



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

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## **THESIS**

**PARALLELS BETWEEN JAPAN'S DECISION TO  
ATTACK THE UNITED STATES IN WWII AND  
CONTEMPORARY U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS**

by

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June 2020

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**PARALLELS BETWEEN JAPAN'S DECISION TO ATTACK THE UNITED  
STATES IN WWII AND CONTEMPORARY U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

World War II reshaped the world order, and U.S. involvement in that war was the result of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Recently, China has been expanding its sphere of influence and pushing against that of the United States. This thesis analyzes the U.S.–Japanese relationship prior to World War II, focusing on Japanese militarism, economic tensions, and racism and mistrust in order to examine the current relationship between China and the United States and to determine the likelihood of another war. However, where Japan was accustomed to using military force to achieve its political and economic objectives, China is not. Rather, as the Chinese economy is interconnected with that of its rivals, China has sought to expand its influence through economic means, making the possibility of another large-scale war less likely than it was with Japan.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KMT	Kuomintang, or Chinese Nationalist Party in Taiwan
NDB	New Development Bank, formerly BRICS Development Bank
NSR	North Sea Route
PRC	People's Republic of China
U.S.	United States
USD	United States Dollars

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The impact of World War II on East Asia and the world in general are impossible to ignore, with the development of nuclear weapons, an almost complete destruction of Japan, and a complete reorganization of the international order descending into the Cold War. The United States' entry into World War II was largely based on one event: a Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. There are many potential explanations for why Japan made such a destructive decision to attack the United States, such as Japan's militarist expansion in an attempt to present itself as an equal in international relations with the Western powers threatening U.S. interests in Asia, economic tensions and trade restrictions with the United States, and miscalculations based on the racism and mistrust that had developed between the two countries.

As this thesis presents, there are some parallels between U.S.-Japan relations leading up to the breakout of war and tensions in contemporary U.S.-China relations. China's meteoric rise as an Asian economic and military power with a desire to challenge the established international order greatly resembles Japan's rise following the Meiji Restoration. Additionally, the United States has taken actions that could be seen as a threat to China's economic and security as was the case with Japan, such as initiating a trade war by placing heavy tariffs on Chinese imports and challenging China's various sovereignty claims. Therefore, this thesis aims to explain the circumstances that led Japan to attack the United States in 1942 and compare and contrast Japan's situation with China's in order to identify the factors that contribute to tensions in U.S.-China relations today and could lead to armed conflict. In short, will increasing tensions between China and the United States lead to war?

### **A. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

This thesis is significant because the rise of China as an East Asian power has many parallels with Japan's rise following the Meiji Restoration that eventually led to war between Japan and the United States. Japan's actions in attacking Pearl Harbor formally brought the United States into the conflict, and America eventually prevailed over Japan.

With the war essentially destroying all other established powers, the United States emerged as the sole global superpower and used its position to establish the new international order and institutions in a manner that would mostly align with Western values. This new international order is now again being challenged by a new rising Asian power in China, which seeks to be an even larger economic and military power than Japan was in World War II.

Japan's rise after the Meiji Restoration and attempt to establish itself as an Asian empire that would be seen as a peer to the Western empires was met not with friendly relations with the United States, but instead an attempt to contain Japan's expansion.<sup>1</sup> Similarly today, the United States initially welcomed the rise of the Chinese economy and used China as a manufacturing base for American goods, but as China began to see itself more as another nation worthy of acting on the global stage, the United States moved to contain the new Chinese influence.<sup>2</sup> China's has moved to obtain strategic alternatives to current trade systems via programs such as its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Polar Silk Road as avenues that China has taken to establish strategic relationships on the international stage via its economic clout.<sup>3</sup> China attempts to work around the current international order to obtain strategic goals without resorting to relying on Western powers, but this circumvention of the established order is, in itself, a threat to U.S. interests.<sup>4</sup> Similar to Japan before, the United States attempt to contain the expansion of Chinese influence has led to a challenge to international order and increased tensions between the two nations that could potentially develop into armed conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Smethurst, "Japan, the United States, and the Road to World War II in the Pacific," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 10, iss. 37, no. 4 (Sept 2012): 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> Ash Carter, "Reflections on American Grand Strategy in Asia," Belfer Center, last modified October 2018, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/reflections-american-grand-strategy-asia>.

<sup>3</sup> Carter, "Reflections on American Grand Strategy in Asia."

<sup>4</sup> Carter, "Reflections on American Grand Strategy in Asia."

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Literature on Japan

One explanation of Japan's military action toward the West that is supported in literature is the international condemnation of Japan for their aggression toward China in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Japan, needing to stimulate its economy in the Great Depression, saw three possible strategies: emigration for its rapidly increasing population, expansion of trade on the world markets, or territorial expansion.<sup>6</sup> Cut off from emigration and trade by the policies of Western nations, Japan chose territorial expansion which guided its decision to move into Manchuria in 1931.<sup>7</sup> The initial expansion into Manchuria did not receive much international reaction until Japan later expanded into China in 1937, which sparked the mentioned outrage in the international community.<sup>8</sup> In continued diplomatic relations with the United States, Japan's involvement in the war in China was continually the one issue that prevented the two nations from a peaceful resolution.<sup>9</sup> Due to the attacks in China carried out by the Japanese Army, Japan was accused of violating the various treaties of the 1920s that had formed the international political system following the first world war.<sup>10</sup> This accusation resulted in Japan's formal censure in the League of Nations with a near unanimous vote, Japan's exit from the League in 1933, and discussions and eventual implementation of trade embargoes against Japan, severely stressing the Japanese economy's ability to finance the war effort in China, and eventually leading to Japan's decision to attack the United States and seize more territories in Asia for their much needed natural resources.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London and New York: Longman Inc., 1987), 16–17.

<sup>6</sup> Kingorô Hashimoto, "The Need for Emigration and Expansion" in Ryusaku Tsunoda, Wm. Theodore De Bary, and Donald Keene, eds. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol II. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 289.

<sup>7</sup> Elise K. Tipton, *Modern Japan: A Social and Political History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 131.

<sup>8</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 16–17.

<sup>11</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 14–21.

Literature mentions the Japanese army's involvement in China and Indo-China as major sources of conflict with the West, and the economic hardships from trade restrictions as a result of the international condemnation of that involvement, as isolating forces that pushed Japan away from a peaceful resolution. In the end, it seems that the consensus may be that a feeling of hopelessness and existential threat that Japan faced following their isolation may have been the important factor that drove the country to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor.<sup>12</sup> As Japan truly was on the verge of exhausting key resources, and with the United States' trade embargoes blocking sale of those resources, it is logical that Japan would have been forced to look for other sources even if that meant conflict with the great powers in the West. The large influence and autonomy of the military is also a logical contributor to Japan's decision process, as the unchecked Army invasion of China was both a large drain on Japanese resources and was also a primary reason for the United States to enact trade embargoes, exacerbating the situation.

## **2. Literature on China**

Scholars describing U.S.-China relations provide multiple sources of tension in U.S.-China relations. First, China has created several parallel institutions to address its concerns with the Western-oriented systems put in place by America following World War II, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI.<sup>13</sup> Tensions could also heighten through a confrontation between China and U.S. partners and allies over the well-known territorial disputes of Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, or the South China Sea features. Additionally, trade frictions caused by the United States' extensive implementation of tariffs on select Chinese goods in an attempt to contain expanding Chinese influence could cause a chain reaction that places the two nations as adversaries in a new Cold War, heightening tensions that could spiral out of control.

One of the most high-profile sources of tensions between the United States and China is China's claims of sovereignty over Taiwan and the illegitimacy of the Republic

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<sup>12</sup> Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2014), 170–171, 14–15.

<sup>13</sup> Ash Carter, "Reflections on American Grand Strategy in Asia."



of China government, and its sovereignty claims over the Senkaku Islands and various features in the South China Sea. Re-integrating Taiwan into the PRC has been a goal of the CCP since the KMT retreated to Taiwan in their loss of the Chinese Civil War and continued survival of the Republic of China on Taiwan threatens the legitimacy of the CCP governance of the PRC.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Japan has definitively established that the Senkaku Islands are sovereign Japanese territory when the islands were purchased by the government in 2012 and would defend the Senkaku Islands against any incursion by foreign forces as it would any other Japanese territory.<sup>15</sup> The United States has repeatedly stated that the Senkaku Islands are covered under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Defense Treaty, and the United States will support Japan should they invoke that article.<sup>16</sup> Last, the United States regularly challenges China's claim to territorial waters surrounding its occupied features in the South China Sea.

### **3. Japan/China Similarities and Differences**

The literature suggests there are many possible parallels between Japan's circumstances that led it to attack the United States and China's situation today. Japan's rise from an undeveloped nation to a modern power that could challenge the established powers of the West can also be compared to China's new economic and military growth, especially as an Asian power with different views concerning the international world order that could put it in conflict with the Western powers that established the current world order. The United States has also moved to contain Chinese influence in a similar manner to its attempt to contain Japan, using its economic power to enact trade restrictions. Finally, Japan's territorial expansion into Korea and Taiwan, followed by Manchuria, then a prolonged war in China, and eventual invasion of Southeast Asia can be a possible parallel

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (November 2017): 83–84, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00294](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294).

<sup>15</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Senkaku Islands," April 13, 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/index.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Brad Lendon, "Mattis: U.S. will defend Japanese islands claimed by China," CNN, Last Modified February 4, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/03/asia/us-defense-secretary-mattis-japan-visit/index.html>.

to China's sovereignty claims to the Senkaku Islands, Taiwan, and features in the South China Sea.

While there are a considerable amount of parallels between the Japan situation and the China situation, scholars identify some differences in the Post-World War II international system that may prove important in explaining possible policy decisions. For example, while China and Japan share the characteristic of rising Asian powers with strong economic and military capabilities and a different governing philosophy than the established Western powers, China's economy is comparatively much larger than Japan's was and has grown to be interdependent with the West while Japan's economy was more dependent due to its lack of natural resources. This lack of natural resources in particular made Japan desperate to expand its influence to compensate for trade restrictions placed on Japan by the United States, its major supplier of those resources. China, while it has had trade restrictions placed on it by the United States and also depends on the United States somewhat for resources, is not yet so desperate. Japan sought to gain and maintain influence over Asia as a regional hegemon, but China's Belt Road Initiative and Polar Silk Road, while not explicitly stated by its government, appear to have a goal to provide a global alternative to Western trade and international relations frameworks. While Japan used its military might to expand its influence into Asia, China instead uses its economic might via investment into infrastructure projects and predatory loans, a strategy that is much more difficult to protest.

### **C. RESEARCH DESIGN**

In order to address the possible explanations, this thesis used translated primary sources of communications inside the Japanese government in order to conduct another analysis on the decision-making process of the civilian and military officials. Additionally, previous research conducted by scholars such as Iriye, Tipton, and Hotta provided background information needed to provide the context of those officials' comments. Sources from other governments, most notably the United States, provided context on whether the decisions made by the Japanese officials could have changed the actions that the West took in response to Japan's. In order to identify Japan's motivations, those sources

were used to attempt to identify what Japanese policy was in filling its resource demands, achieving its goals of being accepted as an equal to the established Western powers, and why Japan ultimately chose military action. The research also sought to identify what the policy of the United States was in its attempted containment of Japan, its motivations for refusing to accept Japan as the dominant power in Asia, and if there were any alternatives that could have fulfilled both nations' policies without war.

This thesis will then apply similar methods to establish the state of the current U.S.-China relationship and what institutions affect that relationship. Sources from scholarly journals, think tanks, and government statements were used to identify the most important factors that are contributing to rising tensions and could lead to an armed conflict scenario between the U.S. and China in order to determine the strategic goals of both nations, and what economic and security factors are causing them to be competitive, cooperative, or adversarial. Also, this thesis sought to identify United States policy concerning China's rise, the extent to which the U.S. will attempt to contain China's rise as an East Asian power, and if there are situations in which the U.S. will accept China's role as a dominant power in East Asia and major global influence. Finally, the research sought to determine the extent to which the U.S. and Chinese economies are interdependent to estimate if economic interdependence can prevent war.

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## II. JAPAN'S ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR

In order to establish possible motives for conflict with the United States, Japan's late integration into global politics and growth as a major power in Asia must be examined. Following Japan's forced opening by the United States in the 1850s, Japan witnessed Western domination of China and realized its own weaknesses in almost every area compared to the Western imperial powers.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Japan pursued an aggressive modernization program to prevent the same fate in Japan.<sup>18</sup> By 1894, Japan was powerful enough to defeat China in the first Sino-Japanese War, and by 1904 was powerful enough to defeat Russia in the Russo-Japanese War.<sup>19</sup> Later, in 1910, Japan was powerful enough to occupy and colonize the Korean peninsula.<sup>20</sup> From these victories, Japan felt that it had developed enough to be considered a great power along with the Western imperialists.<sup>21</sup> The Western imperialists did not share that opinion, which can be seen in the unfavorable terms of the many treaties and conferences following World War I.

One Japanese response to its apparent scorn by the Western imperialists was to continue to build its military and insist upon equal treatment of its rights to maintain a large military to protect its territories and interests.<sup>22</sup> However, following the self-imposed restraint on their militaries following the horrors of World War I, the Western nations saw Japan's aggressive pursuit of military power as an evil that must be contained.<sup>23</sup> Following World War I, imperialist expansion was no longer tolerated among the great powers, seen as a danger that could lead to another great war.<sup>24</sup> The great empires had already been

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<sup>17</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 9.

<sup>18</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 34–36

<sup>19</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 50, 78.

<sup>20</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 96.

<sup>21</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 94–95.

<sup>22</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 94.

<sup>23</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 108–112.

established and would remain in their current state. Japan, however, felt it was their right to create a Japanese-led Asian empire.<sup>25</sup>

Against protests of the Western powers, Japan began expansion through Korea into Manchuria.<sup>26</sup> Japan's new presence in Manchuria brought Japan into potential further conflict with both the Soviet Union and the Chinese, and Japan's further incursion into China brought international condemnation.<sup>27</sup> The United States, as Japan's largest source of essential natural resources, employed an embargo program to convince Japan to withdraw.<sup>28</sup> However, Japan instead decided to seek resources elsewhere in Southeast Asia.<sup>29</sup> Because of Japan's need for national resources, and the Japanese military's refusal to withdraw, Japan decided to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor while simultaneously invading Southeast Asia, seizing the resources produced by Western imperialists for Japan and cutting the United States off from those resources.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, Japan experienced great economic hardships following World War I as European economies recovered, and then as the Great Depression pushed those economies toward autarkic policies Japan was cut off from those markets, devastating Japan's economy.<sup>31</sup> The United States also began to enact isolationist economic policies, further harming Japan's economic situation. As Japan was already suffering economically, the United States trade embargo forced Japan into a desperate situation. Therefore, Japan was forced to take military action against the United States and Southeast Asia in order to secure the resources needed to prevent complete economic collapse.

Finally, the United States and Japan fell into the trap of miscalculation and misunderstanding each other's intentions many times from the initiation of diplomatic

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<sup>25</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 114–115.

<sup>26</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 161–162.

<sup>27</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 192.

<sup>29</sup> John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 25.

<sup>30</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 132–133.

relations in the 1850s all the way to the attack on Pearl Harbor due to unfortunate racism and distrust of the unknown. In the 1850s, Japan was a nation that had been isolated from the world for hundreds of years and was content to live as a society in its limited territory of the Japanese islands. In Japan's eyes, Western nations were empires with an insatiable lust for expansion and conquest. As Japan modernized, it viewed expansion as a natural evolution and could not understand the apparent hypocrisy of Western nations' attempt to contain Japan, as it was expanding just as those nations had done long before.<sup>32</sup> This misunderstanding led to mistrust. In the eyes of the United States, Japan was a rising power determined to brutalize and subjugate its neighbors, and a threat to Western political and economic interests in Asia that must be contained. The West could not see Japan as a modernizing nation substantially inhibited by its resources, desperate to continue its development and establish its membership among the world powers. In sum, Japan's military modernization and economic distress, as well as the miscalculation and misunderstandings between the United States and Japan, led Japan to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941 and bring the United States into World War II.

#### **A. MILITARISM**

Influenced by its experiences interacting with colonizing Western powers in the mid-1800s, Japan's post-seclusion belief systems identified military strength as the determining factor in international relations, and therefore its modernization process included a focus on building a strong military.<sup>33</sup> As Japan developed military might, it began to gradually use that power to impose its will on its neighbors. Early victories such as Japan's use of force to open Korea and obtain unequal treaties in 1876 encouraged this behavior.<sup>34</sup> These victories triggered a feedback effect that encouraged an increasing focus on strengthening the military, making Japan an even larger threat to its neighboring countries. There was little support for reversing this emphasis on military expansion, and movements attempting to rein in Japan's aggression either failed to gain momentum or

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<sup>32</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 29–30.

<sup>33</sup> Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War: 1931–1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 4–5.

<sup>34</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 4.

were stamped out by the government.<sup>35</sup> As the military grew more powerful, the goal of regional hegemony became more popular among government leaders and advocates for Japan's growth beyond that of a small power, but to become the hegemon Japan would have to reduce the influence of China and Russia in the region.<sup>36</sup> This goal led to the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), both ending in definitive Japanese victories establishing Japan's influence over the region.<sup>37</sup> Japan's annexation of Taiwan in the Sino-Japanese War, territories in Manchuria in the Russo-Japanese War, and the Korean peninsula in 1910 cemented Japan's new status as an empire and developed a stronger desire in Japan to build up the military to the level needed to defend Japanese interests in its territories and establish Japan as the dominant power in Asia.<sup>38</sup> The decisive defeat of the Chinese in the Sino-Japanese War shattered the previous view of China as a great nation, and the Japanese began to view the Chinese as a backwards people that were too weak to protect themselves.<sup>39</sup> While Western powers were distracted by the outbreak of World War I, Japan was able to use this distraction to increase its influence over China via the Twenty-One Demands that gave Japan even more special privileges China.<sup>40</sup> This move, however, brought Japan into political conflict with the United States and Britain, both of which maintained interests in China, which would eventually spiral out of control.

The United States was fearful of Japan's need to further its control of Asia, and China in particular.<sup>41</sup> This fear led the United States to pursue policies that would increase Japanese dependence on the vast resources and new wealth that the United States enjoyed after the end of World War I in an effort to provide diplomatic leverage that the United

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<sup>35</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 5–19.

<sup>36</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 6–7.

<sup>39</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 10–11.

<sup>40</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 135.



States could use to contain Japanese expansion.<sup>42</sup> The United States also announced a plan to build a massive increase in its fleet, most of which it would position in the Pacific Fleet to ensure a continuation of U.S. interests in that region.<sup>43</sup> The other major powers in Japan and Britain announced later that they would intend to strengthen their fleets as well to keep up with the United States, triggering the new League of Nations to hold a conference to negotiate limitations on the new arms race.<sup>44</sup> The United States took advantage of this opportunity, reasoning that war with Japan could be avoided by convincing Japan that control of the Pacific was not an attainable goal, and that could be achieved by aiming to limit the arms race in such a way that Japan would not have the naval capacity to do so.<sup>45</sup> This U.S. initiative led to what became the Washington Conference, on the eve of negotiations on the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese treaty.<sup>46</sup>

Going into the conference, U.S. analysis of Japan's position and intentions concluded that Japan required the resources in mainland China for its survival and continued industrial growth, that Japan could perhaps go so far as war in order to achieve control of China's resources, but Japan did not currently have access to the capital needed to develop the investments in China required to fully utilize those resources.<sup>47</sup> However, once that capital was obtained Japan would be the effective regional hegemon of Asia.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, U.S. Navy war planning at the time identified that Japan was not a danger to the United States itself, but due to its natural resource limitations, could pose a threat to China and Southeast Asia, much of which were colonial territories of the United States and the European colonial empires.<sup>49</sup> However, the United States could also leverage the Japanese lack of resources to force compromise in the Washington Conference. Because

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<sup>42</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 135.

<sup>43</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 134–135.

<sup>44</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 135.

<sup>45</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 135.

<sup>46</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 136–137.

<sup>47</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 136.

<sup>48</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 136.

<sup>49</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 135.

of Japan's dependence on the United States for oil and steel, the two particularly definitive required resources needed to wage war, Japan could not compete in an arms race with the United States, and Japan was forced to accept the 10:10:6 ratio of capital ships in exchange for the United States limiting its military buildup in the Pacific (which the U.S. Congress would not provide the funds for anyway) and, with the new Four-Power Treaty (adding France), the U.S. achieved their objective of dissolving the Anglo-Japanese alliance.<sup>50</sup>

Additionally, with the addition of the Five-Power Treaty (adding Italy), Japan gained effective naval control of the Western Pacific and the addition of the Nine-Power Treaty (adding the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, and China) effectively enshrined Japan's influence in Manchuria.<sup>51</sup> However, the Japanese delegation realized their need for capital to invest in the development of their territories and that they would be dependent on American credit to obtain that capital, and therefore could not afford to further antagonize the U.S. or pursue military conflict.<sup>52</sup> However, several crises in the late 1920s such as the spread of Chiang Kai-shek's forces throughout China, the death of the Taisho emperor and the democratic movement that borrowed his name, and the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression led Japan toward a stronger role of the military in Japanese policy.<sup>53</sup>

As the power of Japan's military continued to increase, and these victories legitimized the position of the military as an effective tool in international relations, the military also gained influence domestically, and the idea of expansion into more areas of China became more popular, especially within the military.<sup>54</sup> This popularity continued, despite the possibility that further imperial expansion would lead to war with the United States.<sup>55</sup> The military acted on its own, and conspirators staged the Manchuria incident, where the Kwantung Army attacked the Chinese in Manchuria under false pretenses,

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<sup>50</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 138–140.

<sup>51</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 141–142.

<sup>52</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 140–141.

<sup>53</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 151–155.

<sup>54</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 11–12.

<sup>55</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 11.

capturing more territory without the express consent of the government back in Tokyo.<sup>56</sup> The commander of the Kwantung Army, initially unaware of the plan, retroactively approved and the government, unwilling to risk an attempt to exert control over the military was forced to allow the occupation.<sup>57</sup> However, the international community did not agree that the occupation was justified, and the League of Nations protested, and initiated a commission to investigate the legality of Japan's actions.<sup>58</sup> However, Japan would have been unlikely to concede to the demands made by the League of Nations regarding its actions in Manchuria. Shortly before the League of Nations voted to accept the findings and recommendations of the Lytton commission condemning Japan's acts in Manchuria, the Japanese prime minister was assassinated, and the nation took a shift in foreign policy that placed central importance on Japan's position in Manchuria.<sup>59</sup> Returning to the status quo in Manchuria would also embarrass the Kwantung Army at a time when domestic forces were applauding their actions, not condemning them, which could cause further domestic unrest in Japan.<sup>60</sup> Finally, Japan was offended by the unanimous vote against Japan's position, and felt that the Western powers were still not taking Japan's argument, or its position as the dominant regional power in Asia, seriously.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, by that point, an independent Manchuria was worth more to Japan than its participating in a League of Nations that did not take Japan's positions seriously.<sup>62</sup>

Japan withdrew from the League of Nations and proceeded to take a more independent role in Asia with a full-scale invasion of China in 1937.<sup>63</sup> The international community, and particularly the United States, reacted even more poorly to this invasion, placing heavy diplomatic and economic pressure on Japan.<sup>64</sup> Japan, however, continued to

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<sup>56</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 37–38.

<sup>58</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 17–18.

<sup>59</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 17–18.

<sup>60</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 72.

<sup>64</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 78–79.

assert that it was the dominant regional power and therefore was entitled to its imperial expansion into China. Japan's refusal to withdraw from China and return to status quo per U.S. Secretary of State Hull's four principles was for similar reasons to its earlier refusal to withdraw from Manchuria, even though by that point Hull was willing to allow Japan to remain in Manchuria in exchange for withdrawal from China.<sup>65</sup> Hull's four points were that Japan, and all other nations, respect "territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, equal economic opportunity, and peaceful alteration of the status quo," in direct opposition to Japan's forced alternation of the status quo in China.<sup>66</sup> Japan was instead hoping for the United States to accept a new status quo with Japanese control of China and perhaps Southeast Asia in order to no longer be forced to rely on U.S. natural resources.<sup>67</sup>

However, withdraw from China was unacceptable to the military leadership which had initiated the conflict.<sup>68</sup> With the amount of influence that the military had come to have in domestic politics, such a decision would embarrass the military, make all of its efforts in the war in China lose all meaning, and cause the military to lose its prestige within Japan.<sup>69</sup> Rather than restrain the Japanese military, the diplomatic actions taken by the United States encouraged the Japanese to seek other options, namely occupying Southeast Asia in addition to continuing its expansion in China.<sup>70</sup> General Sugiyama, the army chief of staff, predicted that a move into Southeast Asia would lead to war with the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands, but Japan still continued to split its priorities between regions.<sup>71</sup> When Japan then proceeded to move into Southeast Asia, it was surprised by the response of the United States: to increase the severity of trade embargoes on Japan.<sup>72</sup> This increased the economic impact of the war in China and made it clear to Japan that war with the United States was inevitable. The military then proceeded with plans to cripple

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<sup>65</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 135–136.

<sup>66</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 135.

<sup>67</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 85, 135.

<sup>68</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 141.

<sup>69</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 141.

<sup>70</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, 135.

<sup>71</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 144.

<sup>72</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 146.

the U.S. forces in Asia before it could respond militarily and launched the attack on Pearl Harbor.

## **B. ECONOMIC TENSIONS**

As a small island nation with minimal resources, Japan always struggled to compete economically with the larger nations such as the United States and vast empires such as the British's. Japan's participation in World War I allowed it to strengthen and urbanize its economy due to an increased demand for Japanese goods in Europe while the European economies were shut down to supply war efforts.<sup>73</sup> However, the demand for Japanese goods collapsed when the war ended leaving Japan with an oversized urban population trained to produce goods that no longer had a market to supply, high levels of unemployment and inflation, food shortages, and domestic unrest among the working class.<sup>74</sup> These problems only worsened under the Great Depression.<sup>75</sup>

Japan, needing to stimulate its economy, saw three possible strategies: emigration for its rapidly increasing population, expansion of trade on the world markets, or territorial expansion.<sup>76</sup> However, Japan was cut off from Western markets following World War I, and new immigration policies such as the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924 prevented them from being able to emigrate to reduce population concerns.<sup>77</sup> Japan had already taken Taiwan as a result of the Sino-Japanese War, and had taken the Korean peninsula in 1915, but these territories were thought to be insufficient to stimulate the Japanese economy and were not yet fully developed, and Korean immigration into Japan only made urban population problems worse.<sup>78</sup> To solve its economic problems, Japan sought to create a

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<sup>73</sup> Tipton, *Modern Japan*, 113.

<sup>74</sup> Tipton, *Modern Japan*, 113.

<sup>75</sup> Tipton, *Modern Japan*, 113.

<sup>76</sup> Hashimoto, "The Need for Emigration and Expansion," 289.

<sup>77</sup> Tipton, *Modern Japan*, 113.

<sup>78</sup> Tipton, *Modern Japan*, 112.

new order in East Asia, with an economically self-sufficient bloc of Japan, Manchuria, and China that the Japanese economy could freely operate in.<sup>79</sup>

Cut off from emigration and trade by the policies of Western nations, Japan chose territorial expansion, which guided its decision to move into Manchuria in 1931.<sup>80</sup> However, the expansion into Manchuria caused a negative international reaction that would lead Japan to move further and further away from the established international order lead by the Western powers.<sup>81</sup> Due to the attacks in Manchuria carried out by the Japanese Army, Japan was accused of violating the various treaties of the 1920s that had formed the international political system following the First World War.<sup>82</sup> This accusation resulted in Japan's formal censure in the League of Nations with a near unanimous vote, Japan's exit from the League in 1933, and discussions of and eventual implementation of economic sanctions against Japan, severely stressing the already struggling Japanese economy's ability to finance the war effort in China.<sup>83</sup> Domestically, expensive war efforts, along with these sanctions and trade restrictions forced Japan to take drastic measures to support the military, such as food rationing.<sup>84</sup> For reference, by December 1941, 99 percent of Japan required ration coupons for rice, the nation's staple food.<sup>85</sup>

Japan's participation in World War I also demonstrated the reliance of its military on international trade, with new warships of the time transitioning from coal to oil, and Japan having no domestic oil supply.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the United States cutting off steel shipments to Japan during World War I (in order to maintain enough for its own manufacturing) also had the effect of demonstrating Japan's reliance on the United States specifically, and lack of economic independence that the other major powers enjoyed.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 107.

<sup>80</sup> Tipton, *Modern Japan*, 131.

<sup>81</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 16–17.

<sup>82</sup> Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 16–17.

<sup>83</sup> Iriye, 14–21.

<sup>84</sup> Hotta, *Japan 1941*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> Hotta, *Japan 1941*, 4.

<sup>86</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 133–134.

<sup>87</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 118.

These limiting resources led Japan to form a relationship with the United States that was based more on economic interests in Japan's desire to develop both Japan and its new territories than on any mutually beneficial security concerns.

With Japan's influence in Manchuria recognized following the Washington Conference, Japan was free to seek American investment in Manchurian development, using its American investments to increase the competitiveness of its exports, with the U.S. importing roughly 40 percent and China becoming Japan's second largest export market and an important supply of food and raw materials for import.<sup>88</sup> The Japanese continued to work closely with the American banking sector, borrowing capital with which to develop its holdings in Manchuria and China, which frustrated U.S. diplomats that felt such investments were not in the best interests of the U.S. government, but also felt that government intervention in private investment would be too close to the fascism and socialism that was developing in Europe.<sup>89</sup>

With Japan's excessive dependence on the U.S. economic success supporting Japan's own development, the Great Depression that followed had a similar negative effect on Japan. At that time, the United States was the recipient of 43 percent of Japan's exports, and the massive drop in prices of Japanese products meant ruin for Japan's peasant class.<sup>90</sup> A popular movement attempting to bolster Japan's economy via militaristic expansion led to the militant fascism of 1930s Japan, the Japanese attempt to conquer China and, eventually, war with the United States. Japan's attacks on the United States and Britain were a desperate attempt to reset the Japanese economy using the resources available in the Western-owned territories in Southeast Asia and the Pacific after losing their trade relationship with the United States. Could Japan have established itself in Southeast Asia quickly, Japan hoped that it could build an empire capable of sustaining itself without supplies from the United States.

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<sup>88</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 148.

<sup>89</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 150.

<sup>90</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 155–156.

### C. RACISM, DISTRUST, AND MISCALCULATION

U.S.-Japanese relations from the 1850s all the way up to the attack on Pearl Harbor show a pattern of miscalculation and misunderstanding based on racism and a distrust of the unknown. Japan, since being forced open to international trade, resented its unfavorable treatment by the Western imperialist powers and, throughout its rapid modernization, put much emphasis on establishing its status as an equal to the Western powers, especially the United States and Britain. However, the Japanese were continually viewed as foreign and other by the Anglo-American established world order, leading to a mutual distrust and inability to truly cooperate. The Western powers were even described to view the Japanese as subhuman, akin to apes, inherently inferior and primitive.<sup>91</sup> The Japanese people were seen as a collective, incapable of emotion or independent thought or action.<sup>92</sup> Such racist thought would manifest in multiple areas of U.S.-Japan relations, in Japan's treatment at the Washington Conference and in U.S. immigration and economic policy toward Japan. This mistrust led Japan to view the United States as a hypocritical, imperial nation that strove to exert itself over others and strangle them into submission through economic dominance. This view led Japan to its most fatal miscalculation – that the United States was a merchant nation comprised of selfish and greedy individuals that would not support a protracted war in distant lands.<sup>93</sup>

Modern Japan's first major encounter with Western racism came in the formation of the League of Nations and the following Washington Conference. Japan's request for the addition of a racial equality clause in the charter of the League of Nations was vehemently opposed by the United States and Britain and, even amended to be watered down, the clause a major factor in the United States' refusal to ratify the charter and join the League of Nations, removing a possible avenue for resolving disputes between the two nations.<sup>94</sup> In the Washington Conference, Japan was again treated as a second-rate power,

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<sup>91</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 9.

<sup>92</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 9.

<sup>93</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 36.

<sup>94</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 123–124.



with the United States and Britain cooperating to allot Japan a lower ratio of naval tonnage, a ratio lower than the Japanese navy felt adequate to defend its interests in the Pacific.<sup>95</sup> This perceived insult was especially aggravating to the Japanese following their participation in World War I allied with the United States and Britain, and Japan felt that their contributions deserved recognition as the primary power in Asia. The United States and Britain, however, refused to allow Japan capabilities that could allow Japan to challenge their interests in China and their positions in Southeast Asia.

As previously argued, Japan saw emigration as a possible path to control its growing population concerns, particularly with unemployment, and many Japanese initially emigrated to the United States to provide labor to a developing California. An 1894 treaty established legal Japanese immigration to the United States and allowed them equal rights to American citizens, but local California labor unions eventually protested and used their influence to segregate the Japanese as they had the Chinese immigrants.<sup>96</sup> The resolution of this dispute led to the 1907–1908 Gentleman’s Agreement in which the Japanese government agreed to limit immigration to the United States in exchange for restoration of equal rights.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, the Japanese were rightfully outraged when the United States passed the particularly racist Immigration Act of 1924. The Immigration Act severely limited the ability of the Japanese to immigrate to the United States through immigration quotas based on the ancestry of native-born American citizens.<sup>98</sup> These quotas were based on the 1890 census vice the 1910 census and, with the Japanese immigration treaty having not been established until 1894, the number of native-born Japanese-American citizens would be zero.<sup>99</sup> This policy, therefore, effectively barred Japanese immigration to the United States completely, cutting Japan off from a source of population control during a time it was most needed following its economic crises after World War I, and especially as the Great Depression began to unfold. The Immigration

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<sup>95</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 137–138.

<sup>96</sup> “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act),” United States Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

<sup>97</sup> “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act).”

<sup>98</sup> “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act).”

<sup>99</sup> “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act).”

Act, however, had little negative impact on immigration from Western Europe, to where the United States population traced the majority of its ancestry, establishing this policy as a strictly racist one. This policy forced Japan to focus more on emigration to its own territories in Korea and Formosa, and eventually Manchuria, forcing Japan to expand its territories in order to shore up its economy via population controls. Japan was therefore reasonably offended when its expansion was condemned by Washington and the League of Nations, furthering Japan's mistrust in the actions and intentions of the Anglo-American led world order.

The final perceived insult that led Japan to attack the United States was the economic containment policy implemented by the United States in response to Japan's continued expansion in China. The United States, intent to main its Open Door policy and economic interests in China, placed continual diplomatic pressure on Japan in an attempt to curb Japan's continued expansion, which was met with repeated assurances from the Japanese government that there was no intention of threatening American business and wanted no confrontation with the United States.<sup>100</sup> Japanese continued to see its expansion into China as the natural progression of its status as a rising power that needed territory and resources to support its growth, and grew increasingly frustrated with what it considered to be Western interference into Asian affairs based on a long history of Western powers' desire for global expansion and world conquest, leading Japan to further distrust the West.<sup>101</sup> Following indiscriminate Japanese bombing of Chinese cities, the United States moved to contain Japan economically and materially, instating a requirement for export licenses to be approved before the trade of any goods that could contribute to Japanese war efforts.<sup>102</sup> Next, the United States passed the National Defense Action Act of 1940, which gave President Roosevelt even more leverage to reduce the export of items such as aircraft parts and machine tools, further hindering Japan's capabilities.<sup>103</sup> Then,

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<sup>100</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 186.

<sup>101</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 30.

<sup>102</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 187–188.

<sup>103</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 192.

the United States blocked trade of much needed steel to Japan and, following news of Japan's preparations to move into Indochina, the United States embargoed the trade of oil to Japan.<sup>104</sup> With Japan receiving 60 percent of its oil from the United States, this embargo was the final step to push Japan toward war and a full takeover of Southeast Asia. Perhaps Japan, in such dire economic crisis, believed that war with the United States had essentially already started with its economic strangulation at the hands of the United States. Japan's final miscalculation was the belief that the United States would allow Japan to take Southeast Asia and China in order to form its own economic bloc, and that the United States would restrain from retaliation following the disabling of its Pacific Fleet. Instead, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor lit the powder keg of American nationalism and racism against the Japanese, leading to the prolonged, brutal war in the Pacific.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Rising tensions between the United States and Japan over almost nine decades of diplomatic and trade relations eventually led to the desperate Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, as Japan attempted to obtain the resources it needed for survival and establish itself as the Asian hegemon. Japan felt that its rapid modernization and militarization would lead to recognition of its status as the major power in Asia, but instead its aggressive growth marked Japan as a threat to U.S. interests, and the United States attempted to contain Japan instead of embrace it. Japan responded to these containment efforts by imperial expansion into Manchuria and eventually nearly all of China. This expansion and continued diplomatic miscalculation and misunderstanding between Japan and the United States created new sources of tension between the two powers. When Japan reached its final point of desperation, believing that war with the United States was inevitable for Japan to obtain the resources needed for its survival, Japan made the fateful mistake of launching a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, believing that the United States would not enter a protracted war just to satisfy its interests in Asia. Instead, this attack fueled a rage that brought the United States and Japan into the brutal conflict that was World War II in the Pacific.

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<sup>104</sup> LaFeber, *The Clash*, 199–200.

In recent years, some similar trends have developed in relations between the United States and China. With China's rapid economic growth and increasing militarization, Beijing is seeking to regain its status as the main power in Asia that it enjoyed hundreds of years ago. China's attempt to expand its influence has increased tensions with the United States, as Japan's attempt to do the same had in the build up to the attack on Pearl Harbor. To understand this new power dynamic in Asia and perhaps prevent the terrible consequences of Japan's actions, it is important to view China's rise through the lens of Japan's and determine if China will likely follow a similar path to Japan or forge its own. The next chapter will thus examine America's response to China's recent rise to power in Asia.

### III. CONTEMPORARY U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

One of the most explosive economic expansions occurred in China following the restoration of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China in 1979, and the Chinese government's institution of economic reforms in the 1980 and 1990s that opened up domestic markets and opened up the economy to foreign trade. The Chinese economy has grown at a rapid rate in the past few decades, from a GDP of 1.66 trillion USD in 2003 to 12.24 trillion USD in 2017, or from 4.2 percent of global GDP to 15 percent.<sup>105</sup> While this extraordinary pace was greatly assisted by a spike in trade with the United States, in recent years even becoming the United States' largest trade partner, it is estimated that as China continues to rapidly grow it could surpass the United States economy in the near future. It might be assumed that this trend would cause a military conflict in one of the many areas of tension between the two powers. However, as this the first part of this chapter will show through case studies of Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea, conflicting Chinese and U.S. interests seem to have been restrained in, Sino-American economic interdependence which has contributed to a pattern of de-escalation instead of conflict.

On the other hand, as China has grown ever larger, it has become increasingly concerned with its economic independence with the United States and U.S. efforts to contain China's global influence. This concern has led China to develop programs that attempt to prevent further containment, such as China's militarization of the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative that seeks to expand China's influence in developing nations around the world, and the Polar Silk Road initiative to expand China's influence in the Arctic. These programs have led China to find alternative avenues of expansion outside U.S. containment efforts, leading to new tension points between the United States and China that could possibly lead to conflict.

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<sup>105</sup> World Bank, "GDP (Current US\$)," Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-US-1W>.

## **A. U.S. ATTEMPTS TO CONTAIN CHINESE INFLUENCE**

Since China began its trend of massive economic and military growth year-to-year, there have been several areas of tension between the United States and China, but those tensions have mostly been limited to the immediate vicinity of China and its neighbors. The Chinese government's continued claim to be the legitimate government of a united China leads to tensions with the United States' strategic ambiguity regarding its potential military support for Taiwan. China has also recently intensified its claim over Japan's Senkaku Islands with a heightened maritime presence in the area. China has continued to expand its land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea, militarized several features, and continued to disregard international rules, norms, standards, and laws in its behavior toward passage through these areas and resource extraction.

The United States has attempted to contain China's growing influence in the region by providing extensive assistance to Taiwan with an ambiguous security guarantee, reemphasizing its support of Japanese territorial integrity in the Senkaku Islands and its treaty obligations should that territory be violated, and through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's claims in the South China Sea and prevent their claims from becoming international custom. The United States has relied on its economic interdependence with China in order to assert its position without resorting to military conflict, though that paradigm may shift in the future.

### **1. Taiwan**

Taiwan's presence as a non-PRC Chinese state serves to question the legitimacy of the CCP's governance over all of China. Reunification of the two is still a primary goal of the CCP and while publicly stating that it desires peaceful reintegration, Taiwan's national sentiment rejecting reunification and the PRC's well-known massive defense spending may suggest that a peaceful reintegration is not expected.<sup>106</sup> China's focus on developing a world-class military while having seemingly no major security challenges to the survival

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<sup>106</sup> Xi Jinping, Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, October 18, 2017, 50, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf).

of the nation reflects a possible desire to use its newly improved military to enforce national interests abroad rather than to maintain its own security. Indeed, the PRC has never ruled out the use of force in reunification.

Should China attempt to seize Taiwan by force, however, this would likely have a detrimental effect for every party. As stated before, the United States informally acts as Taiwan's security guarantor. The United States' security role could place China and the United States in direct conflict if China attempts to seize Taiwan. However, China owes much of its continued growth to its economic ties to the United States, its largest trading partner.<sup>107</sup> The United States is China's largest export market at 477 billion USD and 20 percent of China's total exports in 2017. The United States is also China's third largest import market at 133 billion USD and 8.7 percent of China's total imports in 2017.<sup>108</sup> These large figures provide evidence that the two economies are heavily dependent on each other. In the event of war over Taiwan, trade between China and the United States would likely be heavily negatively affected and have negative effects for both nations' economies. This interdependence provides significant incentive for the two nations to deescalate tensions around Taiwan and has therefore helped to maintain the status quo of Taiwan's self-governance.

## **2. Senkaku Islands Claims**

Another major source of tensions between the United States and China is China's claim over Japan's Senkaku Islands. Physically located closer to Taiwan and China than to Japan, Japan has maintained sovereignty over the islands as part of its Okinawa prefecture since the Ryukyu island chain was returned to Japan in 1972.<sup>109</sup> While China claims sovereignty of the islands based on control of the Qing Dynasty, Japan traces its claim to the Treaty of Shimonoseki 1895, which states "Formosa, together with all islands

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<sup>107</sup> *China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, Implications for the United States*, CRS Report No. RL33534 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33534.pdf>.

<sup>108</sup> OECD, "China," Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn/>.

<sup>109</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Senkaku Islands," April 13, 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/index.html>.

appertaining or belonging to the said island of Formosa” be ceded to Japan.<sup>110</sup> Japan has administered the islands since they were returned in 1972, and the sovereignty of the islands was debated relatively little until the 2010 Senkaku crisis when a fisherman refused to leave the territorial waters, and again when Japanese government purchased the islands from their private owner in 2012.<sup>111</sup> Since then, the Chinese Coast Guard, and private fishermen, have becoming increasingly active and aggressive, and this behavior places the Senkaku Islands as a potential source of military conflict between China and Japan, and through Japan’s security treaty with the United States, America as well.

Theoretically, the resource value of the uninhabited islands, which are rich in fishing grounds, and oil and gas deposits, would outweigh the potential economic costs of going to war with the United States and Japan, especially since the oil and gas deposits are described as one of the largest in the world.<sup>112</sup> The situation at the islands has periodically been very tense, with Chinese vessels violating territorial integrity or claiming to be administering the islands, but there has been no military activity and the situation has remained a law enforcement issue under the jurisdiction of the respective coast guards.

I suggest that tensions over the islands have not escalated to the point of war because armed conflict with both Japan, China’s third largest trading partner, and the United States, its largest trading partner, over a small group of islands does not make sense from an economic interdependence perspective.<sup>113</sup> Japan is China’s third largest export market at 157 billion USD in 2017, 6.5 percent of China’s total exports.<sup>114</sup> Japan is also

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<sup>110</sup> “Treaty of Shimonoseki, 1895,” USC US-China Institute, <https://china.usc.edu/treaty-shimonoseki-1895>.

<sup>111</sup> Ito Masami and Mizuho Aoki, “Senkaku Collisions Video Leak Riles China,” *The Japan Times*, 6 November 2010, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2010/11/06/national/senkaku-collisions-video-leak-riles-china/#.Whh8yVWnHIU>. And Kiyoshi Takenaka, “Japan buys disputed islands, China sends patrol ships,” *Reuters*, September 11, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-china/japan-buys-disputed-islands-china-sends-patrol-ships-idUSBRE88A0GY20120911>.

<sup>112</sup> “Senkaku Islands Tabletop Exercise Report,” Lockheed Martin Center for Innovation, March 28–30, 2017, <https://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Senkaku-Islands-Tabletop-Exercise-Report.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> World Bank, “China exports, imports and trade balance By Country 2017,” <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/2017/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>.

<sup>114</sup> OECD, “China,” Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn/>.



China's third largest import market at 8.8 percent of total imports in 2017, above even the United States.<sup>115</sup> Together with the United States, a conflict between the three nations would carry the possibility of China losing over 25 percent of its export market and over 15 percent of its import market, which would place China's economy in an extremely precarious situation and likely lead to domestic turmoil and perhaps even challenge the legitimacy of the CCP.

### **3. South China Sea Claims and Developments**

The situation in the South China Sea is similar to the situation in the Senkaku island chain, except that the U.S. influence is based more on international customs, norms, rules, and laws than with treaty responsibilities. The South China Sea, similar to the Senkaku islands, contains valuable fishing grounds, hydrocarbon deposits, and valuable minerals, though it is much more strategically significant to global commerce than the Senkaku islands due to global shipping lanes passing through the region.<sup>116</sup> China claims the South China Sea as part of its traditional territory before Western imperialism expanded into Asia through its nine-dashed line maps, but those maps have no basis in modern international law.<sup>117</sup> Many of the features in the South China Sea are claimed by various other nations based on modern standards, resulting in a complicated web of reactions between China and the Southeast Asian nations. The United States also rejects China's claim based on the implications that China's claim on the entire South China Sea raises serious freedom of navigation concerns that could allow China to prevent any international shipping from transiting through those waters.<sup>118</sup>

To counter China's claim to territorial seas, the United States Navy maintains a constant presence in the area and regularly conducts FONOPs to challenge China's claims and ensure safe travel. This practice puts U.S. naval vessels in very frequent interaction

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<sup>115</sup> OECD, "China," Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn/>.

<sup>116</sup> Denny Roy, *Return of the Dragon: Rising China and Regional Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 223.

<sup>117</sup> Denny Roy, *Return of the Dragon*, 224.

<sup>118</sup> Denny Roy, *Return of the Dragon*, 224.

with various Chinese vessels, military and civilian, in potentially provocative conditions. There is a danger in miscalculation between U.S. naval vessels and Chinese units stationed in the area, or defense systems on the reclaimed features, that could result in an armed conflict between the two nations. However, even with China's increased aggression, Chinese vessels continue to restrain such aggression to avoid provoking armed conflict.<sup>119</sup> A military conflict in the South China Sea would be detrimental for both China and the United States, as it would threaten the normal flow of commercial shipping through the sea, which amounts to a third of all world trade.<sup>120</sup> China, the United States, and U.S. allies depend upon on the South China Sea for large portions of their economic stability. In 2017, for example, China was both the largest exporter and importer of trade through the South China Sea, accounting for 26 percent of all exports and 18 percent of all imports through the South China Sea.<sup>121</sup> Japan and South Korea, China's third and fourth largest trading partners and treaty allies to the United States, also depend heavily on commercial shipping through the South China Sea.<sup>122</sup> Japan exported 141 billion USD of products through the South China Sea in 2017, amounting to 20 percent of all Japanese exports.<sup>123</sup> In the same year, Korea imported 174 billion USD through the South China Sea, or 37 percent of all Korean imports.<sup>124</sup> Therefore, China may continue to press its claims, but any attempt to assert those claims through military force would result in substantial economic damage for both China and the United States and its allies in Asia.

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<sup>119</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), [https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf), 53–54.

<sup>120</sup> “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?” ChinaPower at Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>121</sup> “How Much Trade Transits The South China Sea?” ChinaPower at Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>122</sup> World Bank, “China Exports, Imports And Trade Balance By Country 2017”; “How Much Trade Transits The South China Sea?” ChinaPower at Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>123</sup> “How Much Trade Transits The South China Sea?” ChinaPower at Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>. And “Japan,” OECD, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/jpn/>.

<sup>124</sup> “How Much Trade Transits The South China Sea?” ChinaPower at Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>. And “South Korea,” OECD, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kor/>.

## **B. CHINA'S RESPONSE TO CONTAINMENT**

Although China has in the past restrained its military assertiveness toward the United States in the above discussed cases because of Sino-American economic interdependence, China has taken more recent moves to counter U.S. efforts to contain China's increased global influence, which may lead to conflict with the United States. In the last decade or so, China has increased its investment in parts of South America, Africa, South Asia, Pacific Islands, and the Arctic in an attempt to expand its own security interests and trade markets outside U.S. control. China has pursued this expansion through the use of parallel institutions created by China as an avenue to invest in various expansion programs, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and New Development Bank (NDB) which focuses on the BRICS nations.<sup>125</sup> Along with these various programs, China has and continues to heavily invest in modernization and expansion of its military, with a goal of full modernization by 2035 and a global force by mid-21st century.<sup>126</sup> These investments give China possible options to expand influence globally outside of traditional Western-influenced areas such as Northeast Asia and much of Southeast Asia, and bypass current chokepoints in maritime shipping such as the Suez Canal and Straits of Malacca. Finally, China has continued to militarize the South China Sea, giving it potential control over a body of water with huge strategic importance that could potentially be used to deny access should China face a security threat from the United States in Asia.

### **1. Continued Militarization of the South China Sea**

China has continued the militarization of the South China Sea and become more aggressive in its harassment of its neighbors in the region and transiting U.S. naval vessels.

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<sup>125</sup> G. John Ikenberry and Darren J. Lim, "China's emerging institutional statecraft: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the prospects for counter-hegemony," (Washington D.C: Brookings, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/chinas-emerging-institutional-statecraft.pdf>.

<sup>126</sup> Xi Jinping, Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, October 18, 2017, 48, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf).

China has stated that it views the presence of international militaries in the South China Sea as a challenge to its sovereignty and has employed coercive tactics to enforce its excessive claims, but below the threshold required to provoke an armed response.<sup>127</sup> China has ceased land reclamation efforts, but has completed construction of military infrastructure on three of its claimed features and deployed anti-ship and anti-air missiles in the Spratly Islands.<sup>128</sup> Infrastructure requirements for the take-off and landing of strategic bombing aircraft have been completed and tested in the Paracel Islands.<sup>129</sup>

China's increased military capabilities in the South China Sea, combined with its rejection of the results found by the Law of the Sea Convention tribunal that ruled China's claims were far in excess of international law, demonstrate China's determination to claim the South China Sea and expel U.S. influence. The newly installed anti-ship missiles are located ideally to deny foreign navies transit through the South China Sea, and the anti-air missiles could provide a reasonable defense against bombardment of the islands. Several of China's features also have deep water ports that could be used to serve as homeport for Chinese naval vessels, potentially increasing the area of China's naval patrol capabilities. Should China be allowed to continue its development of military infrastructure in the South China Sea, it could reach a point where it cannot be stopped as U.S. vessels would face a much longer transit for resupply and repair should conflict occur. China's continued modernization of its forces also increases its capabilities relative to current U.S. naval forces increasing the likelihood that an U.S. force could be overwhelmed in the South China Sea. While China harasses vessels transiting the South China Sea, but short of the level of provocation that would require an armed response, U.S. naval vessels could possibly be deterred from continuing FONOPs as the Chinese military presence strengthens.

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<sup>127</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, 53–54.

<sup>128</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress 2019*, ii.

<sup>129</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress 2019*, 73.

## 2. Expansion Via the Belt and Road Initiative

China has also recently sought to expand into Latin America, South America, Africa, South Asia, and the Southern Pacific Islands through its Belt and Road Initiative, which mixes a combination of economic investment and military forward basing expansion. Crossing multiple continents and much of the South Pacific, China's investments have been strategically separated geographically providing China opportunities in many different regions. In addition to the increase in economic gains seen as a natural result of its increased infrastructure spending in these areas, the lack of evaluation processes in employment of Chinese loans drive many developing countries away from institutions such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank.<sup>130</sup> These easily accessible loans have driven much of Latin America, South America, and Africa into China's sphere of influence, lessening U.S. influence and its ability to fulfill strategic interests. For instance, in South America, Venezuela has begun listing its oil sales in Yuan.<sup>131</sup> El Salvador, Panama, and the Dominican Republic have ceased relations with Taiwan and recognized the PRC instead.<sup>132</sup>

China has also focused on infrastructure development in Africa, largely to gain leverage needed to buy access to resources such as cobalt and other base metals.<sup>133</sup> However, China's construction of a military base in Djibouti became a major focus of security concern for the United States, which operates Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, its main base in Africa.<sup>134</sup> This naval base is China's first overseas military installation, and it offers China a permanent military presence in a strategic location bordering the Gulf of

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<sup>130</sup> Max Nathanson, "How to Respond to Chinese Investment in Latin America," *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/28/how-to-respond-to-chinese-investment-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>131</sup> Nathanson, "How to Respond to Chinese Investment in Latin America."

<sup>132</sup> Nathanson, "How to Respond to Chinese Investment in Latin America."

<sup>133</sup> Moin Siddiqi, "China Strengthening Africa's Infrastructure Base." *African Business*, 03, 2010, <http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/docview/220397441?accountid=12702>.

<sup>134</sup> J. Vandiver, "AFRICOM Chief: Expect More Chinese Bases in Africa." *TCA Regional News* Retrieved from <http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/docview/2011124210?accountid=12702>.

Aden. There has been additional concern regarding the potential for a Chinese takeover of the Djibouti commercial port, which could threaten future use of the port by the United States.<sup>135</sup> Chinese control over foreign ports has already been established in other areas, such as Gwadar, Pakistan, located in the Arabian Sea and Hambantota, Sri Lanka, centrally located in the Indian Ocean.<sup>136</sup> These two ports give China the ability to operate its navy across the Indian Ocean to Djibouti without having to rely on India for port access, granting China greater flexibility in its relations with India, another growing economic power in Asia that has recently improved relations with the United States and Japan in particular to balance against China's rising influence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>137</sup>

Finally, China's expansion into the Southern Pacific Island nations has been cause for concern. Like its investments in Africa, China's investments in the Southern Pacific gives it access to a large amount of natural resources that will be needed for continued Chinese economic development.<sup>138</sup> However, with China's military modernization program and push to develop their navy from a more coastal and shallow-water force to a full-fledged blue-water navy, preparing for future port access across the Pacific would be a strategic necessity for China.<sup>139</sup> Such positioning could also give China some capability to prevent maritime cooperation with Australia and New Zealand in the event of a conflict. Combined with a shutdown of the South China Sea, an increased Chinese presence in the Southern Pacific could also relegate U.S. naval access to only Hawaii, Guam, Northeast Asia and potentially the Philippines. Such a situation would effectively cut the United States off from the rest of Asia, cut off Japan from the vast majority of its imported energy resources, and isolate India, giving China a large strategic advantage that would give China maritime control over almost all of its immediate vicinity.

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<sup>135</sup> Vandiver, "AFRICOM Chief: Expect More Chinese Bases in Africa."

<sup>136</sup> Eleanor Albert, "China's Global Port Play," *The Diplomat*, May 11, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/chinas-global-port-play/>.

<sup>137</sup> Gurpreet S Khurana, "Joint Naval Exercises: A Post-Malabar-2007 Appraisal for India," *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2007. [www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09116](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09116).

<sup>138</sup> Terence Wesley-Smith, "China's Rise in Oceania: Issues and Perspectives," *Pacific Affairs* 86, no. 2 (06, 2013), doi: <https://doi.org/10.5509/2013862351>.

<sup>139</sup> Wesley-Smith, "China's Rise in Oceania: Issues and Perspectives."

### 3. Expansion into the Arctic

In addition to China's more southern focused Belt and Road Initiative, China also has a policy of establishing a presence and developing the Arctic sometimes referred to as the Polar Silk Road project. Ongoing effects of climate change will continue to open desirable North Sea routes (NSR) that could be preferable to China than the potential chokepoints in the Suez Canal and Straits of Malacca route.<sup>140</sup> An open NSR could also allow China another route for resource imports potentially lessening its concerns regarding the importance of the South China Sea. China itself is not an Arctic nation, but it has already entered into agreements with some Arctic nations and invested heavily in Arctic development through those nations to obtain access to their resources.<sup>141</sup> A large portion of the Arctic also lies outside those nations' Economic Exclusion Zones, opening those areas up to unhindered exploration due to the lack of a comprehensive agreement concerning resource development in the Arctic.<sup>142</sup> Local laws regarding foreign direct investment for the development of resource extraction are also very weak in many of the Arctic nations, and those nations welcome such investment.<sup>143</sup> This has allowed China to become the highest contributor of foreign direct investment to the Arctic region giving China considerable influence in its development.<sup>144</sup>

A large increase in resource development and commercial shipping via NSRs will likely lead to an increased naval presence for all nations involved. China's heavy investment in the development of the region will also likely involve the construction of new ports that will be available for a much larger portion of the year than current conditions allow due to the same global warming effects that will open NSRs for commercial shipping. This development could eventually leave to the weaponization of the Arctic region, which with its increased economic importance and opening of new direct routes between potential

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<sup>140</sup> Mark E. Rosen et al., *Unconstrained Foreign Direct Investment: An Emerging Challenge to Arctic Security*, COP-2017-U-015944-1Rev (Alexandria, VA: CNA, 2017), [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/COP-2017-U-015944-1Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/COP-2017-U-015944-1Rev.pdf).

<sup>141</sup> Rosen et al., *Unconstrained Foreign Direct Investment*.

<sup>142</sup> Rosen et al., *Unconstrained Foreign Direct Investment*.

<sup>143</sup> Rosen et al., *Unconstrained Foreign Direct Investment*.

<sup>144</sup> Rosen et al., *Unconstrained Foreign Direct Investment*.

Chinese naval ports and the United States, would greatly increase the strategic importance of the Arctic region. China, having already begun heavy investment, could have the initiative in the current situation.

### **C. CONCLUSION**

China's rapid economic growth, and its subsequent high investment in military growth and modernization, have given China the confidence and will to attempt to reestablish the massive influence that China once enjoyed over Asia and potentially the world. China's continued growth and expanding influence have threatened U.S. interests in the region and have served to increase tensions that have the potential to lead to conflict between the United States and China. However, in the recent past, there have been several cases in which there were tensions that could have led to conflict, such as China's claims over Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea, which have all led to de-escalation, I suggest, due to the high level of economic interdependence between the two nations. Taiwan enjoys protection as the United States has acted as Taiwan's informal security guarantor, and the United States and China share enormous amounts of bilateral trade which would be impacted by a military conflict over Taiwan. Japan has also enjoyed U.S. protection as a treaty ally since World War II, and Japan has a considerable amount of bilateral trade with China in its own right. Security in the South China Sea is also a concern of upmost importance to the United States as a considerable share of total world trade, and a very large amount of the imports and exports of its allies in Asia, transits through the South China Sea. Any conflict that China initiates in any of these cases could lead to a confrontation with the United States, and such a confrontation would result in significant damage to the economies of both China and the United States and its allies and, therefore, these economic ties push all involved nations toward de-escalation

In recent years, however, China has become concerned with the United States containing China's rise. To that end, China has continued its militarization of the South China Sea in order to solidify control of traffic through the South China Sea should it need to. China has also launched programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Polar Silk Road to establish trade networks and influence outside the current areas of U.S.



influence. The potential global influence that these programs could gain for China has led to a new source of tensions with the United States, which fears that new Chinese influence will threaten U.S. interests. U.S. efforts to maintain freedom of navigation in the South China Sea could lead to conflict with China should China attempt to use its militarized islands to exert control over traffic through the South China Sea. Such control could threaten the commercial interests of the United States and its allies that depend on that traffic for large portions of their trade. The Belt and Road Initiative and Polar Silk Road also have the potential to lead to conflict through an increased Chinese presence and influence in the Arctic, South Pacific, South Asia, Africa, and South America. The new Chinese presence and influence provides China alternatives to U.S. -led trade networks and institutions, therefore reducing U.S. global influence and also potentially making China more likely to act aggressively toward the United States because it is less reliant on the Sino-American trade for economic growth. Finally, an increased Chinese presence abroad also brings them into more frequent interaction with the U.S. military. Taken all together, each one of these factors could lead to armed conflict between the China and the United States in the future.

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## **IV. CONCLUSION**

### **A. FINDINGS**

#### **1. Japan**

World War II in the Pacific was an incredibly brutal conflict that had an enormous impact on the world. This thesis has examined the factors that led Japan to launch World War II and attack the United States. The thesis finds that the major contributors to Japan's decision to wage war on the United States were a combination of its aggressive militarism, increasing economic tensions with the United States, and miscalculation caused by the racism and distrust that Japan and the United States harbored against each other.

After its experiences with the Western imperial powers and their expansion into Asia, Japan felt that modernization and militarization were the key requirements to becoming an equal in international relations, especially with the strong Western nations. The carving up of China in the second half of the 19th century only served to reinforce the idea that might makes right in Japanese politics. An increasingly capable Japanese military integrated into Japan's foreign policy with Japanese victories over China in the first Sino-Japanese war and Russia in the Russo-Japanese war. Increased military strength and repeated victories bolstered a desire among the Japanese leadership to become the regional hegemon in Asia.

Japan continued to cultivate its empire, developing Taiwan, which it had received in the Sino-Japanese War, and occupying and developing the Korean peninsula. However, Taiwan and Korea were not enough territory to satisfy Japan's push for expansion. Japan used its foothold on the Korean peninsula to occupy Manchuria in the 1930s as well, providing more territory for an empire that relied on territorial expansion to maintain its economic and social stability. Eventually, even that territory was considered to be not enough, and Japan attempted to occupy China. Japan's continued expansion came to be seen as threatening U.S. interests in Asia.

The United States responded to the Japanese threat with policies meant to contain Japan and deter further expansion. Initial efforts included agreements made at the

Washington Conference that sought to place limits on shipbuilding and prevent a naval arms race. The Japanese were given a lower allowance of ships, with the intention that such a low number would prevent Japan from being able to defend a more expansive empire in the Pacific. The discrepancy in allowed naval capacity offended the Japanese military, which had just assisted the Allied victory in World War I. However, despite Japan's incredible efforts to modernize into a great empire akin to a Western power, the Americans tended to see the Japanese as inherently inferior and primitive, never an equal. In return, the Japanese viewed the United States as a hypocritical nation that would impose such policies as the Monroe Doctrine while striving to exert itself over other nations through economic dominance. Shortly after the Washington Conference, the United States effectively banned Japanese immigration to America in a fit of racism, a move which was perceived to aggravate the burdens of overpopulation on Japan's economy. As Japan invaded China with increasing desperation to bolster its fragile economy, the United States responded with trade embargoes on Japan, eventually placing an effective ban on the trade of steel and oil to Japan, on which the Japanese were almost entirely dependent.

The oil and steel embargoes on Japan did not have the intended effect of deterring Japanese aggression. Instead, the embargoes made Japan desperate and more dangerous, as Japan then feared existential survival. In the final miscalculation that led to war, Japan decided that if the United States would not provide oil and steel, Japan would have to obtain the resources elsewhere in order to survive. Japan targeted resource abundant Western colonies in Southeast Asia and launched a pre-emptive attack on the United States to allow time for Japan to solidify its control over Southeast Asia. Japan vastly miscalculated the U.S. response, believing that the U.S. democratic merchant society did not have the backbone for a prolonged overseas war.

## **2. China**

In recent years, China's rapid growth and modernization has led to an expanding Chinese influence that threatens U.S. interests and increases tensions with the United States. The Chinese and U.S. economies have become very interlinked, and that interdependence has encouraged de-escalation in cases such as China's claims over

Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea. However, China recently has an increasing fear of containment as its sphere of influence pushes against that of the United States that is reminiscent of Japan's increasing dissatisfaction and desperation as it was hemmed in in the years leading up to World War II. In response to this, China has sought to escape this containment via militarization of the South China Sea, and by expanding its influence into areas via its Belt and Road Initiative and Polar Silk Road. This expansion has alarmed the United States and led to new points of tension.

China's claims over Taiwan, Japan's Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea all have one factor in common. The United States has security requirements or interests in all three cases. The United States has been the informal security guarantor of Taiwan since the Chinese nationalists fled the mainland in 1949, though its exact security guarantees to Taiwan have remained ambiguous following the normalization of relations with the PRC. Japan has also benefited from U.S. protection as a treaty ally since the end of World War II, therefore bringing the United States into any military conflict over the Senkaku Islands. In the South China Sea, the United States maintains a constant presence to maintain freedom of navigation in opposition to China's excessive territorial claims. It is well known that the United States is China's largest trading partner. Japan and Taiwan are also large trading partners with China, though not nearly as much as the United States. This economic interdependence with the United States has a moderating effect on Chinese efforts to assert its territorial claims and expand its influence, as any conflict with the United States could risk a major challenge to China's impressive economic growth, on which the CCP has depended for maintaining stability and legitimacy.

This damper effect on China's territorial claims has lessened in recent years, and China has sought other avenues for expanding its influence as a new and growing world power. In response to continued U.S. naval presence in the South China Sea, China has continued the militarization of its artificial islands, giving China the potential to deny access to transiting vessels. China has also sought to build global trade routes outside the U.S. sphere of influence through its Belt and Road and Polar Silk Road initiatives by investing in regions that the United States has not had substantial involvement. In these efforts to escape containment by the U.S., China has sought to build its own networks and

obtained its own sources of natural resources independent of the trade networks the United States has developed since World War II. The United States has taken notice of China's efforts and determined that China's expansion will have long-term effects that conflict with U.S. interests, thereby increasing tensions with the United States.

## **B. FUTURE TRENDS**

### **1. The Path Leading to Conflict**

With China's recent militarization of the South China Sea and efforts to expand its influence most notably through its Belt and Road Initiative, China is showing a similar fear of containment as Japan did prior to World War II. As China grows into a world power, the United States has attempted to contain its expanding influence just as it had Japan's. Like Japan, China is attempting to continue its expansion into new areas to escape that U.S. containment, although China has pursued expansion mostly through economic means rather than Japan's military means. Still, China's new areas of expansion conflict with U.S. interests, just as Japan's did. As China's growing sphere of influence pushes against that of the United States, the possibility of military conflict to settle which nations deserves that influence becomes more likely. Should China or the United States resort to military action as Japan did, the results could be at least as devastating as World War II, if not more. Both China's and America's spheres of influence are much broader than Japan's and America's were leading up to World War II. China's ambitions pushing against America's produce scenarios that could lead to conflict.

As Japan did prior to World War II, China has invested heavily into the expansion and modernization of its military. Prior to World War II, the United States sought to limit the growth of the Japanese navy through the Washington Conference, but there are no such agreements in place which the United States could use to attempt to limit the growth of China's military. As such, the United States must face the possibility that China's continued massive investment could grow its military to be on par or greater than the U.S. military.

China's economic growth has been the main driver of its growing influence and the Chinese economy is expected to surpass that of the United States in the near future. That

economic growth will continue to fuel China's expanding influence and growing military strength. It is possible that the United States could target China's economy to prevent further expansion, as it had targeted Japan's in economy in an attempt to do the same. China's expanding trade routes have been a counter to prevent U.S. economic influence. However, if the United States attempts to restrict China's economy as it had Japan, China could react with a military response to cripple America's ability to exert economic control and prevent the intended damage to the Chinese economy. Similarly, the United States could resort to military action if it attempts to stall China's economy and fails to curb Chinese expansion.

Based on the findings of this thesis, I suggest that China could, as Japan once did, attempt a pre-emptive strike against the United States in strategic positions. Such an attack would attempt to cripple U.S. military forces in the Pacific as Japan had attempted to cripple the Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor. If successful, China could obtain the initiative needed to rapidly expand its sphere of influence and shore up its new territories that China would hope strong enough to defend against an U.S. response. Military conflict is more likely to occur if the United States attempts to contain China through economic restrictions as it had Japan.

Were a conflict between the United States and China to occur, it would likely almost immediately become global in nature, as well as create new alliance systems that would increase the danger even more. Russia, also sharing an interest in the Arctic and traditionally antagonistic with the United States, could ally with China, greatly increasing the military threat in the Arctic and Pacific. Japan and Taiwan, as long-term allies with the United States, would be threatened in the East China Sea and likely be drawn into the conflict. China would likely increase its aggression in a militarized South China Sea, threatening global commerce, resource flows to East Asia, and the security of much of Southeast Asia. A conflict in the South China Sea could spread into the Indian Ocean, potentially threatening India, which also shares a land border with China.<sup>145</sup> Such a

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<sup>145</sup> World Bank, "GDP (Current US\$) – China, Japan, India, Russian Federation, United States, World," Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-JP-IN-RU-US-1W>.

conflict could be the most dangerous war the world has ever seen, and the outcome would likely be against the best interests of all involved. As China's military continues to modernize and approach parity with the United States, a potential war between the United States and China becomes relatively more prolonged and dangerous than the war with Japan was and must be avoided. One factor makes it unlikely that this scenario will happen is that four of the combatant nations possess nuclear weapons (United States, Russia, China, India), which is likely to lead countries to pull away from the brink of war.

## **2. China Forging Its Own Path**

On the other hand, economic interdependence may continue to be the best deterrent to war, with the United States and China depending heavily on each other for trade. However, it is possible that China is using its economic relationship with the United States not as a mutual benefit, but as a shield to prevent the United States from resorting to military action to prevent China's continued growth. China could simply bide its time as it builds its own sphere of influence outside that of the United States until China can use that influence to achieve more independence from economic ties with the United States. With this assumption, China would not be the initiator in a potential conflict. With the ability to continue its economic growth and influence through economic investment, there is no benefit to resort to military action against the United States and countless drawbacks. Japan did not have this capability in the lead up to World War II as its economy was failing and Japan was in a very one-sided trade relationship with the United States. Whereas Japan was entirely dependent on the United States for essential resources, China enjoys a more mutual trade relationship. Japan had also become accustomed to using its military to further its interests, through the occupation of Korea, Manchuria, and its attempt to occupy China. China, on the other hand, has long used its economic power to further its interests. With projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and its Polar Silk Road, it will most likely continue to do so, in contrast to Japan. China could, therefore, achieve its goals by integrating into the liberal economic world order instead of trying to militarily force its way into world power status as Japan had attempted.



Another unknown factor in relations between the United States and China is the potential for misunderstanding each other's intent, resulting in a miscalculation that leads to conflict. The United States and Japan continually misunderstood each other's intentions and this misunderstanding led to escalating tensions in their diplomatic efforts to reach common ground. Such miscalculation between the United States and China could again lead to increased tensions between the two nations and possibly result in a military conflict. However, there are many more avenues of diplomacy between the United States and China than there were between the United States and Japan. First, the United Nations provides a more ideal forum for conflict mediation than did the League of Nations, of which the United States was not a member and Japan withdrew from.

Additionally, modern technology has enabled a much more integrated global society than the technology of the times leading up to World War II. The general population now has much more understanding of different countries and different cultures than was available in the 1930s, and experts and advisors have more opportunity to meet and work together. This increase in general familiarity should serve to reduce the likelihood of such severe misunderstanding as occurred between the United States and Japan. Therefore, it is likely that China and the United States will be much more able to navigate through the difficulties of their conflicts of interest than Japan and the United States were able to, and therefore will be able to avoid a devastating conflict such as World War II. However, there is also a possibility that the effects of nationalism divide the two nations, which could be amplified even more by the state-owned media in China and the mass media in the United States.

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