

China Strategy

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The “Asia Rebalance” in U.S. Strategy: Geopolitical Challenges

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The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) states that “China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea.”¹ Also, the National Security Strategy (NSS) asserts, “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.”² Both the NDS and NSS maintain that China is a competitor in the economic realm that wishes to supplement the United States as a leading global power. In order to mitigate the threat from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), one must understand their motivations through the pressures that they face and exploit them, preventing a PRC hegemony. John Mearsheimer, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, references Waltz’s definition of a defensive realist as a nation-state trying to obtain security.³ The concerns of the defensive realist country are focused on the balance of power in the region and globally.⁴ Waltz also addresses the scenario where a nation-state that acquires power to quickly risks other nation-states banding together against them to subvert their power or foreign policy maneuvers.⁵ Nathan and Scobell developed a four-ring threat structure that this paper will explore, as well as a discussion on its civilian-military situation, to frame what drives PRC international relations and how the United States should mitigate the PRC rise to power.

The First Ring addresses threats to the population from internal and external forces exemplifying a defensive realist nation-state in the PRC. The PRC is comprised of several regions that have their own culture and varying levels of control from the overarching government. First, Taiwan maintains an autonomous government while the PRC claims control over the island. The PRC has employed a “four pronged” strategy to entice Taiwan back into the fold.⁶ The strategy encompasses “the offer of special autonomy within the PRC, diplomatic isolation, economic integration, and military threat.”⁷ This illustrates the hardline approach that

the PRC employs in order to maintain international recognition as the owner of Taiwan. The threat of conventional forces underpins the entire strategy. The special autonomy is more about control of the territory through PRC selected officials that can influence the island. The PRC, through economic means, isolated Taiwan diplomatically. In addition, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is a sparsely populated mountainous region with vast natural resources, including the waterways that feed the “Chinese heartland.”⁸ The TAR also acts as a natural buffer to India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Burma.⁹ The region signed an agreement in 1951 that “Tibet belonged to China while enjoying autonomy within China.”¹⁰ This agreement allowed for “religious freedom, recognized the role of the Dalai Lama, promised that the central authorities would not alter the existing local political system, and gave Beijing control of the territories external relations.”¹¹ China, once established in the region, sought to use military force to quell uprisings and destroy the faith.¹² Much like Taiwan, China sought to use the influx of migrant workers and industrialization to assert more control in the region.¹³ All of these acts brought the region onto the international stage when the Dalai Lama fled China and tried to garner support for an independent Tibet. In the end, China remained in control of the region; however, the region remains a drain on military and political capital. Furthermore, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is “one sixth of the country’s territory; shares borders with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.”¹⁴ China has used and is using tactics similar to Tibet like “colonization, trade, cultural assimilation, administrative integration, and international isolation, backed when necessary by the use of police and military force.”¹⁵ China also used mass migration to consolidate power in the region. The region still has had rebellions related to the ethnic populations that still do not wholly accept Chinese rule. The Uyghur activists have fled to neighboring countries, and China has expended political capital for the

extradition of these individuals back to China. The United States captured “two dozen Uyghurs and interned them at Guantanamo but refused to extradite them to China.”¹⁶ Finally, Hong Kong represents another pivotal region that requires special handling by the PRC. Hong Kong falls under a Special Administrative Region with rights and freedoms brought on by a one country, two systems structure.¹⁷ This structure allows the PRC regime to have an “indirect election system that gave it the ultimate say over the choice of chief executive and the make-up of the Legislative Council majority.”¹⁸ In the recent past, movements towards prodemocracy forced the PRC to resort to military efforts that have ended with a backlash from the international community. The internal structure of China comes from a mix of regions with varying levels of autonomy and culture that require constant vigilance that have security implications using limited resources.

Taking a step away from the internals to China, there are security concerns related to its neighboring countries, twenty in total. The second ring is associated with geographic neighbors covering “nearly 14,000 miles of land borders” with the PRC.¹⁹ China is surrounded by “seven of the fifteen of the largest countries in the world (India, Pakistan, Russia, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam-each having a population of greater than 89 Million).²⁰ Also, due to the strong maritime presence of the United States in the area, China must contend with another superpower on its doorstep. Unlike the United States, which has strong partnerships with Mexico and Canada, China was at war with “Russia, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and India” within the last seventy years.²¹ There have been instances where the PRC worried about invasions in the last 60 years. China played an active role in the Korean war and “feared nuclear or conventional attacks by U.S. forces.”²² The Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958 is another example of the United States and China issue coming from the sale of Matador surface-to-surface missiles to

Taiwan from the United States.²³ The Vietnam War illustrated a proxy conflict that had United States forces violating the sovereignty of China. In addition, the PRC also deals with unstable regimes as neighbors, North Korea, the Philippines, Myanmar/Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.”²⁴ The PRC is more concerned with keeping conflicts on its borders to a minimum. They do not seek to change regimes or upset the status quo for fear of migrants fleeing war, upsetting the balance in their own country. Each of the countries on China’s border views a rising China, economically and militarily, with trepidation. The PRC, until recently, never had the economic leverage or military power to exact gains from its neighbors.²⁵ As a matter of fact, “China has enjoyed formal alliances with only two of its neighboring, the Soviet Union and North Korea, and long-term alignments with two others, Pakistan and Burma.”²⁶ This lack of alliances has hindered the global reach of the PRC. When challenged on the world stage concerning human rights violations, China was isolated. Even in times of proxy wars in Vietnam and Korea, the Soviet Union only provided minimal assistance based on its priorities and did not seek to face the United States. These neighboring countries prevent the PRC from focusing further into the global community, and many of these countries are parts of regional systems that further hamper PRC goals.

The third security ring encompasses the six regional alliances that surround the PRC, reducing their effectiveness in constructing bilateral agreements deterring aggression. The Northeast Asia regional system incorporates Russia, the two Koreas, Japan, China, and the United States.²⁷ This regional system allows the United States additional leverage against China. The United States is based in South Korea and Japan, providing military force in the region and influence the regimes. Japan and China have a “near-perfect complementary” economic systems with Japan needing resources, and China needed capital; however, tensions from previous

occupations have caused diplomatic issues.²⁸ Oceania regional system contains “Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, twelve island microstates, China, and the United States.”²⁹

The PRC needs the Oceania countries for access to resources and acquires political allies. They primarily use funding and economic packages to gain influence. “Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, China, and the United States” constitute Continental Southeast Asia.³⁰ China has complicated relationships with the members of the Continental Southeast Asia. There are border disputes, and many “ethnic groups straddle the borders.”³¹ Maritime Southeast Asia is organized by “Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, China, and the United States.”³² China has delved into free trade agreements that worried smaller countries in this group and limited its exports to avail their fears. South Asia is the unity of “Burma, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Russia, China, and the United States.”³³ China’s biggest competitor in the South Asia area comes from India. India gave sanctuary to the Dalai Lama and allowed him to create an exile government.³⁴ China has expended political capital with India trying to delegitimize the Tibetan exile movement.

However, the PRC has worked to strengthen its relationship with India through a neutral stance on the contested Kashmir region between India and Pakistan.³⁵ Finally, Central Asia is confined to “Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, China, and the United States.”³⁶ Russia, at times, has been an ally and a competitor. The PRC successfully navigated the Cold War period by switching alliances and talks between Russia and the United States. Of note, the United States is a member of all of the regional systems. As expressed earlier, the United States seeks to maintain global dominance that is threatened by a rising China. China’s ability to interact or negotiate with individual nation-states is obstructed by the formation of all of these systems. Furthermore, these systems restrict China from

expanding in the maritime domain. The smaller nations, as part of these systems, have gained power that allows them to rebuff economic and military advances projected by China. While China is mired in the regional politics of the region, it still seeks to build its global brand.

The fourth ring refers to the global interactions that China has developed outside of its regional partners or neighbors and manifests as a defensive realist nation. As a permanent member of the United Nations, China projects power; however, they have chosen to use their votes on the United Nations security council to maintain the sovereignty of other nations.³⁷ Once China entered the World Trade Organization, its focus shifted to acquiring resources and allowed them to substantially influence countries beyond its region.³⁸ These resources include petroleum for energy requirements, commodities and other markets, and arms sales to attain revenue rather instead of bolstering compatible allies.³⁹ China has become a regional economic powerhouse. The diplomatic relationships that China pursues are in order to maintain its sovereignty and influence global norms.⁴⁰

China's military, which forms the basis of security, has not coordinated with leadership on their actions creating a security dilemma in credibility for the Chinese government. China is modernizing its military to cement gains made through the economic expansion and strengthen its negotiating position in the region and globally. However, this strategy is undermined by an out of control military with its loyalties and motivations. The one-party system in China has created an atmosphere of divided loyalties in the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) between President Xi Jinping and the party.⁴¹ President Xi Jinping has sought to consolidate power through the firings of high-ranking generals and replacing them with those more loyal to him. On several occasions, Xi has demanded loyalty from the PLA, showing a chasm between the

military and Xi.⁴² In addition, the PLA has created diplomatic nightmares for President Xi Jinping. During a trip to India in 2014, “Xi arrived on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s birthday with a strange gift for his host – a predawn Chinese military encroachment that day deep into India’s northern region of Ladakh.”⁴³ The credibility issues apparent from the lack of control of the PRC military reduces its effectiveness as an extension of the regime.

The approach to deal with an emerging superpower, China, must involve a whole of government approach underpinned by the military force and alliances to enforce the containment needed. China is a “rising power” working to maintain the status quo.⁴⁴ A strategy should address each of the security rings stated above and maintain the status quo. Interestingly, following China’s plan for incorporating and dominating its regions is a model the United States should follow. The PRC uses international isolation to limit the introduction of foreign concepts to disrupt the status quo in its country. China has continuously tried to change international norms to allow itself autonomy to interact as it sees fit. Without access to bilateral alliances for military defense, China will find itself alone globally, leaving only its economic influence. Conversely, the United States must continue to pull China into trade deals, further globalizing its economy. Guest worker visas and access to Chinese markets will allow influence into the first ring of their security, the people. Once international workers and products begin appearing within its borders, the population will globalize as well. This will divert military resources and policing to counteract the international community’s ideas of freedom and democracy. This strategy mirrors China’s attempts to overtake some of their autonomous regions through the use of migration and industrialization to cause citizens to conform to Chinese cultural assimilation. Of course, much like China, this should all be underpinned with the threat of force to deter or contain China.

In conclusion, the PRC has a multitude of security concerns that the United States should exploit to contain the rising power. In the first ring of security concerns, the PRC must expend resources in the form of policing to subvert uprisings based on local issues of religion and ethnic solidarity. Getting access to their markets will provide another avenue to interject subversion and divert military policing from extending outward. The second ring of security concerns, its neighboring countries, the PRC has worked to maintain the status quo surrounded by countries that are wary of their motives. The United States, Russia, and India can maintain the status quo with their superior alliances and international standing to prevent any encroachments from China into other countries. The third ring of security concerns relates to the regional structures surrounding the country. The United States is a part of all of the regional structures and should maintain its presence in these constructs to prevent inroads by the PRC. In the fourth ring, the United States should limit bilateral agreements for economics and military hardware sales. The United States should remain the partner of choice. All of these security rings are based upon a military power that is in concert with the leadership of Xi. The discord works to the advantage of the United States. The PRC is currently acting in a defensive realist capacity, the United States and its allies must remain vigilant to maintain this status quo and prevent expansion diplomatically and territorially.

Notes

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- ¹ James N. Mattis, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge” (United States Department of Defense, January 2018), 1.
- ² Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (United States Department of Defense, 2017), 25.
- ³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Updated (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 19.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid 20.
- ⁶ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 9.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid, 199.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 200.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 204
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 205.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 207.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 209.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, 210.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 15.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 8.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid, 299.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 17.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 6.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 115.
- ²⁹ Ibid, 6.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid, 148.
- ³² Ibid, 6.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 160.
- ³⁵ Susan L. Shirk, *China Fragile Superpower*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 116.
- ³⁶ Andrew J. Nathan, *China’s Search for Security*, 6.
- ³⁷ Ibid 7.
- ³⁸ Ibid, 171.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Brahma Chellaney, “China’s Troublesome Civil-Military Relations,” *The Japan Times*, (September 6, 2017): 3.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 2.
- ⁴⁴ Susan L. Shirk, *China Fragile Superpower*, 107.

