

Asia's Geopolitical Challenges and Future Order: China Factor

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What is the Broader Strategic picture in the Indo-Pacific?

First, after the Global Financial Crisis (2007-08), there was a relative decline in US power and China made the most out of a “period of strategic opportunity” by occupying the strategic space left vacant by a United States preoccupied with the domestic economic crisis and the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Second, China began to act aggressively with neighbors on her periphery, asserting historical territorial claims unilaterally, first through cartographic aggression, and then by creeping occupation - as was attempted by the PLA at Doklam, Bhutan, in June – August 2017 - and by land reclamation and militarization of reefs in the South China Sea. Chinese provocations were similarly, a cause of rising tensions over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea since 2010. This was accompanied by *soft coercion* through threatening statements made by Chinese official spokespersons and the official media. Chinese fishing fleets were also used to assert territorial claims in the South China Sea against Vietnam and the Philippines, on the Senkaku Islands against Japan and the Natuna Islands against Indonesia.

Third, China is building a “blue water navy” that can defend its sea-lanes of communication and become a dominant force in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. China’s port building activities in the Indian Ocean littoral and the establishment of naval bases in Gwadar, Pakistan and Djibouti have led to concerns that this is part of a larger strategy to bring about the strategic domination of the IOR.

Fourth, China’s BRI is a grand strategy, unparalleled in scope and ambition and far exceeding anything the world has seen before. It is also a masterly blueprint to integrate China’s markets, gain access to resources, utilize excess domestic capacity, strengthen China’s periphery, gain strategic military access in the maritime domain beyond the Eurasian heartland, and enlist “all-weather friends,” as China prefers to call its allies. Its origins may lie in pressures on the CPC to develop China’s western provinces and counter the impact of China’s economic slowdown and lagging exports, but the BRI has evolved into a predominantly strategic mega project.

ASEAN-centric security institutions failed to address the hard security issues that came to the fore with China’s rise.

Fifth, there are the strategic and security underpinnings of the US China Trade spat that we must take note of. On the surface the tariffs imposed by the US seek to address the trade deficit and the theft of intellectual property but more broadly they are a reaction to the rise of China as a challenger to the United States' dominance of the capitalist, liberal and democratic order. The US actions reflect concerns over the loss of US manufacturing industries of the US rust belt and the perception that China's trade policies and industrial policy is unfair and threatens the US advantage in high technology sectors. New US tariffs have targeted both steel and heavy industrial goods but also a range of high technology industries especially in those areas which China hopes to lead in 2025 or 2049.

Sixth, ASEAN-centric security institutions failed to address the hard security issues that came to the fore with China's rise. The economic interdependence between the ASEAN and China and China's soft coercion and offers of investment funds, induced many ASEAN countries to fall in line. As a consequence, ASEAN unity on Chinese claims on the Spratlys and Paracels in the South China Sea has been broken since 2012. While Vietnam and Indonesia continue to stand firm, the Philippines, Cambodia and Laos have in varying degrees, fallen in line and taken an accommodative stance in the face of Chinese pressure.

Seventh, the strategic collusion between China and Pakistan and China and the DPRK exacerbates security challenges for India, Japan, South Korea and the United States. *In South Asia*, China's support to Pakistan – which in the past has included nuclear and missile proliferation - encourages the latter to indulge in brinkmanship with India.

On the Korean peninsula, China's unwillingness or inability to rein in the DPRK allows the latter to engage in nuclear brinkmanship with the ROK, Japan and the US. China has periodically displayed an ability to help defuse crises and bring the DPRK to the conference table, though without any lasting results. This gives China considerable leverage over those countries – Japan, ROK and the US - which are most affected by the DPRK's rogue

state behavior. President Trump's initiative in directly reaching out to the DPRK leader, has, if successful, the potential to be a game changer by reducing China's influence on the eventual outcome of negotiations with North Korea.

Nuclear and missile proliferation activities between the DPRK and Pakistan, are another dimension that has been seriously detrimental to India's national security.

What is the likely future for the Geopolitical Order in Asia?

The Realist Perspective of International Relations Theory gives us some useful insights into Geopolitics in Asia and the likely future of Sino-US relations¹

*Offensive realism*² put forward by Professor John J Mearsheimer holds that the anarchic nature of the international system is responsible for the promotion of aggressive state behaviour in international politics.

Offensive Realism gives us an insight into China's rise and the future of Sino-US relations. According to *offensive realism* the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize power and dominate the system. As a corollary if China continues to grow, it will eventually dominate Asia the way in which the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. As a reaction to China's rise therefore, the US will go to enormous lengths, to prevent China from asserting regional hegemony.

No regional hegemon wants a peer competitor. The US is no exception. Once China achieves regional hegemony in Asia it will move freely all over the world and assert its power in regions and countries far away from home. For this reason, the US will continue to challenge China's efforts at establishing regional hegemony in Asia.

When push comes to shove, however, countries would likely prioritize survival in their interaction with China.

If China does achieve regional hegemony in Asia it will pursue a combination of the following objectives:

First it will project power in places like the Persian Gulf and Africa where it has economic and strategic interests. It could also create problems for the US in the Western Hemisphere.

Second, China will also try to maximize the power gap with other powers like India, Japan and Russia so that none of these states can challenge it.

Third, China will dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior and sanction those who break the rules.

Fourth, China will have its own version of the Munroe Doctrine and try to push the US out of Asia.

Fifth, China will continue to pursue its naval modernization with the goal of creating a blue water navy which can project power across the globe and dominate the choke points connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Unbalanced multi-polarity is the most dangerous distribution of power, because under such circumstances a potential hegemon would have more incentive to go to war.

The US can pursue four strategies to counter China's rise, but none of these strategies are likely to achieve this objective.

First, the US could prosecute a preventive war. But this is not really feasible because China is a nuclear power.

Second, the US could pursue policies seeking to limit China's growth. This could be effective, but could end up wrecking the US economy too.

Third, the US could attempt to roll back China's rise. This would include covert actions, influence operations and trying to overthrow leaders. But these tactics were tried during the cold war period without any lasting success.

Four, the US will continue to strengthen its security alliance and its strategic partnerships in Asia in order to balance China. This will exacerbate tensions between its alliance and strategic partners and China.

How would the competition between United States and China impact on China's neighbours in Asia?

Will economic interdependence be the glue that binds? *Offensive realism* suggests that security considerations will always trump economic imperatives. It would appear to be so. China seems ready and eager to go to war over Taiwan even though the conflict may harm China's economy. Indeed, China has a history of using force to settle security conflicts.

Second, countries balance with their rivals because that maximizes their chances of survival, rather than bandwagon with a more powerful state as this does the opposite.

Third, one factor that has weighed in on countries in East Asia is the use of economic coercion by China. Succumbing to economic coercion prioritizes prosperity over survival. When push comes to shove, however, countries would likely prioritize survival in their interaction with China. This sentiment has been the dominant driver for the push towards bilateral and mini-lateral security cooperation arrangements in the Indo-Pacific.

What does offensive realism tell us about future scenarios of heightened Sino-US security competition?

Broadly there could be three scenarios: If the competition escalates we could see *Crisis* and major disputes escalating into conflict situations, *proxy wars* and the identification of each other as "*threats*". These tensions would however, coexist with trade, investment and economic ties between the principal protagonists.

If we witness over time the evolution into a US-China bipolar system, the balance of power would be stable and the likelihood of conflict between the two would be low. The fact there is not a deep ideological underpinning to the Sino-

US competition would make a US-China bipolar system more stable. *On the other hand, if the evolution is towards a multipolar system* involving the US, China, Japan, India and Russia the risks of miscalculation would multiply. This could occur for example by a miscalculation in assessing the resolve of opponents or the strength of rival coalitions. Or it could be due to the uneven distribution of military power in a multipolar system. Unbalanced multi-polarity is the most dangerous distribution of power, because under such circumstances a potential hegemon would have more incentive to go to war. Bipolarity of the cold war was more stable than unbalanced multi-polarity.

Rising powers embrace an outward looking, extroverted foreign policies of expansion while declining powers adopt inward looking introverted foreign policies of restraint and retrenchment.

Finally, offensive realism suggests that nationalism is likely to play a key role in the Sino- US competition³ and the evolving Geopolitical Order in Asia

Not all *realist* projections for the future of Sino-US relations spell gloom and doom. According to Professor Randall Schweller of Ohio State University, the interaction between nationalism and power trajectory produces entirely different foreign policy orientations between rising and

declining powers. Rising powers embrace an outward looking, extroverted foreign policies of expansion while declining powers adopt inward looking introverted foreign policies of restraint and retrenchment. The resurgent nationalisms of the rising challenger and the declining hegemon could be entirely compatible with a future relationship of peace and harmony. The two nationalisms pose no inherent conflict of interest. And as the world moves from unipolarity to bipolarity it may actually be more stable and peaceful.

Some would argue⁴ that the rise of nationalism could actually strengthen the Westphalian state system and the resultant balance of power would reinforce peace and stability.

End Notes

¹ National Interest, October 2014, ‘Can China Rise Peacefully?’ by Professor John D Mearsheimer.

² Defensive neorealism points towards "structural modifiers" such as the security dilemma and geography, and elite beliefs and perceptions to explain the outbreak of conflict.

³ Prof Randall Schweller of Ohio State University in article entitled ‘Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of Sino-US relations’

⁴ Steve Bannon in an interview to Wion TV

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