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China's Rise and U.S. Defense Implications

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What are the international implications of China's rise? What developments may be expected, and what should U.S. national defense leaders do about the likely effects of these developments? China is a rising power but even if that cannot be said to translate into a security threat to the United States directly, there is little reason to believe that Beijing will not take action to get out from under what it perceives as unfriendly U.S.-led global diplomatic, economic, and security orders. In very broad terms, U.S. defense policy makers will need to address the change from military capabilities for enforcing a liberal international order, to capabilities for both advancing and protecting friendly regional or even sub-regional orders.

China's potential power is sizable and increasing based on a large population and growing national wealth and this potential power makes its neighbors fear that it will become the regional hegemon. Since other states in the region cannot predict if or when Beijing will make a bid for hegemony, relations are beset with uncertainty. Weaker neighbors, like Vietnam and Laos in Southeast Asia, can be expected to accommodate Beijing more while trying to benefit from Chinese economic growth when and where possible.¹ The U.S. security allies can be expected to cooperate more with each other while calling for more visible displays of U.S. commitment (including more military force presence).² India will become more important to U.S. strategy as a link between Australia and Thailand, and the Middle East and Central Asia, and the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Beijing will likely respond to these increased U.S. defense commitments with accusations of hostile containment. But China has already used overt economic incentives to try and encourage U.S. regional allies to deal with Beijing bilaterally, leading with economic engagement, and has used punishment when such states have organized against Chinese interests.³ By one account, China seeks three strategic aims: a secure periphery; a favorable security environment; and successful resolution of the Taiwan issue—and Beijing sees the United States, and even more specifically, the U.S.-led security order in the region, as a threat to all three.⁴ Avoiding armed conflict will become more difficult.

China faces strong incentives, especially economic, to try and assure neighboring states of its benign intentions, but as China becomes more powerful, this will be hard to accomplish—unless there is some dramatic change in the regional security order.

China's dramatic rise in power and international influence, especially since around 2000, has created a mounting 'rise dilemma'—or the more it tries to accumulate comprehensive power, the more it must deal with external pressure against its rise from other states—and as long as the United States relies on alliances and security partnerships in the region, the more Beijing will seek to cultivate

1 Jonathan Stromseth, *Don't Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of U.S.-China Rivalry* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2019), 17.

2 Allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific will not step up quickly to compensate for ground that the U.S. has lost to China in the security realm. See Michael D. Swaine with Wenyan Deng and Aube Rey Lescure, *Creating a Stable Asia: An Agenda for a U.S.-China Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016).

3 Gabriel Crossley and Yew Tian, "Analysis: Beijing Huddles with Friends, Seeks to Fracture U.S.-led 'Clique,'" Reuters, April 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/beijing-huddles-with-friends-seeks-fracture-us-led-clique-2021-04-19/>.

4 Wu Xinbo, "U.S. Security Policy in Asia: Implications for China-U.S. Relations," Working Paper, Brookings Institution, September 1, 2000, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/u-s-security-policy-in-asia-implications-for-china-u-s-relations/>.

state-by-state relationships.⁵ According to Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban, of the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a grand strategic move to begin remaking the international diplomatic and economic orders, or in other words, to take Beijing from a rules-taking to a rules-making position.⁶ China's preferences for bilateral relations and for promoting the BRI as a competing global power order will probably cause leaders in Beijing to increase their confrontational stance vis-à-vis Washington.

From the early 2000s, China accepted that it must operate under American prominence in a unipolar system, but it hedged by trying to deepen ties to multiple countries around the world, to help if Washington is uncooperative—while aiming for a future concert of powers style arrangement.⁷ Unipolarity matters little today in understanding what China's continuing rise will do to the American position in the geopolitical landscape, it is still unclear exactly what kind of polarity is emerging, and it seems that the ability of states to translate economic power into advanced military power is becoming more difficult.⁸ China was engaging in hedging behavior, improving military capabilities while avoiding direct confrontation with the U.S. military, pursuing better ties with Southeast Asian states, as power was transferring away from the United States to multiple other players—this all up until about 2016.⁹ Although future Chinese foreign policy is hard to predict, especially as it relates to the United States, Chinese policy makers and analysts have been increasingly arguing for America's loss of power status, or at least highlighting what they claim is Washington's inability to handle the primary world power position.¹⁰ Where Chinese hedging against the system leader is going now is less clear but Beijing behaves like it is cultivating options that allow it to sidestep U.S. policy preferences.

- 5 Xuefeng Sun, "United States Leadership in East Asia and China's State-by-State Approach to Regional Security," *Chinese Political Science Review* 3, no. 1 (2018): 100-114. Also see Xuefeng Sun, "Rethinking East Asian Regional Order and China's Rise," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2013): 9-30; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2016): 7-53; and Michelle A. Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 6 Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban, "Beyond Balancing: China's Approach Towards the Belt and Road Initiative," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 112 (2018): 487-501. Also see Lina Liu, "Beyond the Status Quo and Revisionism: An Analysis of the Role of China and the Approaches of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Global Order," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 1 (2021): 88-109; Laura-Anca Parepa, "The Belt and Road Initiative as Continuity in Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 9, no. 2 (2020): 175-201; and Xue Gong, "The Belt & Road Initiative and China's Influence in Southeast Asia," *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 4 (2019): 635-665.
- 7 Rosemary Foot, "Chinese Strategies in a U.S.-hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging," *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2006): 93-94. Also see Wang Jisi, "China's Search for Stability with America," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 39-48; and Yong Deng and Thomas G. Moore, "China Views Globalization: Toward a New Great-Power Politics?" *The Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2004): 115-136.
- 8 Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2016): 40-45, 52-53.
- 9 Mohammad Salman, "Strategic Hedging and Unipolarity's Demise: The Case of China's Strategic Hedging," *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 3 (2017): 356-361, 370. Also see Wojtek M. Wolfe, "China's Strategic Hedging," *Orbis* 57, no. 2 (2013): 300-313.
- 10 See Jeffrey Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2010). Also see Thomas Wright, "The Rise and Fall of the Unipolar Concert," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014): 7-24.

It is becoming increasingly important for U.S. defense policy makers to come to grips with whether the bilateral security relationships with important regional actors, like India, are durable enough to balance against China. India should prove to be a key player for U.S. security interests, but there are also risks in the U.S.-India alignment against China.¹¹ Containing China through greater mobilization of partner states in the region figures prominently in the security strategies of both the United States and India.¹²

Having some alignment in strategic approaches will help both countries see and interpret security challenges in similar ways. In realist terms, India is pursuing a network of friendly security partners through Southeast Asia, to parts of the Pacific Rim, and including the United States—to push back against Chinese involvement in countries around India and to counterbalance Chinese assertiveness.¹³ At the same time that India is trying to balance China it is also trying to assure Beijing that it is not containing China's rise.¹⁴ This balancing act will be increasingly difficult as long as border violence continues between the two major powers (such as recurrences of the vicious skirmish at Ladakh in June 2020).

Also key to how geopolitics unfolds over the next few decades will be the degree and manner in which the United States chooses to either reconfigure global engagement or pull back substantially to the western hemisphere. The Indo-Pacific is emerging as the pivot around which major powers are maneuvering, major powers will drive the most important security aspects of the region, and the pivot is a geostrategic opportunity for the United States.¹⁵ For some scholars, the divergent views between Washington and Beijing are too far apart and a more strategic approach would be to forgo cooperation and move to managing rivalry.¹⁶ The rise of China has been portrayed as the geopolitical event of the post-1945 world, and that the U.S.-China rivalry is the dominant power relationship to shape all others.¹⁷ If the United States decides to pull military forces from many parts of the world to

11 Sobia Hanif and Muhammad Khan, "U.S. Security Strategy for Asia Pacific and India's Role," *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2018): 6, 9-10, 16-17. Also see Shiv Kumar, Sudheer Singh Verma, and Shahbaz Hussain Shah, "Indo-U.S. Convergence of Agenda in the New Indo-Pacific Regional Security Architecture," *South Asia Research* 40, no. 2 (2020): 215-230.

12 Josukutty C. Abraham, "Indo-U.S. Convergence in the Indo-Pacific: China's Containment and Lingering Constraints," *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, no. 2 (2020): 7-9.

13 Mohan Malik, "India Balances China," *Asian Politics and Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012): 371-372.

14 Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Evasive Balancing: India's Unviable Indo-Pacific Strategy," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 91-93.

15 Timothy Doyle and Dennis Rumley, *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 5.

16 See Timothy R. Heath and William R. Thompson, "Avoiding U.S.-China Competition Is Futile: Why the Best Option Is to Manage Strategic Rivalry," *Asia Policy* 25, no. 2 (2018): 115-119. Also consider Joseph M. Grieco, "Theories of International Balancing, the Rise of China, and Political Alignments in the Asia Pacific," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 12 (2014): 16-48; and Jin-Yong Kim, "A New Type of Great Power Relationship between China and U.S., and Its Sustainability," *Journal of North-East Asian Cultures* 1, no. 40 (2014): 339-363.

17 See Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2013): 130-131, 139. Also consider Georg Löffmann, *American Grand Strategy Under Obama: Competing Discourses* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); and Daniel Egel et al., *Estimating the Value of Overseas Security Commitments* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

focus more on defending only core interests, more narrowly defined, than U.S. defense policy makers should ensure that minimal outposts remain (or are quickly acquired) in terrain key to the Indo-Pacific security construct as a whole, including north and south India, north and south Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, along with South Korea, Japan, and Australia. The idea of “minimal outposts” here refers to what might be termed cold-start and warm-start military sites.¹⁸

There may be circumstances and options for major powers to control their ambitions and cooperate for stability and peaceful development, but the drivers for conflict point to even more intense competitive rivalry. Significant drivers for war include: diminishing arms control; weakening international institutions; persistent competition between democracies and autocratic states; increasing nationalism; advancements in long-range strike, and in nontraditional ways of warfare; and a possible explosion in mis- and disinformation.¹⁹ U.S. China scholars and policy experts have been starting to refer to decisive turning points in Washington-Beijing relations, such as the March 2021 meeting in Alaska between senior officials, and this may reflect a growing sense that the stakes involved are significantly higher than in any recent period.²⁰ China will continue working for a dominant regional position, as a major power may be expected to do, but it is also maneuvering for global power, and these advances to the global stage may surprise American strategists if Beijing does not follow expected paths.²¹ While power shifts alone should not spell future armed conflict, the U.S.-China rivalry has multiple dimensions, including technological, security-defense, and ideological, and that suggests that the drivers for conflict will be hard to manage for both sides.

If security relations with China worsen in the region, then it can be assumed that there will be more requests for U.S. military presence but of the more reversible kinds such as maritime patrols and air shows of force. But these will not communicate the same level of U.S. commitment as land forces and may contribute to misunderstood deterrence signaling. At some point in the conflict escalation, regional states will no longer weigh the benefits of economic activity with China over their security and they will want more permanent demonstrations of U.S. commitment to regional stability. It will

18 Cold-start military sites would comprise hard stands, staging areas, and prearranged force access agreements. Warm-start sites would include secure storage, maintenance, and work facilities, ready but unused, under local government or commercial control with prearranged agreements.

19 Strategic Futures Group, *Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, March 2021), https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends_2040.pdf.

20 See Evan S. Medeiros and Jude Blanchette, “Beyond Colossus or Collapse: Five Myths Driving American Debates about China,” *War on the Rocks*, March 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/beyond-colossus-or-collapse-five-myths-driving-american-debates-about-china/>.

21 See Anonymous, “The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy,” *Atlantic Council*, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/the-longer-telegram/>; Elizabeth C. Economy et al., “How 2020 Shaped U.S.-China Relations,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-2020-shaped-us-china-relations>; and Evan Osnos, “The Future of America’s Contest with China,” *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/the-future-of-americas-contest-with-china>.

be important for the U.S. Joint Force to be able to demonstrate capability to extend conventional military force to the Chinese mainland, as well as conventional-nuclear integration, to counter People's Liberation Army force projection. The U.S. military end will be to prevent war, if possible, and advance U.S. interests by strengthening friendly coalition deterrence of Chinese aggression.

The implications for U.S. defense planners will be that the future Joint Force will need:

- 1) Significant sea, air, and space forces for creating operational maneuver areas, to enable coalition operations to fight to the Chinese mainland (a capability that reinforces deterrence).
- 2) Some of this need to create operational areas (including movement corridors) can be fulfilled, and indeed should be fulfilled, by less expensive, more survivable missile-armed ground forces maneuvering in the large archipelagic regions of the Indo-Pacific.
- 3) Sizable, but lighter, defensive ground forces with limited mobility to hold key land areas for integrating coalition forces and attriting Chinese People's Liberation Army formations, to create the diplomatic room for war termination.



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