

Asia Rebalance Final

Domestic Pressures for Chinese Expansionism:
Rising China and What America Should Do About It

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What does the rise of China mean for American power?¹ This is one of the central questions of the 21st century, and one the United States is likely to grapple with for decades to come. Today, there are many potential hot spots in the Indo-pacific region and China is at the heart of many of them. China is currently in the midst of cracking down against pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, continues to claim Taiwan as a central part of its One China Policy, is determined to use its newfound economic power to revise the current international rules based order by creating its own parallel institutions, and is involved in territorial disputes with Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and India, just to name a few.² Before the United States can develop a solid strategy to maintain its place in the world, Chinese goals and the pressures facing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must first be understood. A closer look will show that internal domestic pressures will drive China to behave like an expansionist power. In response, the United States should focus on maintaining the international rules based order by strengthening its alliance and partner network through economic and security means, leveraging ASEAN as a forum for dispute resolution and Asian consensus building, and divest from CENTCOM in order to improve its current Indo-pacific force posture which will allow the US to increase military to military engagements with partner nations and invest in dual use infrastructure throughout the region.

Like most authoritarian regimes, the number one goal of the CCP is to remain in power. But China's large population, diverse ethnic population, recent history of victimhood during the century of humiliation, and the communist legacy of Mao Zedong, combine to make regime survival a dynamic challenge for the CCP. Since the end of World War II, the CCP has tied its legitimacy as the leader of China to economic growth, its role in expelling Japan from occupied China, and a growing sense of nationalism that will overcome the century of humiliation and

return China to its rightful place in Asia and the world. Because of the challenges presented to Chinese domestic policy and CCP legitimacy concerns, the CCP will be forced to operate as an expansionist power.

Beginning with Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy following the death of Mao, the Chinese economy began to globalize.³ Today "the debate is no longer over whether to globalize, but over how to manage the process."⁴ This globalization has led to skyrocketing growth and now the largest economy by GDP in the world.⁵ By championing the "Chinese version of Capitalism and Globalization" the CCP has bought itself goodwill with the Chinese people, many of whom have seen their wealth rise at a rapid pace during their lifetimes. This presents two challenges to the CCP. The first is that expectations have been set for growth to continue and that by making economic growth a mainstay of CCP policy, any slowdown in the economy will be seen as a failure of the CCP. The second challenge is that in order to maintain economic growth in a globalized world, the CCP is much more invested in what is happening outside its borders. "In the first decade of the twenty-first century, "thinking locally demands acting globally" has become the unofficial mantra guiding the People's Republic of China (PRC) diplomacy."⁶ This desire to maintain economic growth could drive the CCP to be more aggressive towards its neighbors in order to ensure its own economic prosperity.

In addition to economic growth, the CCP has also tied its legitimacy to driving Japanese Imperial Forces out of China during World War II.⁷ Japan's history of occupation and atrocities committed against China has played a large role in Chinese anger towards Japan, and rising nationalism in China which the CCP has exploited to its own benefit.

Revisions to Japanese textbooks that do not adequately address Japanese atrocities, and Japanese prime ministers who visit the Yasukuni shrine where Japanese war criminals are

honored, are two examples of recent crises that have led to robust protests in China.⁸ In each event, the CCP has reacted by allowing the Chinese people to protest but has increasingly feared that failure to take a hard line against Japan could turn the people against the CCP. In fact the CCP has used the Chinese people's animosity towards Japan as a foil to gain popular support, particularly for leaders who are perceived as weak.⁹ As the CCP continues to revise its own textbooks to emphasize Chinese victimhood at the hands of the Japanese, tie its own legitimacy to the victory over Japan in World War II, and utilize a propaganda department that reinforces these views to the public on a regular basis, Chinese nationalism has continued to rise.¹⁰

The populace has also increasingly viewed Japan negatively which is making it more difficult to reconcile.¹¹ For the Chinese government, "getting satisfaction on the intangible issues related to Japan's World War II history has become a higher priority than negotiating a solution to tangible disputes such as drilling in the East China Sea."¹²

Critically, China does not believe that the Japanese people have taken full responsibility of their role in Japanese behavior prior to and during World War II.¹³ In fact, the Chinese government likes to compare Japan to Germany, who came to terms with its past, in order to prove its point.¹⁴ For example, "no historical museum in Japan gives anything close to an accurate rendering of the atrocities that the Japanese army inflicted on China and Korea, including forced sexual slavery of "comfort women" and experiments with chemical and biological weapons on prisoners."¹⁵ Because of this, previous apologies provided by the Japanese government are not considered sincere.¹⁶ The CCP has exploited this feeling to boost domestic support within China, but risks alienating a country with the 10th highest population in the world and 3rd largest GDP.¹⁷ As a result, growing Chinese nationalism has led to 65% of

Japanese feeling unfriendly towards China compared to 53.6% of Chinese who feel unfriendly towards Japan according to 2005 data.¹⁸

As Mao's utopian communism continues to fade away, the CCP has increasingly used nationalism as the "party's most reliable claim to the people's loyalty, in part because of nationalism's protean character and diverse interpretations."¹⁹ The CCP's reliance on the economy and nationalism has given it a sense of vulnerability that could cause the CCP to overreact in a dispute over the Senkaku Islands or a Taiwan straits scenario which could bring it into armed conflict with the United States, whether intended or not.²⁰ "If economic growth slows and problems multiply, there is a possibility that China's leaders could be tempted to "wag the dog" – mobilize domestic support by creating an international crisis."²¹ Just as likely is that in an attempt to appear strong the CCP makes threats it can't back away from for fear of appearing weak to its domestic audience exacerbating the crisis it is currently in.²²

Recognizing that China faces significant domestic pressure which will likely drive it to adopt an aggressive foreign policy, what actions should the United States take to secure peace and prosperity in the Indo-pacific region and for the American people? Any policy focused toward the Indo-pacific and that counters China must begin with maintaining the international rules based order established by the United States following World War II.

Following the conclusion of World War II, the United States has pursued its global interests through "creating and maintaining international economic institutions, bilateral and regional security organizations, and liberal political norms...collectively referred to as the international order."²³ Since its implementation, not only has the United States benefited, but global wealth has increased, and no two great powers have gone to war with each other. However, China believes that the current system puts them at a disadvantage largely because it

was designed when China was weak at a historic level. China sees a World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization that are dominated by the United States and represent its values.²⁴ As Chinese economic power has grown, it seeks to design a system underwritten by the Chinese economy and Chinese values. Rather than create an alternative that could threaten the collapse of the current system, the United States must incentivize China to operate within the current system allowing China to rise peacefully while allowing the US to maintain a large degree of its influence within the system.

The best way to ensure the current system remains viable is for the US to participate in all parallel organizations created by China. To this point the US has withdrawn from organizations such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and avoided joining Chinese backed structures such as BRICS New Development Bank due to concerns over how to enforce penalties on those who cheat and over concerns these organizations don't represent western liberal values such as human rights abuses.^{25,26} The fact remains that by not joining, the US loses any chance it has to influence the Chinese backed institution, and over time these institutions will demonstrate that the US is not needed for these institutions to be viable. Instead, the United States should follow Australia's lead by joining parallel institutions and calling China out in these forums when they cheat or demonstrate exploitive economic behavior in order to demonstrate that the preexisting international order offers a better path.

As the globalized economy produces more multi-national corporations (MNC), nations will need to rely on international rules more than ever. Without international rules that a consensus of nations believe are just and enforceable, China can leverage access to its large market in order to impose onerous rules on a company to China's benefit. Tech companies such as Google have been forced to comply with Chinese censorship laws and provide intellectual

property rights to the Chinese government in order to operate in the Chinese market.²⁷ Similarly, the NBA, an American iconic sports institution, has found itself self-regulating against free speech, internally punishing the General Manager of the Houston Rockets for supporting freedom in Hong Kong, in order to maintain access to the Chinese market.²⁸

In addition to maintaining the current international rules based order, the United States should focus on alliances and partners in the region by increasing diplomatic, economic, and military sticky ties in order to build a consensus for shared values that will incentivize China to behave within the international rules based order. American outreach to its Asian partners should not simply be bilateral, but should incorporate the ASEAN cooperation and collaboration approach. Many Asian middle powers “want to include China in, and anchor it to, regional organizations like ASEAN.”²⁹ At first glance this approach may not seem ideal because it will force the United States to build consensus in Asia and limit its ability to act unilaterally, but it is precisely for this reason that it will also limit China’s freedom of maneuver and reinforce the preexisting international rules based order.

The United States must also embrace the Asian Middle Power way of a la cart politics with an eye towards the long game. Embracing a la cart politics means that not every issue will go America’s way, but by understanding and respecting that many Asian countries are pulled between their economic dependence on China and their desire to hold China accountable when they exploit their economic dominance through territorial claims and exploitive economic deals, America can maintain and gain influence in the region and support for the standing international rules based order.

The United States also plays a key role in stabilizing Asia by keeping Japan from reverting back to its imperialistic impulses and by offering security guarantees against the threats

of north Korea (nK) and China to Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Taiwan, among others. While the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union weakened the rationale for the US presence in Northeast Asia, a more assertive China, the growing nuclear threat from North Korea, and the need to provide deterrence has become the main focus of the US-ROK-Japan trilateral alliance.^{30,31} The growing competition between the US and China, however, has raised South Korean and Japanese fears that the alliance might entangle them in a conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan or other issues.³² These countries are equally concerned that the US could take unilateral action against North Korea, or even abandon the alliance in the future. Despite these fears, both South Korea and Japan have maintained good relations with the United States because the US is a democracy, has the world's top military and economic capabilities, and harbors no territorial ambitions in NE Asia; facts that must continue to be emphasized for the US to maintain its position in NE Asia.³³

Japan and the ROK are not always in lock step, however, and it is the US who is the lynchpin holding the ROK and Japanese governments together in a trilateral alliance. South Korea shares much of the same concerns over a remilitarized Japan as China and gets equally upset with Japan over Japanese atrocities committed during colonization including the comfort women issue and revisions of Japanese school textbooks. Recently tensions got so high that South Korea did not renew the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). This was in response to the ROK being removed from Japan's preferred trading partner "white list" which was a reaction to a ROK court ruling that Japan owed Korean workers compensation dating back to the colonial period.³⁴ The GSOMIA issue has the US very concerned. In fact Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (CJCS) of Staff General Milley's first overseas trip as the CJCS

was with the ROK and Japan military leadership, and only SECDEF Mark Esper's 11th hour trip to the ROK and Japan at the end of 2019 convinced South Korea to remain.³⁵

Security guarantees in Asia are only one aspect of a successful US Indo-pacific policy. The United States must also increase its military to military engagements with allies and partners throughout the region. Not only does this increase interoperability if a coalition is ever formed to accomplish a military objective, but through these engagements America can gain critical soft power throughout the region as well. For example, the United States has supported the Philippine's counter terrorism efforts against violent extremist organizations for the last 20 years and has "worked to strengthen professional norms within the Philippine security forces."³⁶ Even as Philippines President Duterte moves towards China, America is poised to maintain and reestablish if necessary its relationship with the Philippines because of this enduring military to military relationship.

Counter terrorism is just one mission set that the United States can engage on. Exercises that respond to national disasters are another that can build soft power without provoking China. Certainly exercises with allies that are designed to practice against nK aggression or a Taiwan straits scenario are necessary, and serve their own deterrent purpose, but expanding the mission sets to include other missions that are not threatening towards China will actually improve American standing in the region and ultimately serve to strengthen America's bargaining position *visa vi* China.

The United States must not only invest in building relationships through military to military engagement, but must invest in new and improved dual use infrastructure in the Indo-pacific as well. The tyranny of distance in Asia makes any potential military operation challenging, and in an anti-access area denial (A2AD) environment, America's current forward

footprint represents the minimum required to conduct successful operations. Any potential adversary in the Indo-pacific knows exactly where American bases are located making targeting these bases very easy. To complicate this targeting, the United States should begin investing in dual use infrastructure throughout Asia that could be used as a forward operating base if needed. This type of investment provides multiple opportunities to the United States. First, developing multiple bases complicates adversary targeting by allowing allied forces the flexibility to disperse forces in a more economical fashion. Commanders can move assets closer to front lines or locate high value assets at multiple locations. It also provides contingency options for the United States military if American servicemen were expelled from Okinawa for political reasons for example. Second, it offers an opportunity to invest in local airports, commercial hubs for local economies, and better port and road infrastructure as an alternative to some of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This type of investment will require more resources than are currently distributed to the region, however, as the United States draws down from CENTCOM and continues its pivot to Asia, more funds should be made available for the Indo-pacific to support this initiative.

The question of China's rise and America's response to it is complicated and offers no simple solutions. Understanding what China will do with its newfound power is complicated by the multiple challenges and pressures facing the CCP. A deeper look at these challenges illustrates that domestic pressures are likely to drive China to behave like an expansionist power. While any American response must be synchronized across the whole of government, there are a few steps that the United States should take in order to manage China's rise without supplanting America's place in the world. American must focus on maintaining the international rules based order by strengthening its alliance and partner network, joining Chinese international economic

structures in order to influence them, and maintaining its role as a security guarantor in the region, while utilizing regional forums such as ASEAN to build consensus and resolve disputes. The United States should also reallocate resources from CENTCOM to the Indo-Pacific to improve its current force posture by investing in dual use infrastructure throughout the region and increasing its military to military engagements with allies and partner nations. The questions China's rise poses to America's place in the world are difficult, but there is still time for America to rise to the challenge.



Notes

¹ I wish to thank Maj Purvi Desai for her thoughtful comments and suggestions. All errors found herein are my own.

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/territorial-disputes>

³ Nathan & Scobell. "China's Search for Security." 251.

⁴ Nathan & Scobell. "China's Search for Security." 252.

⁵ <https://www.thebalance.com/china-s-economic-growth-cause-pros-cons-future-3305478>

⁶ Nathan & Scobell. "China's Search for Security." 35.

⁷ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower." 154.

⁸ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower." 140.

⁹ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower." 144.

¹⁰ Ranes. "Chinese Perspective on Relationship with Japan." Paper for Asia Rebalance Class.

¹¹ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower." 144.

¹² Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower." 148.

¹³ Ranes. "Chinese Perspective on Relationship with Japan." Paper for Asia Rebalance Class.

¹⁴ Ranes. "Chinese Perspective on Relationship with Japan." Paper for Asia Rebalance Class.

¹⁵ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower. 155.

¹⁶ Ranes. "Chinese Perspective on Relationship with Japan." Paper for Asia Rebalance Class.

¹⁷ Nathan & Scobell. "China's Search for Security." 114.

¹⁸ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower. 146.

¹⁹ Nathan & Scobell. "China's Search for Security." 33.

²⁰ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower. 255.

²¹ Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower. 255.

²² Shirk. "China: Fragile Superpower. 255.

²³ Mazarr, Priebe, Radin, Cuvellos. "Rand Study: Understanding the Current International Order." https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1598/RAND_RR1598.pdf

²⁴ Nathan & Scobell. "China's Search for Security." 99.

²⁵ [https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2018-](https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/China_Monitor_18_Shadow_Foreign_Policy_EN.pdf)

[01/China_Monitor_18_Shadow_Foreign_Policy_EN.pdf](https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/China_Monitor_18_Shadow_Foreign_Policy_EN.pdf)

²⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-the-new-bank-of-brics-is-all-about/>

²⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/google-stumbles-back-to-china/>

²⁸ <https://www.foxnews.com/sports/nba-adam-silver-china-row-hong-kong>

²⁹ Gilley & O'Neil. "Middle Powers and the Rise of China." 105.

³⁰ Hundt. "South Korea between China and Japan: Lifting the Cold War Lens." 226.

³¹ Gilley & O'Neil. "Middle Powers and the Rise of China." 93.

³² Gilley & O'Neil. "Middle Powers and the Rise of China." 93.

³³ Gilley & O'Neil. "Middle Powers and the Rise of China." 94.

³⁴ Hundt. "South Korea between China and Japan: Lifting the Cold War Lens." 223.

³⁵ Ranes. "South Korea Position Paper." Paper for Asia Rebalance Class.

³⁶ War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/for-want-of-a-visa-values-and-institutions-in-u-s-philippine-relations/>