

The Stirring Giant: China's Strategic Interests and Geopolitical Fault Lines

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Abstract: This research seeks to evaluate China's major strategic interests and how their geopolitical contexts could possibly result in war. It identifies a realist bent to both American and Chinese behavior that is driving the two toward increased security competition. It features considerations of Taiwan, the South China Sea, Island Chain Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative, while also delineating the nuances of China's strategic approach in Asia.

Keywords: China, Taiwan, Asia, Belt and Road Initiative, First Island Chain, Second Island Chain, South China Sea, Security Competition, Hegemony, Regional Hegemony

Introduction

The anarchism of the international system drives security competition. This is no less true today than it was three thousand years ago. The actors change but the patterns do not – as shown now by a growing US-China rivalry. The pursuit of hegemony – that is, power to such an extent that a state is able to dominate all the others in the system¹ – creates power asymmetries with consequences for global peace.

Nothing threatens to result in war more than a power nearing hegemon status. Hitler, Wilhelm II, and Napoleon are all recent examples that brought their states to the brink of hegemony, destabilizing Europe in the process. China now looks poised to achieve that same distinction and with it a capacity for regional dominance. Ever intolerant of emerging rivals, the US now wrestles with the question of how to slow or stop China but formulates questionable policies in doing so.

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¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 40.

Asia is headed toward unbalanced multipolarity. Russia is already a great power, and it would not take much for Japan and India to join its company.² Other minor Asian powers are nervous about China's rise and cooperate with the US, whose presence in the region is significant. The question is whether or not this is enough. Failure to balance correctly will result in China's emergence as hegemon. But a misstep, given Asia's multipolarity and China's sensitive fault lines, could just as easily tip the region into war.

This research acknowledges the offensively realist bent of Chinese behavior and its drive toward regional hegemony (that often takes place amongst rhetoric proclaiming the opposite). But more importantly, it outlines China's specific strategic interests and the way it pursues them. China is not Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany nor Nazi Germany whose strategies were all so classically Western. If the US does not take the time to understand what exactly China wants, as well as how it has and will go about achieving those objectives, the outcome could be both a premature and unwinnable war.

China's Resurgence in Context

The desire for hegemony is universal, given the anarchic nature of the international system, but this impulse is colored by state history and geography, which can indicate clues as to specific state behavior. China has enjoyed a very long history in which it occupied the zenith of global power several times. It has survived pandemics, economic crashes, invasions, conquest, and all other such threats that a state must face. And through it all China has flourished, at varying times, culturally and politically. Pride naturally emerged from this apparent superiority and the so-called "cradle of civilization" mentored, mediated, and dominated nearby Asian

² Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 398.

powers. To some extent, it is possible China views its recent resurgence as a return to a historical norm.³ But that return is not without bitterness.

China's Century of Humiliation began in 1839 with its defeat in the First Opium War and is usually taken to have ended with the Second World War in 1945. In that time, China was torn piecemeal. Backward and technologically behind, it lost nearly every conflict that it fought and was forced into the notorious Unequal Treaties. These usually entailed massive reparation payments and the concession of territories. Foreign powers made excursions into the country or dominated its ports for economic gain while China continually spiraled. One of the most infamous episodes of this century was the Nanjing Massacre that left 40,000 to 300,000 people dead. All of this was a hard pill to swallow for a prideful state possessing such a stellar historical record, but swallow it China did, eschewing its pride for pragmatic reforms. Now, China displays a desire for international power coupled with a deep suspicion of Western powers, chief among them, the United States.⁴ All states seek hegemony, but China's particular reasons for doing so, right now, are emotionally and historically charged.

What, then, does China's return look like? First and foremost, it is geographic. China is looking to reintegrate disputed territories and lost possessions with the mainland. Some of these territories and disputes inspire a fight-instinct powered by intense nationalism. Others, China has turned a blind-eye to, viewing them as not worth fighting over—yet. Second, is China's basic security problem. China has a very long border that could become vulnerable to both local and foreign adversaries. Its nearby seas and waterways present a similar problem, with many foreign powers cruising through them regularly.⁵ Becoming whole enables China to better hedge its

³ Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy* (Rand, 2000), 3.

⁴ Swaine & Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, 3-4

⁵ Swaine & Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, 9-10

security problem. Hence, China's objectives revolve generally around winning its territorial disputes, becoming preponderant and ultimately supplanting the US as a producer of security in Asia.⁶

Hegemon of an Unbalanced Multipolarity

China, like all states, aspires to hegemony as means of achieving maximum security. With global hegemony being an impossibility, it is likely to settle for the next best thing: regional hegemony.⁷ Dominance over Asia is attractive for a few reasons. First, the region is rich in natural resources. A large number of Asian economies benefit from mining precious metals, rocks and minerals; oil and natural gas abound everywhere from the Arab peninsula to the bottom of the South China Sea; Asia's waterways enable major maritime trade; and the region is rich in biodiversity.⁸ China, as recognized by much of the West and globe already occupies territory primed to exploit the aforementioned. A major cause of strain, however, are Chinese claims on contested waters and territories. China desires to widen its access to Asian natural resources and becomes more likely to achieve this as its relative power increases.

Secondly, Asia is growing in international relevance to such an extent that it may become the sort of focal point that Europe once was. Increasingly, it seems that there is an "Asian Century" on the horizon.⁹ One half of this phenomenon is economic. China and India continue to grow at breakneck speed, Japan is a mainstay in terms of GDP, Indonesia and South Korea tend to rank in the top fifteen, encouraging trends can be found in Singapore, and one could argue even in Vietnam. Furthermore, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is fostering greater

⁶ Swaine & Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, 19-20

⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 41.

⁸ National Geographic Society, "Asia: Resources," National Geographic Society, October 9, 2012, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/asia-resources/>.

⁹ John Reed and Valentina Romei, "The Asian Century Is Set to Begin," *Financial Times* (Financial Times, March 26, 2019), <https://www.ft.com/content/520cb6f6-2958-11e9-a5ab-ff8ef2b976c7>.

economic interdependence and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has over a hundred members.

The other component increasing the likelihood of an “Asian Century” is raw and potential power. While a far cry from challenging the United States, the People’s Liberation Army is still a formidable force. Beyond China, however, we find that Asia is home to several great and potential-great powers. Russia surely qualifies as one and Japan is only a nuclear weapon away from that same distinction. India, if managed right, could also elevate to this level. It is no wonder that China would like to be preponderant. Asia is resource-rich and swathed in deadly rivals.

Asia is decidedly Multipolar then. There are several great and potential-great powers in the region. More critically, Asia is likely to become an *unbalanced* multipolarity— if it isn’t already— given the growing gap between China and the other powers there. This does not bode well for future peace and stability as Multipolarity is far less stable than Bipolarity. Mearsheimer indicates that Bipolar systems have a lower risk of miscalculation and a greater likelihood of even power distribution.¹⁰ Multipolarities, by contrast, crank up the opportunities for miscalculation and other such mistakes by virtue of more variables needing to be accounted for.¹¹

Multipolar systems, as stated, tend to be less stable but a key distinction must be made. Balanced Multipolarities – systems in which all the great powers are more or less equal— can enjoy lengthy periods of peace because no potential hegemon is present. But the great powers are likely to shift the burden of containment when a security threat does emerge and may resist

¹⁰ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 346

¹¹ Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, *Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability* (New Haven: Yale University, Political Science Research Library, 1964), 392

forming a balancing coalition.¹² Balanced Multipolarities, as a result, run the risk of buck-passing themselves into imbalance. Europe's response to Nazi Germany's prewar expansion is a good example of this.

Modern Asia is not the balanced Multipolarity that preceded the Second World War in Europe. It is Multipolar and unbalanced, China's stature as a potential hegemon is what makes it so.¹³ Since China's emergence has been gradual, unlike that of Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany, there should not be a sleepy and time-consuming shift from buck-passing to coalition balancing. Many great and minor powers are already on alert regarding China's rise, and the US is already something of a coalition leader. The problem is that unbalanced Multipolarities are the most war-prone of all combinations. With China pulling away, the other great and minor powers will fear for their survival and sovereignty. The United States will grow especially anxious as it watches the rise of a peer competitor boasting a larger population and faster growing economy.

History shows that regional hegemons do everything they can to prevent the rise of another.¹⁴ The question is not whether the US will try to contain China, but rather, how. Adding the unbalanced Multipolarity of Asia to the mix means the US will be playing a dangerous game in which the instances for a potential war are high— not just between the US and China, but between the many other dyads existing there too.

Strategic Orientation

Given Asia's unbalanced Multipolarity, one may be tempted to view China as an overwhelming aggressor in the same mold as Nazi Germany or Napoleonic France. But China's strategic posture is calculative, resulting in an unusual restraint.¹⁵ Geopolitical events are

¹² Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 268

¹³ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 399

¹⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 141

¹⁵ Swaine & Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, 113

weighed pragmatically against a policy of avoiding unnecessary conflicts; China avoids foreign entanglements like the plague; and China seems to only take on an aggressive posture over Taiwan and territories it believes are its own. Why this is so, and why China has settled on a calculative, rather than an assertive or cooperative orientation, is the subject of this section.

First to consider is that there is a fundamental, philosophical difference between the US and China when it comes to strategy. Patience, discernment, restraint and pragmatism are not words that could be used to describe US strategy and foreign policy. Instead, there is emphasis on speed, force, coercion and violence to force capitulation as quickly as possible. In a sense, the United States is playing Western chess. The goal is to capture the opposing king in as few moves as possible. China, by contrast, is playing Go or Wei Qi; “a game in which the slow and patient building up of assets leads to victory.”¹⁶ One looks for swift victory, the other plays a long game. One is direct and offensive, the other is diffusive and bent on waiting for advantage.

Since the end of the Cold War, China’s focus has been on economic reform. Recognizing that conflict can be counterproductive for a power on the rise, it has resolved to avoid open security competition. Militaristic responses to security threats and challenges are usually avoided or are muted compared to other similar powers of today and yesterday.¹⁷ This would naturally also mean a refusal to become entangled in adventures abroad. US meandering in the Middle East, for example, is deeply appalling to Chinese leadership. They are unable to grasp the rationale behind continuing to waste both lives and resources in what are essentially unwinnable conflicts. What is more, China correctly estimates that these interventions serve more of an ideological than national interest, a sentiment that clashes with China’s pragmatic bent.¹⁸ It is

¹⁶ Kishore Mahbubani, *Has China Won?: The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2020).

¹⁷ Swaine & Tellis, *Interpreting China’s Grand Strategy*, 112

¹⁸ Mahbubani, *Has China Won?*, 90

interesting that the US accuses China of expansionism and wanting to export ideology, when it is the United States that has been prolifically involved in both. Mischaracterization of China may win certain politicians domestic approval, but in the long run this will create an international situation in which shadows are confused for roaring monsters.

It is in China's interest to prevent or at least soften US containment efforts. Any posturing that indicates a sudden or aggressive run at hegemony is likely to activate more assertive containment policies on part of the US and Asian powers fearful of China. An aggressive and expansionist China would see its progress quickly ruined or at least greatly slowed.¹⁹ Van Stephen Evera, professor of Political Science at MIT, provides the following aphorism: "States fight when they think they will prevail, when they think the advantage will lie with the side moving first, when they believe their relative power is in decline, when they assume that resource cumulativity is high, and, most important, when they believe that conquest is easy."²⁰ There is no reason for China to currently fight a war and China does not want to. China is far better off delaying big conflicts until its relative power has neared or overtaken the US'.

But none of this is to say that China is a supplicant. It must be remembered that if China ever commits to a military response, the West and Asia will find itself fighting an enemy that guarantees *at least* mutual destruction. The implications of a war with China will be more closely evaluated later, but at the outset it is obvious that China cannot be invaded or made to submit by military means outside the deployment of nuclear weapons. Reckless talk of defeating or

¹⁹ Swaine & Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, 115

²⁰ Van Stephen Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 255

stopping China indicates a lack of sobriety regarding the Asian situation and a downplaying of China's capabilities.

Specific Strategic Interests

A whitepaper from the State Council Information Office outlined China's national defense aims. They are: "to deter and resist aggression; to safeguard national political security [...]; to oppose and contain 'Taiwan independence;' to crack down on proponents of separatist movements [...]; to safeguard national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security; to safeguard China's maritime rights and interests; [...] to safeguard China's overseas interests; and to support the sustainable development of the country."²¹ The key phrases here are "national sovereignty" and "territorial integrity." China's strategic interests tend to be categorized into one or the other. The issue is that the waters and territories that China claims by virtue of sovereignty are disputed.²²

The purpose of this and the elapsing sections is not to outline in detail all of China's stakes and interests, but to focus on those with the greatest potential for war or resource accumulation. As such, the focus will be on the reintegration of Taiwan; pushing the US beyond the First and Second Island Chains; dominating the South China Sea in general; and hedging containment through economic initiatives.

The Taiwan Issue

No issue stirs Chinese fury more than the problem of Taiwan. Observing outsiders are quick to sympathize with the small democracy in constant resistance to the monolithic and

²¹ "China's National Defense in the New Era," Xinhua (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, July 2019), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

²² Pia Krishnankutty, "Not Just US, India - China Is Involved in 17 Other Territorial Disputes in Asia," ThePrint, July 15, 2020, <https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/not-just-india-tibet-china-has-17-territorial-disputes-with-its-neighbours-on-land-sea/461115/>.

authoritarian China. China's insistence on Taiwanese submission can appear fanatical and even unhinged, especially considering China's recent methods.²³ But China's reason for taking such a hardline policy is historical, harkening back to the Century of Humiliation.

China's loss in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) resulted in the Treaty of Shimonoseki. The treaty was harsh. Besides the massive indemnity, it ceded the Pescadore Islands and Liaodong peninsula; made Korea (originally a Chinese tributary) into a Japanese protectorate; and most importantly, gave all of Taiwan to Japan.²⁴ Being defeated in war and then exploited by a power that China considered a "younger brother" was mortifying. Subsequent leaders vowed to undo this humiliation.

That goal was achieved with the defeat of Japan in World War II. By 1949, however, the legitimate Republic of China was suffering defeat after defeat at the hands of the communist PRC. Mao's forces eventually pushed Chiang Kai-shek, the ROC leader, off the mainland. He continued his rule in Taiwan as Mao propped up his regime in China.²⁵ Herein lies the sensitivity regarding Taiwan. In the first half of the 20th century Taiwan was taken from China by force. A foreign power ruled over and exploited it while continually inflicting embarrassments on the mainland. When Taiwan did finally return to the mainland, the communist revolution was in full swing, looking to depose the corrupt and ineffective ROC. When the People's Republic of China finally succeeded, the ROC retreated to Taiwan and ruled there, making it difficult for the mainland to reintegrate it.²⁶ An invasion across the strait back in the 1940s and 50s was

²³ Mike Yeo, "China Sends Largest Group of Military Aircraft in Single Day near Taiwan," Defense News (Defense News, June 16, 2021), <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2021/06/16/china-sends-largest-group-of-military-aircraft-in-single-day-near-taiwan/>.

²⁴ John Keay, *China: A History* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009), 489

²⁵ Keay, *China: A History*, 515

²⁶ Keay, *China: A History*, 12

unrealistic. Taiwan was largely left alone and flourished, as a result, into an impressive and independent democracy.

Taiwan is the final remnant of a humiliating century.²⁷ This is the reason it inspires nationalistic furor. Any provocation or action geared towards decisively ensuring Taiwan's independence will be interpreted as a revival of foreign interference. Weakness over real or perceived territories risks disorder in the populace and removals in leadership.²⁸ Thus, Taiwan stands as one of very few exceptions to Chinese pragmatism. China *will* fight over Taiwan, against any power, even if it does not feel ready to. Chinese leadership feels compelled to:

China resolutely opposes any attempts or actions to split the country and any foreign interference to this end. China must be and will be reunited. China has the firm resolve and the ability to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will never allow the secession of any part of its territory by anyone, any organization or any political party by any means at any time. We make no promise to renounce the use of force, and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures. This is by no means targeted at our compatriots in Taiwan, but at the interference of external forces and the very small number of "Taiwan independence" separatists and their activities. The PLA will resolutely defeat anyone attempting to separate Taiwan from China and safeguard national unity at all costs.²⁹

Ideology aside, there are practical and strategic reasons for taking up this policy. In the Korean War, the United States launched a counterattack from the island and its strait. Observers

²⁷ Mahbubani, *Has China Won?*, 95

²⁸ Mahbubani, *Has China Won?*, 22

²⁹ "China's National Defense in the New Era," Xinhua (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, July 2019), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

quickly realized that Taiwan could be used as a bridgehead for an equally devastating attack on the mainland.³⁰ Fear of this particular problem has waned with the advent of nuclear weapons, but the defensive notion that an island near the mainland should not be hostile—or on good terms with powers that are potentially hostile—remains. A short history of US relations with states in the Caribbean reveals a similar sentiment. In fact, it is becoming increasingly popular to frame modern Chinese policy as a variant of the Monroe Doctrine.³¹

Despite being a small island, Taiwan occupies critical geography. It straddles east and southeast Asia providing a base of operations and swing-point into both. While fear of Taiwan serving as an offensive bridgehead into China have diminished, it still remains that China could make offensive use of it, for example, into the Koreas. Taiwan furthermore provides access to maritime shipping lanes critical to global trade and forms part of the so-called First Island Chain; a larger, geographic conception that forms something like a barrier to China's sphere of influence.³² Taiwan is a critical piece in the long-term scheme of Chinese hegemony. This fact is largely recognized. Confusion resides in the question of whether the US should resort to arms in preserving Taiwanese independence. To answer this, we must grasp the larger, strategic picture.

The First and Second Island Chains

Strategic conceptions of a First and Second Island Chain have caused some in the West to detect a zone of exclusion policy.³³ This would-be “Monroe Doctrine” would see China trying to eject foreign powers from the South and East China sea like the US did in the waters of Central

³⁰ Keay, *China: A History*, 519-520

³¹ Steven F Jackson, “Does China Have a Monroe Doctrine? Evidence for Regional Exclusion,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (2016): pp. 64-89.

³² Joseph Bosco, “Taiwan and Strategic Security,” *The Diplomat*, May 15, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/taiwan-and-strategic-security/>.

³³ Jackson, *Does China Have a Monroe Doctrine?*, 78

and South America. The comparison of contemporary Chinese policy with the Monroe Doctrine of the United States is not a pedantic fit. But Chinese posture and behavior in this context does fit the tenets of Offensive Realism. Rising hegemonies seek to eject foreign powers from their sphere of influence while established ones seek to stir up trouble in the ascendant power's backyard.

The First Island Chain begins at the Kuril Islands, extending through the Japanese archipelago, Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, northern Philippines, and island of Borneo. The Second Island Chain is further out, beginning off the east coast of Japan. From there it snakes through Guam and all the way down to the Moluccan Islands.³⁴ These chains, while associated with physical islands, require great maritime power to control and influence.

Chinese strategy in this area is simple: The goal is to push the United States out of the First and eventually Second Island Chain. With the achievement of this, China will replace the US as the security provider of the region. Other Asian states will be forced to reassess their policies and levels of cooperation with China. Ejecting the US from the Island Chains, in short, is China's best shot at achieving regional hegemony. Anxiety over the problem of Taiwan is tied to the question of how it affects influence over the said Island Chains.

The South China Sea

The South China Sea is a mainstay in Asian headlines. This ocean is critical with implications for "ownership, demarcation, rights of passage and access to resources."³⁵ Rival claims here are multiple and intense: China and Vietnam dispute ownership over the Paracel Islands. China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam dispute the Spratly

³⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 373-374

³⁵ Donald K. Emmerson for The Diplomat, "Why Does China Want to Control the South China Sea?," – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, May 24, 2016), <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/why-does-china-want-to-control-the-south-china-sea/>.

Islands.³⁶ Multiple parties—chief among them China, Vietnam and the Philippines—are building artificial islands for varying purposes, but China is unique in being the first to outfit these with military equipment.³⁷ The increasing militarization of the South China Sea would seem to indicate a more assertive China in the coming years, which has the US and its allies on high alert.

Much of the South China Sea's importance is economic. Trillions of dollars in commercial goods pass through the sea annually, representing sizable chunks of GDP for varying countries. A disruption there could be disastrous. The Strait of Malacca in particular, connects the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean and South China Sea, making it a potential chokepoint.³⁸ All beneficiaries of trade in this region want to see continued freedom of navigation. The battle, instead, is over sovereignty of competing claims. Any claim on a physical territory there implies possession of nearby waters as well. In those waters there may be 14 trillion barrels of natural gas and 16 to 33 billion barrels of oil.³⁹ In the South China Sea, economic interests combine with claims of sovereignty. The sea's resources are as badly wanted as formal recognition of claims.

Ultimately the issue of the South China Sea ties into the Island Chain issue, for where China seeks to push the US out, the US seeks to remain and be preponderant. Both states make use of an "Island Chain Strategy," just in reverse. What will ultimately determine who dominates the South China Sea is whether the US is pushed beyond the Island Chain(s) or not. The minor powers in Asia so fearful of China are consumers of US security. So long as the US is there, and

³⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 375

³⁷ William Johnson, "Everything You Need to Know about the South China SEA Conflict - in under Five Minutes," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, May 11, 2016), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-johnson-china-idUSKBN00Q03620150610>.

³⁸ "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?," ChinaPower Project, January 25, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

³⁹ Ethen Kim Lieser, "How Much Oil and Gas Is Contained in the South China Sea?," *The National Interest* (The Center for the National Interest, February 22, 2021), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-much-oil-and-gas-contained-south-china-sea-178587>.

so long as the US makes good on its promise to defend these powers, claims in the South China Sea will remain up for debate. The risk lies in US hesitation or failure. If the claims of smaller Asian powers are overwhelmed and their territories taken, the US will suffer reputational damage. China need not erupt into open and aggressive security competition with the United States then. It needs only to create difficult situations that leave the US questioning if it should resort to arms are not. Taiwan is one such example. Minor acts of aggression against impotent powers in the South China Sea are another. China's goal here is to slowly shift the balance of power and status quo in Asia, not fight an all-out war to achieve hegemony *now*.

Hedging Containment Through Economic Initiatives

China is busily connecting itself to the entire globe through economic projects. The standout among these is the infamous Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI is essentially a trade and infrastructure project designed to proliferate growth by connecting the economies, cultures, and technologies of states.⁴⁰ It currently includes at least 139 countries, stretching across Asia, Europe and into South America. In many ways, the BRI is a refashioning of the ancient Silk Road and the sea routes once followed through the Indo-Pacific. Three land and two sea routes currently comprise it, dimly resembling an economic flow of movement found on ancient maps.⁴¹

The idea behind the BRI today sounds remarkably liberal. It fixates on sustainable development aiming to interconnect all economies regardless of religious and political differences. Indeed, it has offered infrastructure, trade and loan opportunities to both affluent *and* developing states that were spurned and exploited by the west in the past. All of this has resulted

⁴⁰ Yose Rizal Damuri et al., "Belt and Road Initiative: An Overview," *Perceptions and Readiness of Indonesia Towards the Belt and Road Initiative: Understanding Local Perspectives, Capacity, and Governance*, Report. Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2019, 4

⁴¹ Damuri, et. Al., *Belt and Road Initiative*, 5

in ferocious accusations of sino-centrism on part of the US. The United States seems convinced that the BRI is a shifty mechanism through which to increase global reliance on China, and thereby its chances for hegemony. That the US levels these accusations without seeing an eerie image of itself is either ironic or outright disingenuous. Regardless, Europe has joined in on these criticisms of China and the BRI but has also, curiously, joined it.⁴²

In practical terms, the BRI does lend aid to China's goal of becoming preponderant in Asia. The generation of new infrastructure and modes of connectivity will force Asian states to turn ever steadily toward China, even as they tender a preference for the US.⁴³ More critically, the BRI addresses the Malacca Dilemma. As mentioned earlier, any blockage of the Strait of Malacca would threaten to strangle Chinese imports and exports, resulting in serious economic damage in the mid to long-term.⁴⁴ It is a real possibility that the US or some other adversary would consider blocking it. Overland infrastructure and alternative sea routes, then, would serve to counter this threat, creating new economic and military options in case of the strait being blocked. The EU, meanwhile, is decisively open to connectivity with Asia, hoping to court more Chinese investments. While the EU pretends that this is all in the name of the "rules based international order," China recognizes that this engagement will eventually grant it some leverage in Europe.⁴⁵ Last to consider are the struggling, unstable states of Africa, the Middle East and South America that are contemptuous of the US, distrustful of Western democracy, and

⁴² Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "European Union Member States Who Joined China's Belt and Road Initiative Are Seeing Their Exports Rise Faster by Nearly 5% More than Those Who Have Not," Silk Road Briefing, November 20, 2020, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/11/20/european-union-member-states-who-joined-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-are-seeing-their-exports-rise-faster-by-nearly-5-more-than-those-who-have-not/>.

⁴³ Terry Mobley, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from China's Backyard," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (2019): pp. 52-72.

⁴⁴ Mobley, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, 54

⁴⁵ Erik Brattberg and Etienne Soula, "Europe's Emerging Approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/19/europe-s-emerging-approach-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-77536>.

eager for means of rising without capitulating to Western demands. These powers tender an obvious preference for China over the US and stand the most to gain from the Belt and Road Initiative.

All of this reveals the BRI to be yet another expression of China's pragmatism and calculative posture. China displays a flexibility that cares not for internal government type, whereas the US has opposed states or restricted aid to them on the basis of how democratic they are. China's own lack of democracy and willingness to engage non-democratic states has resulted in many moral polemics but its economic appeal is apparently universal. Not even democratic states are passing up the opportunity to benefit from the BRI.

One can anticipate, given the basic nature of US thinking and strategy, banal attempts at pressuring allies to sever their ties with China in the future. The US will probably not recognize the wane in its own global influence and will continually assume that the states of the world will adjust their policies to align with US preferences. There will be calls to limit business with China, to reject its investments and seek out alternatives.⁴⁶ But the states of the world will not be able to afford this. The BRI is China's strongest move thus far in hedging containment efforts that will absolutely intensify in the future. Its connectivity with the world will mean it *cannot* be isolated, and in many instances the states that once gave fealty to the United States will not *want* to break with China, as doing so would entail many political, economic, and military risks. One could easily imagine a US-Asia coalition in which half or most of the members are entrenched and dependent on the BRI, resulting in defections, hesitation or buck-passing. The BRI, in short, is a coalition-neutralizer that threatens to render the US alone in facing China.

⁴⁶ Mercy A. Kuo, "Blue Dot Network: The Belt and Road Alternative," – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, April 7, 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/blue-dot-network-the-belt-and-road-alternative/>.

On The Soundness of Resorting To Arms In Taiwan

In Western eyes, the hourglass of Taiwanese Independence appears to be nearing the last grain. Speculation of a Chinese Invasion abound with varying time frames. Some believe an invasion is imminent, others point to the year 2049 (The Centennial anniversary of the PRC).⁴⁷ Regardless, fear is palpable. American policymakers, thinkers and writers seem to be swept up in a frenzy. They correctly estimate China's hair's breadth proximity to regional hegemony, but consistently misidentify the issue that will nudge China over the line.⁴⁸ The reintegration of Taiwan – as an island, as a territory–will *not* ascend China to hegemon status.

The frenzy over Taiwan is couched in either one of two beliefs: (1) That Taiwan as a territory is the final piece preventing an unstoppable torrent of Chinese expansionism; (2) that Taiwan's importance lies in the influence it yields over the First Island Chain.⁴⁹ Regarding the former, who would agree that all this time China has only been the total value of Taiwan's armaments and GDP away from regional hegemony? The more realistic standpoint is the latter. Confusion and ambiguity lie in the question of whether Taiwan throws control of the Island Chain. If an invasion of Taiwan means "it's all over," as Nikki Haley asserts, the implication is that the United States must make a desperate effort to physically defend Taiwan. If, instead, Taiwan represents a tilt in the balance of power, we can consider the situation more thoughtfully. There is no doubt that Taiwan would give China a lift–morally and materially–but the see-saw of Asian dominance would still lean heavily in the US' favor because the addition of Taiwanese armaments is not enough to eject it from the region.

⁴⁷ Graham Allison, "What Xi Jinping Wants," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, May 31, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/>.

⁴⁸ Scott Wong, "Nikki Haley Warns Republicans on China: 'If They Take Taiwan, It's All over'," *The Hill* (The Hill, June 16, 2021), <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/558834-nikki-haley-warns-republicans-on-china-if-they-take-taiwan-its-all-over>.

⁴⁹ Loren Thompson, "Why Taiwan Has Become The 'Geographical Pivot of History' in the Pacific Age," *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, September 29, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2020/09/29/why-taiwan-has-become-the-geographical-pivot-of-history-in-the-pacific-age/?sh=5d396a751921>.

It is the US' presence and freedom of naval movement in Asia, specifically throughout the Island Chains—not Taiwan as an island—that is the final restraint on Chinese ambitions. The reintegration of Taiwan does not suddenly impede the US' freedom of movement, it simply increases the opportunities for naval confrontation—that were always bound to increase because the US is interfering in a foreign region. It must be thoroughly understood that competition between hegemony in the modern era risks escalation up to nuclear fallout. It does not make sense to take this risk over Taiwan if it does not decisively throw influence in the region. Instead, the focus should be on the Island Chain Strategy and containing China within it, whose secondary benefit would be an increase to Taiwan's security anyway.

Policy Recommendations

The overarching problem here is that despite its great presence in the region, the US has no consolidated policy. Obama's "Pivot to Asia" established a good framework but failed in execution.⁵⁰ Trump launched a trade war that hurt the US more than China and that also failed to contain it.⁵¹ The Biden administration has no China policy.⁵² This tendency to badly execute, form bad policy, or no policy – combined with the yellow peril that American elites seem bent on cultivating – is a powder keg. When no plan or a bad plan meets with fearful anticipation, it results in two things: a confused wait-and-see approach and a desperate overreaction when something finally does happen. Herein lies the great risk of war. On its current trajectory, US policy in Asia will remain nonexistent or vague, prompting it to over-respond if an invasion does

⁵⁰ Victor Cha, "The Unfinished Legacy of Obama's Pivot to Asia," *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/the-unfinished-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>.

⁵¹ Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, "More Pain than Gain: How the US-China Trade War Hurt America," *Brookings* (Brookings, August 25, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/>.

⁵² Russell Flannery, "Seven Months in, Biden Uncertainty on China Policy Is Hurting American Business," *Forbes* (*Forbes Magazine*, August 22, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/russellflannery/2021/08/21/seven-months-in-biden-uncertainty-on-china-policy-is-hurting-american-business/?sh=3a9dee922418>.

occur. China, powered by a national-historical trauma, is very likely to fight back despite the risks, causing the situation to spiral out of control. Remembering that Asia is multipolar allows one to consider that all events there have a reverberating effect and impact the other dyads in unpredictable ways. Nuclear fallout is the worst possible outcome. An entire regional war is less severe than that, but still a credible risk.

From here on, the United States must be remarkably proactive. It must do its work ahead of time and focus on tangible implementation. This begins with a general policy of “practical deterrence.” To that end, the US should create a NATO-like organization in Asia. Member states should include *all* states fearful of China that have an interest in containing it. Ideological considerations should be eschewed, and the US should emulate China’s pragmatism. An example of this would be setting aside distaste for Prime Minister Modi of India and his domestic policies for the sake of enlisting a potential great power. All member states should have clearly defined roles, their communications integrated, and weapons systems interlinked (as is the case in NATO). Finally, this organization should begin militarizing the Island Chains. This helps Taiwan more than anything else.

To begin with, Taiwan benefits from US ambiguity on the question of Taiwanese statehood. The lack of a commitment means China must always guess if the US will directly aid the island. This also means that so long as the US maintains that ambiguity and restrains the impulse to directly interfere, it can justify militarization on non-Taiwanese grounds. With the creation of a NATO-like organization, more missiles in the Island Chain, and with China having to guess at US intentions, the potential costs of invading Taiwan will skyrocket. This can never 100 percent dissuade China from invading Taiwan but the aforementioned policy recommendations would buy a lot of time and improve Taiwan’s chances. If implemented soon

enough, the US can get defense commitments out of Asian powers before they are entrenched in the BRI, decreasing the likelihood of buck-passing later.

Conclusion

The US has correctly identified China's core interests. They are indeed Taiwan, control of the Island Chains, dominance in the South China Sea and execution of the BRI. The United States has completely misidentified, however, which of those is most critical in enabling or preventing Chinese hegemony. The current fervor over Taiwan has its origin in a complex melting pot of biases and historical interpretations. These impede the ability of the US to accurately view Asia and fire up Chinese nationalism to a boiling point.

If the US is determined to play the world's police officer into perpetuity, it must cultivate an ability to read international situations accurately. A conflict risking escalation up to nuclear fallout over Taiwan is nonsensical if Taiwan's importance does not extend beyond its symbolism as a democracy. Taiwan should always be considered in terms of its relation to the Island Chain, for it is the Island Chain issue that will slow or facilitate China's march to hegemony. But this march can only be slowed, not stopped. It is the reality of great power politics that hegemony is unsustainable. Great powers *must* come and go. Perhaps the United States will suddenly lurch into well-thought and proactive action. Perhaps the United States will suddenly build a beautifully efficient coalition that is effective to a staggering degree. This only delays an eventuality.

The United States has both allies and options that can go a long way (if utilized correctly) in slowing down China's ascension. But the US must not fall into the trap of acting emotionally over Taiwan or convince itself that it can *stop* China, even through sensible policy. As the US attempts to contain China it must plan for a world in which China is a great and non-democratic

power. That is the reality at hand. A lot of lofty idealism and pre-assumptions about the world will shatter in this process, but seeing things as they are is the prerequisite to state survival, now and into the future.

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