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Features

Strategic Expeditionary Advising

Exploring Options beyond Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands and Ministry of Defense Advisors

Paul Szostak
Juan Pizarro

Since the US-led invasion following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the coalition has faced continuous hostilities in Afghanistan. This conflict has forced the US Department of Defense (DOD) to conduct extended new missions alternatively labeled as, "nation building," "advising," and "security force assistance."[1] Afghanistan presents one of the most well-known examples of this type of expeditionary advising, where the NATO-led mission shifted to one of train, advise, and assist (TAA) on 1 January 2015 and continues today.[2] Unlike similar efforts in Japan, Korea, and Europe following cessation of hostilities in World War II, this twenty-first-century military-to-military engagement takes place in an area with significant ongoing hostilities. In response, the services' have developed various human resource capabilities to prepare personnel to advise our partner nation's security and defense forces at the strategic level. Some examples of this effort include attempting to increase overall levels of cross-culturally competent personnel among our expeditionary forces, the creation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands (AFPAK Hands) and more recently, the Ministry of Defense Advisors (MoDA) program. However, Foreign Area Officers (FAO), an Office of the Secretary of Defense–mandated joint program since 2005, have been almost wholly absent from consideration as a human resource tool available to meet the need for strategic advising in Afghanistan. Given the nature of advising positions, which work frequently with our partners at strategic levels in the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of the Interior (MOI) or in one of our largest security cooperation offices (SCO) in the world,[3] the failure to consider FAOs for roles involving direct contact with partner nation (PN) militaries, requiring top notch cross-cultural skill sets, endangers mission success to the point of mission failure. This article will briefly review the major programs the services have undertaken to develop cross-culturally capable forces in the twenty-first century to meet these enduring senior advisor requirements, what level of success has been achieved utilizing these new programs in expeditionary advisor roles, and how the Joint FAO community can be utilized to increase mission effectiveness. Ultimately, we will explore why the DOD should utilize FAOs to fill current and fu-

ture expeditionary advisor requirements and why the creation of new advisor programs should be carefully considered in light of past experience.

Importance of Cross-Cultural Competence

To understand how the DOD has responded to the challenge of twenty-first-century advising, we must first look at how the department currently defines the unique skill sets required. Effective engagement with foreign nations requires personnel that are able to successfully communicate, interact, and work with PN representatives to further US national objectives while minimizing any cultural missteps that detract or impede the achievement of those objectives. This level of cultural awareness is commonly referred to as *cross-cultural competence* (3C), which is defined by the DOD as the "set of knowledge, skills, and affect/motivation that enable individuals to adapt effectively in cross-cultural environments."[4] Generally speaking, 3C refers to the ability to successfully operate across cultures using particular knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAO) germane to effective cross-cultural performance.[5] Given this definition of cross-cultural competence as a set of knowledge and skills, we can infer that cross-cultural knowledge can be learned or acquired, with the right amount of training and motivation. A cross-culturally competent person would not, for example, eat with their left hand in the Middle East or snack on a banana during a meeting in Japan.[5] These examples, while harmless in the United States, may be so repulsive to PN counterparts that it would prevent them from focusing on the message of the engagement and working toward the objective to which the US personnel are attempting to secure commitment. This may ultimately prevent personnel from achieving their strategic goals. 3C is an important foundation for developing the necessary relationships for an effective advisory mission and engagements with PNs because it demonstrates to PN representatives that their culture and traditions are respected, thereby increasing the possibility of developing trust with the partner. Moreover, 3C helps ensure advisors develop a message that the partner will comprehend in the manner intended. Moreover, 3C skill sets sensitize advisors to the increased possibility of miscommunication that exists when working in another culture if the advisor does not carefully construct the message and confirm understanding through appropriate interaction.

Unfortunately, the current expeditionary tasking process for military personnel does not routinely contemplate 3C during the sourcing process, which can lead to a failure to request cross-culturally competent personnel to advise PN representatives. Instead, taskings for expeditionary advisor billets are typically generic or focused on the occupational specialty of the PN representative(s) whom the individual will advise. For example, a coalition infantryman would advise PN infan-

trymen. Some traditional military training and professional military education courses discuss 3C; however, these courses alone are insufficient to consistently produce 3C leaders that are able to affect meaningful PN change. To lessen the training time required to prepare individuals to deploy, 3C requirements are minimized and incorporated into the individual's training spin-up. Typically, the deploying personnel complete advisor training, such as that offered at Fort Polk or Joint Base McGuire, where they undertake 3–6 weeks of 3C familiarization training, depending on the course. As noted, the goal of this 3C training is familiarization, not proficiency, potentially leaving personnel unready for their advisory role. Moreover, one key aspect of effective 3C is that it requires someone to develop empathy for another and take on their point of view, yet most people who receive predeployment 3C training are not volunteers for it but rather "voluntold" or forced to attend. Even though predeployment 3C training is provided to all advisors, someone forced into 3C training may not be as motivated to embrace it, with the end result being a reluctant advisor who is unprepared for their mission.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands (APH) program, created in 2008, was designed to meet the challenge of creating a sizable cadre of regional experts with 3C skill sets. The brainchild of Gen Stanley McChrystal, USA, APH is perhaps the most well-known program of this type.[6] APH's stated goal is to, "create greater continuity, focus, and persistent engagement," by developing, "a cadre of military and civilian experts who speak the local language, are culturally attuned, and focused on regional issues for an extended duration."[7] The program develops APH personnel to "engage directly with Afghan or Pakistani officials at the ministerial (strategic and operational) level."[8] Employment of APH personnel consists of two one-year rotations, with five-month predeployment training prior to each period of service in theater. The two deployments would be broken up by a one-year "out-of-theater" tour at a designated organization with "responsibilities related to" Afghanistan and Pakistan.[9] Initially, the program established over 200 positions for APH personnel to fill, but US Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR–A) has steadily reduced those numbers, which now stand at just over 100.[10]

On the surface, the APH program makes sense. However, close examination of the program reveals several serious flaws. First, program management was assigned to the Joint Staff Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate (J-5) to provide, "policy, guidance, and oversight of the APH Program by serving as the office of primary responsibility."[11] While this was likely done as an expedient means to raise the program's profile and thereby obtain the military department's commitment, the placement of a human resources program in the J-5 is a mismatch of roles and re-

sponsibilities that is reflected in the poorly conceived structure of the program. This shows up most notably in the chasm between the APH program's stated goal to have "experts who speak the local language" and the actual training program design that sets a "speaking/listening goal for Phase I training [at] 1 (as measured on the Oral Proficiency Interview)."[12] According to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) definitions, speaking level 1 implies an elementary proficiency, "able to satisfy minimum courtesy requirements and maintain very simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics . . . simple, personal and accommodation needs . . . exchange greetings . . . and predictable and skeletal biographical information."[13] A program goal of "1" on the ILR skill level hardly defines "experts who speak the local language." This low bar results in the vast majority of APH personnel remaining dependent upon an interpreter, just like those advisors with no training in the language—thereby significantly reducing the utility and efficacy of a "Hand." This reality undercuts overall "brand" reputation.

The second flaw of the APH program comes about from the poorly conceived selection criteria. Aside from the request for personnel with "previous operation ENDURING FREEDOM/FREEDOM SENTINNEL" experience, the remaining criteria are poorly defined and not restrictive enough to serve as useful screening criteria that ensure human resource experts find quality candidates to meet quotas. The desired traits include *communications skills* (the ability to listen and absorb nontraditional concepts), *respectful* (the ability to promote dignity, open-mindedness), *flexibility* (the faculty of thinking in nonrigid and nontraditional manners), *operational competence* (the possession of basic military skills), and *entrepreneurial mind-set* (the capacity to develop problem-solving networks).[14] While all good aspirational traits, almost none of these criteria would bar any officer from filling the requirement. Absent are hard criteria like previous command experience, in-residence professional education, Defense Language Aptitude Battery minimum scores, and so forth.

The third and perhaps most important challenge to the APH program is the expectation for APH personnel to serve in a 44–46-month tour—a long tour for all the services, and especially long for a program that fills no critical career development for officers from the Army or the Navy.[15] The severity of this disconnect is hard to overstate but can be clearly seen in two statistics: the high rate of nonvolunteers for the program and low promotion rates for APH personnel. According to the director of Afghan Hands Management Element–Forward in October 2017, Capt Herschel Weinstock, the Army and Navy's APH personnel both suffered promotion rates well below 50 percent to lieutenant colonel—significantly below average.

These low promotion rates lead to a type of "death spiral" for the program. First and foremost, few volunteers come forward, resulting in higher rates of nonvolunteered officers, who then chose to separate or retire rather than serve in the assignment, which then produces low fill rates. Over time, these empty billets then present a dilemma for senior leadership, who must choose to keep a vacant APH billet on the books or convert the billet to another specialty with higher fill rates. The choice has often been to convert the billet away from APH. Surprisingly, this declining level of APH billets comes at the same time that the NATO mission transitioned to TAA, which should argue for an increase in an APH-like skill set since the mission shifted from a kinetic one to that of 100-percent advising. According to the forward deployed program director, this combination has led to a crisis in the program toward the end of 2018. Acknowledging this, Gen. Joseph Dunford, Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "earlier this year approved ending the program by fall 2020, said Richard Osial, his spokesman." [16]

Ministry of Defense Advisors

The MoDA program was developed in 2010 in response to operational requirements in Afghanistan and an increased US government emphasis on civilian-led capacity building at the ministerial level.[17] To effectively engage PN colonels and generals, US civilians in GS-13 through GS-15 pay grades are encouraged to apply to the MoDA program to serve in one-year assignments to a specific area of operation. MoDA program advisors support a wide range of key functional areas in the Afghan MOD and MOI, including policy and strategy, resource management, logistics and acquisition, human resource management, and facilities maintenance.[18] The MoDA program was designed to leverage the subject matter expertise of the DOD civilian workforce to address partner ministerial-level development objectives and to provide these civilians with the requisite cultural, operational, and advisory training necessary to ensure that the effort is appropriate and effective.[19] After selection, and prior to deployment, MoDA program advisors assigned to Afghanistan first participate in an eight-week training course that includes professional advisor training, cultural awareness, country familiarization, language instruction, security training, senior-level consultations and briefings, and practical exercises with native Afghan role-players.[20] Personnel selected for the program are afforded the opportunity to extend their deployment or serve in subsequent deployments after reapplying.

The MoDA program's primary purpose is to address the DOD's history of carrying out advisory efforts on an ad hoc basis, utilizing military or contract personnel whose functional expertise and advisory skills were not always well matched to address technical processes and gaps in government ministries.[21] To select advisors

to fill International Security Assistance Force requirements, the MoDA program recruits from GS civilians and applicants to the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce.[22] A screening panel reviews résumés for professional experience, advisory skill, education, and international background.[23] Unlike most APH personnel, all MoDA personnel self-nominate (i.e., volunteer) to be a part of the program. To offset any negative impacts of losing a GS civilian for a year, MoDA funds a GS replacement for the duration of the deployment until the GS employee returns to their assignment post deployment. Due to the program's success, MoDA was granted global authority in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 National Defense Authorization Act and is currently supporting advisors in the European, African, Pacific, Central, and Southern Command areas of responsibility.[24] While the MoDA program strives to represent a more deliberate DOD effort toward expeditionary advising, as of the publication of this article, there is not a DOD Directive or Instruction currently in place that governs the MoDA program. Without written guidance that establishes policy, assigns responsibilities, and outlines procedures, the MoDA program may not evolve as well as otherwise would be possible. Written guidance would aid MoDA by facilitating a dialogue with other communities, further institutionalizing program support, improving training, and thereby ensuring continued program success to the mission in Afghanistan.[25]

Foreign Area Officers

In 2005, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) first issued directive 1315.17, "Department of Defense Foreign Area Officer (FAO) Program." This joint policy guidance mandated that each service establish their own FAO program. OSD's vision for FAOs' role is wide-ranging, as seen in this excerpt:

> DOD Components shall use FAO capabilities to advise senior US military and civilian leadership, to provide liaison with foreign militaries operating in coalitions with U.S. forces, allies and partners. They shall also use FAOs in the US DOD attaché corps, and support the Department's security cooperation and assistance, intelligence, and political-military affairs staff functions in roles that include planners and advisors.[26]

Other key hallmarks of the program include "competitive selection" for FAOs who are "managed as a professional community with career paths," and perhaps most notably, "education, training, and professional development necessary to attain, sustain, and enhance an in-depth knowledge of international political-military affairs, language, regional expertise, and cultural (LREC) skills."[27] In other words, OSD policy makers envisioned the FAO program as a full-fledged human resource program with an imperative to "recruit, assess, develop, retain,

motivate, and promote a cadre of Officers to meet present and future DOD needs."[28] The FAO program places development and sustainment of 3C skill sets at the forefront and other traditional specialties as a secondary consideration—a characteristic unique to FAOs in the military departments.

In terms of specific requirements to create a qualified FAO, the directive is explicit. There are four primary requisites:

1. "Qualification in a principal military specialty;"
2. A regionally focused Masters' degree;
3. Attainment of foreign language proficiency at the 2/2 level or better on the Defense Language Proficiency Test;[29] and
4. "One year of In-Region Training (IRT) or In-Region Experience (identified as duty experience involving significant interaction with host nationals and/or host nation entities in the foreign countries or regions in which they specialize)."[30]

These rigorous requirements come with a high training cost, and the average time to train an average FAO often exceeds three years. Language training programs that develop foreign language proficiency in select service members, such as the Air Force's Language Enabled Airman Program, have increasingly provided language-enabled personnel for the FAO program, thereby reducing the training timeline. Despite the high training costs and extensive training pipeline, the services responded positively and have rapidly expanded their FAO ranks. As of the end of FY15, the time of the most recent OSD assessment, the military departments collectively tout 2,874 FAOs (2,688 in the active component and 186 in the reserve component), a 12-percent increase over 2014.[31] Today, each military department celebrates the many successes and achievements of their respective FAOs, and senior-level commitment to the program has grown steadily in the last decade. The military departments continue to drive toward the goal of creating the DOD's "foremost regional experts and foreign language professionals" through programs that develop "professional-level foreign language proficiency, regional expertise, and cultural (LREC) competencies."[32] These cross-culturally competent warriors, however, have been almost wholly absent from expeditionary advisor missions, despite their robust skill sets.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The DOD has clearly expended a great amount of energy and resources to meet the challenge of conducting strategic-level advising in Afghanistan. However, our review of the major recent efforts, which include AFPAK Hands and MoDA,

shows the challenges of taking an expedient approach toward solving this issue. Given that the FAO program enjoys broad support across all the military departments, the failure to consider it as part of the solution certainly seems like an oversight that should be addressed in the near future. In addition to this general observation, below we propose a series of additional recommendations to improve the possibility of mission success in this critical strategic effort.

1. Identify the key expeditionary advisor billets where FAO skill sets would have maximum impact and utilize FAOs to fill those billets to the maximum extent possible. In our own experience, these would include the US colonel billets directly advising at the senior levels of the Afghan MOD at Resolute Support Headquarters (RS HQ), and our estimate is that less than one dozen would meet criteria that would warrant a FAO as the appropriate fill.
2. Allow for "generic" FAO coding. By *generic* the authors wish to communicate that the billet coding would allow FAOs from any region to fill the position. This may seem to contradict the idea of obtaining a FAO with the right regional skill set, but we recommend generic coding for two reasons. First, the FAO community is relatively small and cannot easily accommodate the creation of a large pool of Dari speakers, as their utility out of theater is very limited due to the small number of countries that speak Dari or a derivative of this language. Second, it is not really required. Given that none of the current solutions produce professional level speakers (3/3/3 on the ILR) in the native language, the priority should be placed on finding those with deep 3C skill sets. FAOs have more depth in 3C than perhaps any other military specialty, since 3C is a significant portion of their initial training. This generic coding would also allow for FAOs to fulfill service deployment requirements in their FAO specialty, rather than any other occupational specialty they may have. Lastly, FAOs' knowledge of an additional language—even one from another region—allows them a significant advantage when working with a translator, as they are more sensitive to the possible miscommunication that can occur across languages.
3. Require FAO skill sets in key contractor advisor positions. While RS HQ has only relatively few US military senior advisor positions, there are many contract advisors that support the coalition advisors, which far outnumber US strategic advisor positions. The performance work statement (PWS) for those positions currently fails to identify FAO or 3C experience as mandatory criteria, but adding such criteria would represent a

significant additional way to bring retired FAOs into the mission without the impact on active duty forces. Of the 153 Contractor positions in the PWS assigned to advise the MOD and MOI for Resolute Support, only 23 (15 percent) required some degree of 3C skills under the essential qualifications necessary for employment.[33] Those billets requiring 3C were primarily for translators, not advisors. PWSs for contract advisor positions should be revisited and should prioritize hiring personnel with 3C skillsets.

4. Develop additional policy guidance for MoDA. While already a successful program, MoDA would benefit from policy guidance as found in DOD directives and instructions that govern the FAO program. In addition, MoDA should consider targeting civil service series 0130/0131—the identifier for international affairs and international relations—as a core experience required for MoDA. This would favor entry for retired FAOs into these positions and would generally prioritize 3C skill sets over other occupational specialties that do not guarantee 3C.
5. Terminate AFPAK Hands. Due to its limited utility and the negative perception it suffers in the Army and Navy, it may be time to consider focusing those resources elsewhere. Certain positions would need to be filled through other means—flying positions that require high levels of language skills, for example—but these requirements may be better met by changing them to "language-designated positions."
6. Develop improved measures of 3C skill sets and code positions that require those skill sets, where needed.

In sum, it is time to reconsider how the DOD responds to the human resource challenges of strategic expeditionary advising. While our analysis has focused on Afghanistan, these lessons are equally relevant for other theaters with expeditionary advisor roles, such as Iraq or Syria. As FAOs ourselves, we know firsthand the 3C capabilities resident in this community of experts and hope to one day see better utilization of this skill set going forward. The success of our most critical missions depends on it! ✪

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Notes

1. Scott G. Wuestner, *Building Partner Capacity/Security Force Assistance: A New Structural Paradigm*, Letort Paper (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, February 2009), https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=880.

2. US Central Command, "Resolute Support," February 2018, http://www.centcom.mil/OPERATIONS-AND-EXERCISES/RESOLUTE-SUPPORT/.

3. According to the Congressional Research Service, the annual US military aid to Afghanistan currently averages almost USD 1 billion in International Military Education and Training (IMET) and approximately USD 5 billion in DOD aid in the form of the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF). See *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 13 December 2017), https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30588/278.

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5. Sophie-Claire Hoeller, "25 Common American Customs That Are Considered Offensive in Other Countries," *Business Insider*, 5 August 2015, http://www.businessinsider.com/american-customs-that-are-offensive-abroad-2015-8.

6. Capt Herschel Weinstock, director of Afghan Hands Management Element–Forward, interview by the author, October 2017.

7. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI)1630.01B, Para 4. "Policy," 1.

8. Ibid., Para 5.a. "Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands," 1.

9. Ibid., Para 5.b. "Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands," 2.

10. Weinstock interview.

11. CJCSI 1630.01B, Para 1.a. "Joint Staff Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate (J-5) Responsibilities," 1.

12. Ibid., Para 5.b. "Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands," 2.

13. Interagency Language Roundtable, "Speaking 1 (Elementary Proficiency)," http://www.govtilr.org/Skills/ILRscale2.htm#1.

14. CJCSI 1630.01B, Enclosure B, Para 1.e. "The following traits and elements," 2.

15. By contrast, the Air Force career development includes a "career broadening" tour at the O-4 level that allows for a program like APH and can be seen in that service's slightly above average promotion rates, which are .5% above average, according to Captain Weinstock, the forward deployed program director in 2017.
16. Stars and Stripes, "A decadelong program to 'turn the tide' in Afghanistan is ending, long after military shifted its focus," August 17, 2019, https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/a-decadelong-program-to-turn-the-tide-in-afghanistan-is-ending-long-after-military-shifted-its-focus-1.594651
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19. Ibid., 1.
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26. Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) 1315.17, DRAFT (as of July 2018), "Department of Defense Foreign Area Officer (FAO) Program," 4.
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28. Ibid., 8.
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FEATURE

Dueling Hegemony

China's Belt and Road Initiative and America's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

Il Hyun Cho

China's rise is one of the most significant challenges to US influence in Asia and the world. Scholars have debated over the nature and effects of geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, often predicting tumultuous relations between the two nations by drawing inferences from past hegemonic competition or current incompatible political systems. Such alarming forecasts appear more realistic under the administration of Donald Trump. Along with the ongoing trade war with China, the Trump administration in its 2017 *National Security Strategy* document unmistakably called China a "strategic competitor."[1] US National Security Advisor John Bolton depicted China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a primary means for Beijing to seek "global dominance."[2] The Trump administration in turn unveiled the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy to counter China's global strategy.

With the BRI, the Xi Jinping government initially focused on various infrastructure deals with nations along the Eurasian region, but in recent years, Beijing has increasingly turned toward the geostrategic goals of securing long-term port access and enhancing strategic ties with key regional states. Highlighting open trade and connectivity, the Trump administration has stressed the role of India and officially renamed the US Pacific Command to the US Indo-Pacific Command.[3] What will be the likely effects of the dueling hegemonic strategies in Asia? In addressing this question, this article seeks to investigate the perceptions and motivations of Japan, South Korea, and India with respect to the BRI and the FOIP. Despite their strategic ties with the United States, each of these countries have responded in various ways to the two hegemonic visions.

Specifically, South Korea, a US military ally, has not joined the FOIP despite Trump's invitation, instead seeking to work with China on the expansion of the BRI into the Korean peninsula.[4] The Narendra Modi government in India wel-

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comes the FOIP but calls for greater inclusivity aimed at engaging the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China. The Abe Shinzo government in Japan is more enthusiastic about the FOIP but reaches out to Beijing over the BRI as well. These varied responses to the BRI and the FOIP suggest that balancing and bandwagoning are insufficient to capture the Asian realities. While aligning themselves with Washington or China over some regional issues, the Asian nations remain hesitant to fully embrace the competing hegemonic visions.

In this article, I contend that a key driver behind these strategic calculations is the pursuit of greater regional autonomy in a changing regional order. Instead of following the footsteps of the two superpowers, Japan, South Korea, and India seek to carve out their own regional space and draw on the two hegemonic initiatives for their own specific foreign policy goals. By comparing the domestic debate about the BRI and the FOIP in the three Asian nations, this article explores the ways in which each nation comes to grips with the dueling hegemonic strategies. As long as politicians in Tokyo, Seoul, and New Delhi stake out their regional positions on the basis of foreign policy autonomy, both the US push for an anti-China coalition and China's drive to alter the regional order to Beijing's liking are less likely to succeed. An analysis of the regional responses to the BRI and the FOIP will also help us better conceptualize the evolving regional order in East Asia.

In the following section, this article critically examines various accounts of state response to rising powers. It then advances an argument based on foreign policy autonomy considerations. The next section briefly highlights the key features of the BRI and the FOIP. The subsequent three sections in turn delve into the Japanese, South Korean, and Indian domestic debates about the dueling strategies. The final section concludes with a brief summary of the findings and a discussion of theoretical and policy implications.

Explaining Variation in Regional Responses to the BRI and the FOIP

There are various scholarly accounts of state behavior in the face of emerging powers.[5] A realist explanation centers on *balancing behavior*.[6] From this perspective, regional countries tend to be "more sensitive to threats from other regional powers" due to geographical proximity.[7] Specifically, from this vantage point, states confronting a rising power in an anarchic world are likely to turn to either *internal balancing* (i.e., increasing their own military capability) or *external balancing* (i.e., working with allied nations). For instance, John Mearsheimer argues that in light of a rising China, its regional neighbors, such as "India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam, will join with the United States to contain Chinese power."[8]

In the East Asian context, this balancing perspective expects that Japan and South Korea would either revamp their own defense posture or strengthen their alliance ties with the United States. For instance, according to Richard Samuels, the rise of China provoked "Japanese diplomacy toward balancing partnerships" with other regional countries.[9] Along with the launching of the National Security Council and the revision of the National Defense Program Guidelines, the Abe Shinzo government's push for a "dynamic defense force" is viewed mainly as an effort to balance and "reinforce deterrence toward China."[10] As for South Korea, in the face of North Korea's provocations, the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments strengthened their alliance ties with the United States. Many have similarly attributed India's post–Cold War "Look East" policy to New Delhi's effort to balance against China in the South Asian and Asia–Pacific regions.[11]

Other scholars, however, expect that Asian states would either *bandwagon* with or at least accommodate China.[12] Pointing to limited balancing against China, David Kang argues that both material interests in the present and shared history and interaction in the past gravitate East Asian states toward accommodating China.[13] Similarly, Bjorn Jerden and Linus Hagstrom assert that throughout the Cold War period and beyond, Japan has been accommodating China by "facilitating the successful implementation of China's grand strategy, and hence by respecting China's core interests and acting accordingly."[14] The bandwagon account is particularly useful given its due consideration of the perspectives of local actors. It also illuminates the limited levels of balancing dynamics in the region.

What is puzzling, however, is that neither balancing nor bandwagoning adequately captures the ways in which these three Asian nations have responded to the BRI. While they are among the world's most sophisticated armed forces, Japan's defense budget of less than one percent of its GDP and South Korea's peninsula-focused defense posture hardly suggest internal balancing against China. India's defense budget for 2019 is USD 49.68 billion, with a marginal increase that is far short of its modernization plan.[15] As shown in the empirical sections below, a regional record of external balancing in the form of a strengthened alliance relationship with the United States is also mixed at best. As for bandwagoning as well, there is wide variation in the three countries' approaches to the BRI (e.g., active, conditional, or no participation).

Hedging, where states engage potential enemies while keeping the option of balancing with allies, is another possibility for smaller states in East Asia.[16] For instance, a policy proposal by the Tokyo Foundation recommended a three-tiered policy of "integration, balancing, and deterrence" toward China.[17] Similarly, one scholar describes Modi's policy toward China as "a more consolidated hedging component combined with a more robust engagement policy towards China."[18]

While useful in understanding the regional nations' cautious approach toward Beijing, this account remains ambivalent about permissive conditions for balancing and engagement.

Lost in the wide spectrum of scholarly expectations is the attention to the domestic process of interpreting and coping with the challenge of a rising power. What the existing accounts miss is that systemic factors, such as changes in the power distribution among states, are filtered through the domestic political prism. In this regard, Amitav Acharya questions the mainstream international relations discussions of Asian security, which "treat China as if it is the only country in the region and focus more on the U.S.-China relationship than on East Asia itself." Instead, he argues that "it is these interactions [between the United States and China on the one hand and other regional states on the other] that are going to have the most impact on stability."[19] Building on this insight, this article seeks to demonstrate how local political dynamics in Tokyo, Seoul, and New Delhi intersect with the broader American and Chinese grand strategies.

In unpacking the domestic political process of interpreting the challenges and opportunities associated with China's rise, I contend that we need to pay greater attention to considerations of foreign policy autonomy.[20] A rising power and the subsequent change in the regional power balance may affect the nature of strategic relationships among states. Under this strategically fluid circumstance, political leaders weigh the potential values of gaining material benefits from great powers against the possible costs of ceding too much foreign policy independence to them. It is worth noting here that hedging strategy is often pursued because official alliance ties may risk "losing their independence and inviting uncalled-for interference."[21] Bandwagoning with China is also politically untenable for Japanese and South Korean leaders eager to secure greater regional autonomy. In fact, Japanese and South Korean leaders "have rarely assumed or accepted unquestioned American or Chinese leadership roles" in the region.[22] With its tradition of nonalignment and independence in foreign policy, India has also maintained strategic straddling between balancing and bandwagoning vis-à-vis China. Overall, far from joining the US-led balancing coalition or bandwagoning with China, Japan, South Korea, and India focus on different aspects of the BRI and the FOIP to enhance their regional autonomy and promote their foreign policy goals.

Specifically, for domestic political actors who seek autonomy from the United States, China's BRI could serve as an opportunity to reassert their nation's independent regional strategy and benefit specific national interests, such as South Korea's Northern Policy and inter-Korean relations and Japan's infrastructure export program. On the other hand, other domestic actors may fear China's potential to undercut their regional autonomy in the future, pushing for their na-

tions' participation in the US-led FOIP. It is the nature of the domestic contestation on regional autonomy that shapes variation in regional responses to the BRI and the FOIP. In what follows, this article will first examine the Chinese and US grand strategies in turn. It will then delve into the domestic debate on the two hegemonic visions in Japan, South Korea, and India.

Contending Visions: The Key Features of the BRI and the FOIP

Officially entitled "the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road," the BRI (*or yidai yilu*) was unveiled in 2013 after Pres. Xi Jinping's speeches in Astana, Kazakhstan, and Jakarta, Indonesia.[23] Widely viewed as Xi's "signature project," the BRI represents China's long-term master plan, which "seeks to integrate Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa into a Sinocentric network through the construction of land- and sea-based infrastructure."[24] According to a director of the Central Party School's Institute of International Studies, the BRI's main goals include "promoting better-balanced domestic development, opening up China's inland provinces to the outside world, expanding export markets for Chinese goods, and increasing available channels for energy imports."[25]

However, the BRI is not merely a series of infrastructure projects with smaller developing nations but rather a grand strategy that serves "China's vision for itself as the uncontested leading power in the region."[26] For its part, the Chinese government stresses that the BRI is "in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter," such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and cooperation.[27] With more than 3,000 individual projects, the BRI has also been incorporated into the Chinese Communist Party's Charter during the 19th Party Congress in October 2017.[28]

Despite its promises and the Xi government's efforts to highlight mutual benefits, since 2017 many have criticized the BRI for its lack of transparency and various risks for participating nations. For instance, the transfer of control of the port in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, to China for 99 years "sparked worldwide alarm about Beijing's strategic intentions, along with allegations that China was setting a 'debt trap' for smaller countries," while Malaysian prime minister Mahathir bin Mohamad depicted his nation's railway projects with China as "unequal" and a "new version of colonialism."[29]

As questions began to mount over China's underlying motivations behind the BRI, the Trump administration launched the FOIP strategy in 2017. The term, the *Indo-Pacific*, was first incorporated into the US security discourse during the first term of the Obama presidency by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, with the main focus on the "Quad" grouping of the four "like-minded" de-

mocracies, namely Australia, Japan, India, and the United States.[30] Compared to the Obama presidency, the Trump administration has taken "a more combative approach, formally designating China a 'strategic competitor.'"[31] Building on Japanese prime minister Abe's previous push for greater regional cooperation in the Indian and Pacific oceans, President Trump, during his trip to Vietnam in November 2017, stressed the importance of a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, which was incorporated into the US *National Security Strategy* document.[32]

According to the US State Department, the Trump administration has several key objectives for the FOIP. By nature, these are both economic, "to advance fair and reciprocal trade, promote economic and commercial engagement that adheres to high standards and respects local sovereignty and autonomy, and mobilize private sector investment into the Indo-Pacific," and diplomatic, "partnership on energy, infrastructure, and digital economy" with allies such as Japan.[33] From the strategic and military standpoint, the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* issued in 2019 by the US Department of Defense calls for greater partnerships with existing allies and new partners to establish "a networked regional security architecture."[34] While emphasizing "strong alliances and partnerships," the Trump administration also insists on "sharing responsibilities and burdens."[35] Another key feature in the Pentagon report is characterization of China as a "revisionist power."[36] In an attempt to counter China, the FOIP promotes good governance in the Indo-Pacific region by encouraging "transparency, openness, rule of law, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms" and "ensuring a peaceful and secure regional order."[37]

However, Chinese analysts maintain that the FOIP is an updated version of Obama's "Pivot to Asia" policy aimed mainly at reformulating America's "alliances and partnerships to respond to China's rise."[38] According to a Chinese analysis, unlike the Obama administration's efforts not to brand its Asia pivot strategy as targeting Beijing, the Trump administration tends to predict "an all-round zero-sum strategic competition" with China and seeks to balance China with "a strong US-anchored coalition that keeps tight grips on US allies such as Japan and Australia and brings ASEAN and India into its orbit."[39] The next section investigates the three case study Asian nations' reactions to the evolving hegemonic competition.

Varied Responses to the BRI and the FOIP

Japan

Historically, Tokyo's diplomatic approach has been focused on Japan's regional autonomy, rather than outright military balancing. Japan has sought "as much

autonomy in its China policy as is compatible with maintaining the cohesion of its alliance with Washington," and since the early years of the Cold War, political leaders have viewed "Japan's interests vis-à-vis China as distinct from U.S. interests and sought to pursue an independent China policy."[40] As such, irrespective of structural changes in the region, various Japanese policy makers across the ideological spectrum have called for an equidistance approach toward China and the United States.

The pursuit of regional autonomy resurged during the rule of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Even before coming to power, the DPJ's search of autonomy was evidenced in its 1996 party manifesto, which called for reducing Japan's "excessive dependence on the U.S.," while improving relations with countries in the region.[41] After the election victory in 2009, Hatoyama Yukio, the DPJ's first prime minister, unveiled the East Asian Community initiative. Stressing the notion of *yu-ai* (or fraternal love) among regional countries, Hatoyama made it clear that Japan's cooperation with China and South Korea became "an extremely indispensable factor" in realizing the regional initiative.[42] Contrary to the expectation from the balancing perspective, Hatoyama, at his meeting with Chinese president Hu Jintao, proposed "an Asian EU."[43] In his efforts to gain greater foreign policy autonomy, Hatoyama also attempted to revisit the 2006 US-Japan agreement to relocate the US bases in Okinawa, worsening the alliance relations. Japanese analysts characterized the DPJ's move as efforts "to distance Japan's foreign relations from the 'domineering' United States and to strike a better balance between Japan's relations with the United States and with the rest of East Asia."[44]

Hatoyama's vision was well received in the region. In the midst of these warming circumstances, Japanese officials agreed with their Chinese and South Korean counterparts to "begin joint research by academic, government and private-sector representatives on the possibility of forging a trilateral free-trade agreement."[45] The Hatoyama government, however, did not last long, as he resigned over a political scandal and his failure to realize a campaign pledge on moving US bases from Okinawa.[46] His successors, Kan Naoto and Noda Yoshihiko, similarly ended their terms early amid criticisms over the government's handling of Japan's Triple Disasters in 2011: the earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant.

The three-year DPJ rule ended with the 2012 election victory of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led by Abe Shinzo. At first blush, Abe's foreign policy stance appeared to be balancing against China. For instance, Abe was focused particularly on cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, visiting seven of the ASEAN countries, many of them claimants in territorial disputes with China, and seeking to "contain China's increasing maritime advances in the region."[47] In

a sign of the continued salience of regional autonomy, however, Abe framed the diplomatic moves not as a direct balancing mechanism against China but as bold regional leadership. Abe thus claimed that he "succeeded in changing the general mood and atmosphere that was prevalent in Japan" by engaging in proactive shuttle diplomacy with various Southeast Asian nations.[48]

However, the Abe government's proactive regional approach went beyond Southeast Asia. In May 2017, Japan dispatched a delegation to the first Belt and Road Forum in Beijing.[49] During his meeting with Xi at the 2017 G20 summit, Abe expressed "Japan's interest in collaborating with China in implementing the BRI."[50] It was under these improving bilateral circumstances that Abe visited Beijing in October 2017—the first official visit by a Japanese prime minister in seven years. During the visit, Abe conveyed Japan's "readiness to actively participate in the BRI."[51] In addition, Abe reportedly proposed to start a "development cooperation dialogue" for joint infrastructure projects, some of which will be funded by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation and the China Development Bank.[52] In May 2018, Japan and China also agreed to create a "public-private sector committee" for joint infrastructure projects in third countries.[53]

Japan's participation in the BRI, however, is based not solely on economic incentives but also on larger political considerations. Given regional concerns about US commitment in the Trump era, Japan's limited role in the negotiations with North Korea, and tense bilateral ties with South Korea over the history issue, working closely with China over the BRI has the potential to open up diplomatic space and enhance Tokyo's regional autonomy. Moreover, some of key political and business elites, especially politicians from the Komeito party, the LDP's coalition partner, have supported Japan's collaboration with the BRI.[54] It is with these domestic and regional political considerations that Abe told Chinese prime minister Li Keqiang that "[s]witching from competition to collaboration, I want to lift Japan-China relations to a new era. . . . Japan and China are neighbors and partners. We will not become a threat of each other."[55] Beyond the government, a group of Japanese intellectuals, journalists and business leaders established in 2017 the Belt and Road Initiative Japan Research Center (BRIJC) with former Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo joining as the "supreme advisor" of the center.[56]

It is important to note, however, that Japan's charm offensive toward China is far from a bandwagoning exercise. Instead of playing second fiddle to China's BRI, Japan highlights the importance of seeking "quality growth" and "quality infrastructure" with developing countries.[57] Similarly, the Abe government launched the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure and worked closely with the United States and Australia over the Indo-Pacific Fund.[58] More broadly, Abe has been careful to maintain a balancing act between the BRI and the FOIP. In fact,

it was Abe who during his first term as prime minster in 2007 stressed the Indo-Pacific as a regional focus and called for Japan's greater role in maintaining "peace, stability, and freedom of navigation" in the Indian and Pacific oceans.[59] When he returned to power in 2012, Abe resumed his push for proactive diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific by joining the FOIP.

USAF photo

Figure 1. US-Japan alliance. Gen C.Q. Brown, Jr., Pacific Air Forces commander, and Gen Yoshinari Marumo, chief of staff, Japan Air Self Defense Force, perform an inspection of the honor guard during a ceremony at the Ministry of Defense in Tokyo, Japan, 7 August 2018. Brown visited the country to affirm the United States' shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific as well as to seek opportunities to enhance cooperation and coordination across the alliance.

However, instead of being a passive follower, the Abe government promotes its own FOIP agenda. For instance, the Japanese Foreign Ministry pledges that Japan will "enhance 'connectivity' between Asia and Africa through a free and open Indo-Pacific to promote the stability and prosperity of the regions as a whole."[60] Similarly, the Abe government announced Japan's new overseas assistance strategy for its FOIP with the aim of substantially expanding "Japan's diplomatic playground beyond Southeast Asia to a wider area that includes the Indian subcontinent."[61] Although Japan has welcomed the FOIP and worked with the Trump administration, Tokyo has not always followed the US moves, reflecting Japan's emphasis on regional autonomy. In contrast to the US focus on the military dimension, the Abe government's official rhetoric about the FOIP has recently changed from a "strategy" to a "vision."[62] After Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Abe government also "jumped

right in the power vacuum in order to lead the trade deal without the US."[63] Japanese leadership was critical in bringing the remaining 11 members to sign off on the deal in March 2018.[64] Abe's effort to revive the TPP is another example of Japan's constant pursuit of greater regional autonomy in Asia.

South Korea

The partition of Korea since 1945 has essentially meant South Korea's disconnection from the Eurasian continent, turning South Korea into a de facto island nation. As such, the BRI provides South Korea with a unique opportunity to "reconnect with the rest of Asia to escape from [its] isolation."[65] The first serious effort to expand South Korea's diplomatic space and regional autonomy came in the late 1980s. President Roh Tae-woo initiated "Nordpolitik," or a Northern Policy, aimed at transforming South Korea's "relations with northern socialist countries and North Korea" with the aim of "a greater diversification of South Korea's trading partners" and promoting a peaceful security environment around the Korean peninsula.[66]

The Northern Policy contributed to South Korea's diplomatic normalization with Russia in 1990 and with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1992. In contrast to his predecessor, Chun Doo-hwan, who came to power through a military coup and thus had no choice but to zero in on strategic ties with Washington to overcome his lack of legitimacy,[67] Roh was relatively free from the political need to highlight alliance relations with the United States. In seeking diplomatic rapprochement with the Soviet Union and the PRC, Roh "wished to shed Seoul's role as Washington's loyal subordinate."[68]

However, it was the Roh Moo-hyun government that drastically improved South Korea's relations with China. For instance, in March 2005 when US policy makers warned of China's military modernization and called on South Korea to take "a more regional view of security and stability,"[69] President Roh made it clear that South Korea would "not be embroiled in any conflict in Northeast Asia against [its] will."[70] In the same month, Roh unveiled South Korea's "balancer role" (*gyunhyungja-ron*) "not only on the Korean peninsula, but throughout Northeast Asia."[71] Contrary to expectations from the balancing perspective, however, Roh stressed the importance of working closely with China. A key factor behind the strategic shift was "the desire to reduce dependence, both economic and strategic, on the United States."[72]

However, the conservative president Park Geun-hye was keen not to choose between Washington and Beijing, seeking to improve both the alliance ties with the United States and the strategic partnership with China.[73] Park's signature project was her "Eurasia Initiative."[74] In fact, the announcement of Park's initia-

tive coincided with the unveiling of the BRI in 2013, and the South Korean initiative was similarly aimed at "economic cooperation in Eurasia through infrastructure projects, such as the trans-Korean railway."[75] From the Eurasia Initiative's inception, President Park observed that the South Korean initiative could be linked to China's new Silk Road project, thus encompassing Northeast and Central Asia, Africa, and Europe and benefiting both Seoul and Beijing.[76]

South Korea's serious foray into the BRI, however, began in 2017 as the newly installed Moon Jae-in government stressed the economic link between the BRI and the Korean peninsula. During his 2017 visit to China, President Moon stated that he and President Xi "agreed to actively look for ways of actual cooperation between China's One Belt, One Road initiative with South Korea's New North and New South policies."[77] Highlighting the importance of connectivity in Asia, Moon remarked, "If the connection between an inter-Korean railroad and the Trans-Siberian Railway that South Korea is actively pursuing meets China's trans China, Mongolia and Russia economic corridor, the rail, air and sea routes of Eurasia will reach all corners of the region."[78] Connecting to the BRI offers the additional benefit of reducing tensions between the two Koreas and promoting South Korea's economy through land-based shipping and energy pipelines, thus replacing the far more expensive liquified natural gas.[79]

Collaboration with South Korea has several benefits for China as well. For instance, a Chinese analyst points to the potential for stimulating economic growth in China's three northeastern provinces and for incentivizing North Korea to adopt economic reform, "thereby creating a peaceful environment conducive for the BRI's successful implementation."[80] This is why Beijing has recently expanded the BRI into Northeast Asia, which could be connected to Russia, Mongolia, and the Korean peninsula.[81]

In contrast to South Korea's enthusiasm about the BRI, Seoul's approach to the FOIP has been lukewarm at best. During his visit to South Korea in November 2017, President Trump encouraged South Korea to "participate in the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy, of which the ROK-U.S. alliance could be an integral part."[82] Although South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained that the FOIP "was consistent with South Korea's diplomatic strategy to diversify foreign relations," Moon's chief economic advisor "flatly rejected the idea, claiming that the FOIP is a Japanese initiative to link Japan with the United States, Australia, and India."[83] Instead, the Moon government has been seeking to increase its regional autonomy by reaching out to Eurasia, Southeast Asia, and India. A key focus has been its new "Southern Policy—an effort to increase economic and cultural cooperation with ASEAN, and economic and security cooperation with India."[84] Instead of "simply following Washington's lead," Seoul

appears intent on seeking "ad-hoc diplomatic support for non-controversial security initiatives," specifically "participation in economic projects that suit Seoul's needs, support for truly multilateral initiatives and prevention of any perceived antagonism towards China."[85]

At the same time, despite growing cooperation with China, Seoul is not bandwagoning with Beijing. South Korea's reliance on trade with China also means a growing sense of dependency and the potential for greater vulnerability in the future. South Korea's anxiety about its dependence on China materialized in 2016 when the Chinese government, upset about South Korea's decision to deploy the US-designed theater missile defense system, penalized South Korean companies operating in China and limited the number of Chinese tourists to South Korea.[86] Another key constraint in working with China is the uncertain future role of North Korea in any of the regional initiatives. This is why the Moon government has been eager to take a lead role in the nuclear negotiation with Pyongyang. From a South Korean standpoint, the success of the negotiation process would not only denuclearize the Korean peninsula but also expand Seoul's diplomatic space and improve regional autonomy substantially.

US Forces Korea photo

Figure 2. Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). US Forces Korea install a THAAD system on the Korean peninsula.

India

Despite the shared experiences of starting their own civilizations and suffering from colonial invasion, India and China maintained a rocky relationship throughout the Cold War period, especially after the 1962 border war in which India suffered a humiliating defeat. India's tradition of nonalignment policy also affected its relations with China. Rooted in India's independence movement, the nonalign-

ment strategy kept India away from both the Western alliance and the communist bloc.[87] Even after the US-China rapprochement in 1972, India's ties to the Soviet Union hindered Sino-Indian relations. However, after the Cold War, bilateral relations have turned into "a partnership of friendly cooperation and competition."[88]

As India's economic growth accelerated, relations with China have gathered steam as well. As of 2018, China is one of India's top five export partners and top import partner.[89] In addition, India has worked with China as members of BRICS, the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. In 2017, India also joined as a member of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Given India's desire to regain its great power status, these multilateral groupings could contribute to "greater parity, recognition and influence" for both India and China.[90]

Despite New Delhi's growing ties with Beijing, India's strategic ambivalence toward China continues with the Narendra Modi government. India's cautious stance on China is reflected in its approach to the BRI. While not rejecting the initiative altogether, unlike Japan and South Korea, India has expressed concerns about China's motivations behind the BRI. In fact, India was "the first country to come out against the opaque BRI," refusing to send delegates to the first BRI summit in May 2017.[91] Brahma Chellaney, a prominent Indian commentator, calls New Delhi's position a "brave, principled stand against BRI," as China's project is perceived as "a non-transparent, neocolonial enterprise aimed at ensnaring smaller, cash-strapped states in a debt trap to help advance China's geopolitical agenda."[92] A statement from India's Ministry of External Affairs raised the following concerns about the BRI: "[W]e are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; . . . Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity."[93]

Beyond its general concerns about the BRI's overall direction and lack of transparency, New Delhi has specific concerns about the BRI's impact on India's security and regional interests, including "an entrenched China–Pakistan alliance that may subsume Indian influence in South Asia; mounting maritime, trade and naval competition in the Indian Ocean region; engrained border disputes."[94] Among them, India is particularly worried about the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) over issues of sovereignty and territorial dispute in Kashmir.[95] Along with the CPEC, New Delhi has misgivings about "various points on the 'Road,' notably Gwadar port in Pakistan, and the Hambantota and Colombo ports in Sri Lanka."[96] Among these concerns, the port in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, is "a glaring

example of such unsustainable loans, which ultimately are allowing China to gain significant economic and strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean region."[97]

More broadly, as the Modi government seeks to enhance its regional autonomy and influence by reaching out to countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia, the BRI's overlapping linkages to these regions alarm New Delhi. As one analyst observes, the Modi government is "uneasy about Chinese designs for the region and how this challenges India's own 'neighborhood first' approach."[98] Specifically, the BRI is seen as a challenge to Modi's regional initiatives such as the "Act East" policy.[99] Under this policy, India has made a particular effort to promote "connectivity through Myanmar and Thailand with other ASEAN states."[100] India also countered China's BRI with the unveiling of "the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor, an India–Japan joint effort to support development in Africa."[101] In addition, India promotes its own projects such as ports in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Iran, while enhancing its relations with ASEAN over maritime cooperation and satellite data access and naval training.[102]

At the same time, despite concerns about a rising China, some Indian analysts also highlight the promises of working with China through the BRI. For instance, proponents of the BRI point to possible economic benefits to India's domestic infrastructure building, especially "the northeastern part of the country, which has traditionally been geographically distant from the rest of India and from major cross-border trading routes."[103] Furthermore, India's participation in the BRI could help New Delhi "play a leadership role in South Asia's infrastructure and economic integration."[104] More broadly, most Indian foreign policy experts "recognize the need to maintain substantive cooperation with Beijing as leverage for dealing with the West and promoting India's own development."[105] As such, when China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, India quickly joined it and led the BRICS group to "jointly sponsor the New Development Bank headquarters in Shanghai, under an Indian chief executive."[106]

It is against this complex strategic backdrop that the Trump administration unveiled the FOIP with India as a major counterpart. The 2017 US *National Security Strategy* document welcomes India's rise as "as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner."[107] The main reason for this increasing weight given to India is the view of New Delhi as an "important balancing counterweight to China's rise."[108] However, given its emphasis on regional autonomy, India is concerned about "open support for the Indo-Pacific, in particular military commitments to an open and free, rules-based maritime region as it could result in an escalation in Sino-Indo geopolitical tension with China."[109] Similarly, New Delhi is not enthusiastic about the Quad grouping—not only because of its relations with Beijing but also because of its fear of being seen as "America's pawn in

power games with China."[110] One analyst even calls the Quad a "strategic liability," as it "would disturb India-China relations and could also prove unfeasible in terms of finances and logistics."[111] Instead, India has approached the FOIP mainly as "an extension of its Look East policy in Southeast Asia."[112]

Indian analysts also raise questions about limited inclusivity in the FOIP. For instance, Jagannath Panda contends that the US regional strategic vision is "based on an anti-China shift in US security strategy," which is at odds with "India's vision for a regional order which is inclusive."[113] As such, Prime Minister Modi, in his 2018 speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, included China and Russia as regional partners, while pointedly skipping the US-led Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Washington, attended by Australia and Japan.[114] The Modi government's effort to navigate between the Quad grouping and China continues despite Australia's hope of strengthening ties with India as its "strategic partner" in light of a rising China.[115] In addition, India has "not agreed to the elevation of Quad talks to Secretary-level consultations."[116] As a consequence, going beyond the US version of the FOIP, India has highlighted a "Free, Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIIP)" policy aimed at taking "a leadership role in the region in partnership with ASEAN, while 'balancing' its relations with the US and China."[117] After the successful reelection of Prime Minister Modi in 2019, most analysts expect that New Delhi will continue to maintain India's policies toward Washington and Beijing, reflecting its "multiaxial nature" of foreign policy.[118]

Conclusion

This article has argued that contrary to the expectations from existing accounts, Japan, South Korea, and India have not balanced against or bandwagoned with China. Instead, they view China's BRI and America's FOIP strategy through domestic political prisms, in particular the goal of enhancing regional autonomy. By examining the domestic debate about the two grand strategies in these three case studies, this article has shown that these Asian nations have been responding to the regional visions of the United States and China in their own ways, complicating the great powers' regional plans. The findings of this article have broader theoretical and policy implications.

First, in predicting state behavior in the face of rising powers, we need to go beyond structural determinism. Instead of *a priori* assuming balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging in response to systemic changes, one needs to devote greater attention to the local lenses through which regional power dynamics are gauged and contested. National reactions to the shifting regional security order cannot be explained by material power considerations alone. More often than not, domestic political considerations, especially the ruling governments' pursuit of greater re-

gional autonomy, have influenced the ways in which Japan, South Korea, and India understand and cope with the BRI and the FOIP.

As for policy implications, Chinese and US policy makers should be more attentive to the regional perceptions of their grand strategies. A common assumption in US policy circles that an increasingly assertive China would automatically compel Asian states to join a US-led balancing coalition is misguided. In fact, there have been growing questions about the US role in the region. Cases in point are the Trump administration's withdrawal from the TPP and its confusing messages to its allies over Washington's diplomatic commitment, including the role and duration of the US military presence in the region.[119] The limited role of the United States was also shown in its failure to mediate tensions between Seoul and Tokyo over Japan's trade restrictions on South Korea and the Moon government's decision not to extend an intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan, known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).[120] The diplomatic rift in turn has the potential to undermine the FOIP.[121] Worse yet, given the political salience of autonomy, pressuring the Asian allies to join the US campaign to contain China would not only undercut those domestic political actors in support of alliance ties, but it may also embolden domestic actors that seek greater regional autonomy.

For the Chinese, it is worth bearing in mind that Beijing's proactive regional vision will not be fully realized without taking into consideration the pursuits of autonomy undertaken by Tokyo, Seoul, and New Delhi and meaningfully engaging the three Asian nations as equals, not as weaker counterparts for the BRI. More broadly, despite the promises and potential of the BRI and the FOIP, without a fuller understanding of regional perceptions and responses, coalition building will be much harder for both China and the United States, and the resulting regional order in Asia will be far more complex than the extant accounts of hegemony and balancing typically assume. ✪

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FEATURE

Undermining Democracy

Elites, Attitudes, Norms, and Behaviors in Southeast Asia

Amy Freedman

Abstract

Threats to democracy are not new in Southeast Asia. Manipulated elections, press and assembly controls, weakening of public attitudes and values toward democracy, elite stoking of populist illiberalism—Southeast Asia has it all. We saw the fracturing of democratic norms in the 2014 coup in Thailand, Rodrigo Duterte's victory in the Philippines, the rise of extrajudicial killings, the horrific atrocities committed against the Rohingya in Myanmar (Burma), and the rise of religious populism in the Jakarta governor's election and this year's presidential race. How should we understand these regional dynamics? Is populism and the rise of appeals to religion always antithetical to democracy and tolerance? What is the role of elites in stoking or dampening antidemocratic behavior? What institutional features (the nature of elections, the military, unitary vs. federal power, the political party system) might make democracy stronger or weaker and why? And, what is the impact of renewed populism? This article looks at public opinion and attitudes about religion and about democracy across Southeast Asia. The article will discuss how larger global dynamics, underlying structural elements, and public attitudes open the door to political elites who are able to capitalize on malleable attitudes to undermine democracy. Additionally, the article looks at what the implications are for US interests in Asia.

Introduction

There is a loud chorus of voices around the world worrying about the demise of democracy.[1] But, what do we mean when we say that democracy is being undermined or weakened? Are threats to democracy the same across different countries? And, how can we explain the perceived backsliding? From 1998 to 2008, it looked as if a number of countries in Southeast Asia were making a genuine transition to democracy. Literature on transitions from authoritarian rule found that political transitions were often the result of elite behavior.[2] When elites thought they could benefit from political reforms, they were more willing to side with reform-minded leaders or to initiate political reforms themselves. Hard-liners (*standpatters* in Samuel Huntington's terminology) who were able to maintain support from other elites (usually business and military leaders) had less need to make changes or

support efforts at democratization. Southeast Asia fit the transition models. Indonesia and Thailand underwent democratization after the 1997 financial crisis as leaders like Bacharuddin Jusuf "B.J." Habibie and Chuan Leekpai thought that they could benefit from supporting free elections and constitutional revisions (although ultimately they were not able to hold on to power). In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad was able to outmaneuver his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim's calls for economic (and later political) liberalization by closely maintaining support within his party, the business community, and the judiciary. Thus, in Malaysia there were no democratic reforms in the late 1990s.[3] Many believed that the changes would go only in one direction, toward greater openness, transparency, accountability, and tolerance. In short, that democracy would "stick." This has not been the case. Just like transitions to democracy could be understood as being elite driven, so too, is the undermining of it.

From 2014 to 2018, more countries have seen the undermining and weakening of democracy. Dani Rodrik and Sharun Mukand break down democracy in a useful way, explaining that liberal democracy rests on three sets of rights: property rights, political rights, and civil rights. *Property rights* affect mostly elites, by definition those who own property, businesses, and investments. Property rights protect these citizens and their wealth from state expropriation. *Political rights* are those that enable groups in society to win electoral competition, assume power, and enact their preferred policies. *Civil rights* guarantee equal treatment under the law and equal access to public goods like safety and security, education, markets, and so forth.[4]

In observing threats to democracy, we are most often seeing threats to civil rights and some weakening of political rights. It is rarer to see dismantling of property rights. Property rights have powerful constituents. Property rights directly affect the elite; this group may be small, but they can mobilize their assets, resources, and power to protect their interests. And, if they do not get their say, they can move their money elsewhere, imposing a high penalty on those who cross them. Worryingly, we are seeing some roll back to political rights—rights that protect the masses' ability to participate in the political process. This impacts the ability of groups in society to organize and assert their preferences. The majority may encompass middle class and poorer citizens, but their collective power poses a check on elites—they can threaten uprisings and mass mobilization. The main beneficiaries of civil rights in all societies are minorities, who (by definition) are smaller in number and who may not command great wealth.[5] It is worth noting here that minorities may be religious, ethnic, or linguistic groups, but *minority* can also be anyone who disagrees with the dominant group or who is seeking inclusion in rights regimes. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, and

queer (LGBTQ) community exemplifies this.[6] In countries around the world, LGBTQ are seeing increased attacks, demonization, and legislation expressly targeting their very persons. It is not surprising that we are seeing significant undermining of civil rights and protections in Southeast Asia for these and other minority communities. While weakening civil rights is problematic and worth decrying in the strongest possible terms, it may not signal the end of other elements of democracy. This article helps explain why we see the patterns we do.

The undermining of democracy is a reflection of elites capitalizing on five interrelated phenomena. Elites have found that it is possible to chip away at democracy because: 1) there is contradictory public support for democratic values, with surveys showing that people simultaneously favor "order" over other issues, while still believing that democracy is a good thing; 2) there are contingent norms of tolerance, in other words, there is public support for protection of civil rights and liberties but not as they apply to all equally; 3) the rise of social media has increased the saliency and potency of hyperbolic rhetoric and fear tactics and has ramped up religious identity and demonization of the "other;" 4) there has been a failure of more moderate and mainstream political elites to strongly make a case for why tolerance and civil rights matter and to back up this rhetoric, and there have been other failures to solve deep underlying problems in society like corruption and failures of governance issues like better provision of public goods; and 5) the international dimension has changed. Under the Trump administration, the United States no longer sees democracy promotion as important, and Southeast Asia seems to be a low priority for the administration. Couple this with the rise of China and Beijing's increased involvement in Southeast Asia, and it means that there is little or no external pressure on Southeast Asian leaders to place a high value on democratic practices and values. These five interrelated factors open the door to antidemocratic elites to make a case for why their "solutions" or message offer a better way to fix society.

If a significant number of people are already weakly supportive of democracy, already have waffling confidence in government (versus other institutions like the military or religious organizations), and have low levels of support for minorities in their communities and country, it makes it easier to mobilize support for antidemocratic measures and leaders. And, if solving really deep, intractable problems like corruption and provision of public goods like better infrastructure, schools, health care, and economic growth has not benefited more people in noticeable ways, it contributes to cynicism, distrust, and the likelihood that people may support leaders who promise simple but robust solutions—often ones that involve demonizing or denigrating those who are perceived as part of the problem. So, Duterte's war on drugs has targeted the poorest and most marginalized in Philip-

pine society, blaming them for crime and insecurity. In Indonesia, populist politicians and their supporters increasingly target religious and ethnic minorities—like Ahmadiyya,[7] Christian, Chinese, LGBTQ and others—labeling them as outsiders who should not have equal rights and protections and who should not be allowed to hold elected office. In Myanmar, despite the political reforms of the past few years, both state and nonstate actors have carried out horrific violence against the Muslim Rohingya, and political leaders have steadfastly denied it and have prevented a full accounting of the atrocities. In Thailand, elites within the military and monarchy could not win power through elections and so resorted to destroying all democratic elements of the political system, despite high levels of public support of democracy.

Table 1. Freedom House Rankings

	1999	2003	2008	2013	2017	2018	
Indonesia	3.5 Partly Free	3.5 Partly Free	2.5 Free	2.5 Free	3.0 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	⇩
Malaysia	5.0 Partly Free	5.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	⇧
Thailand	2.5 Free	2.5 Free	5.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	5.5 Not Free	6.0 Not Free	⇩
Philippines	2.5 Free	2.5 Free	3.5 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	⇩
Myanmar	7.0 Not Free	7.0 Not Free	7.0 Not Free	5.5 Not Free	5.0 Partly Free	5.0 Partly Free	⇩

1 is the best, 7 is the worst. 1–2.5 ranked "free," 3–5 ranked "partly free," and 5.5–7 ranked "not free." Freedom House, "Freedom in the World Reports 1999–2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world.

Table 1 reflects the last 10 years of Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" rankings. Countries can be designated as "free," "partly free," or "not free." The scale goes from 7, the least free, to 1 the most free, and countries are evaluated on about 30 metrics ranging from political rights in elections, rule of law elements, civil rights, as well as economic and social rights and freedoms. The arrows in the last column reflect current trends in each country. Based on recent developments, all countries except Malaysia are trending downward; conditions are getting worse, not better. Why?

Backsliding in Southeast Asia

The explanation for this situation varies to some extent from country to country, but there are certain familiar threads in the case studies.

Thailand

Thailand suffered a military coup in 2014 and instead of a reasonably quick return to civilian rule, the military has held on to power and has engaged in widespread efforts to stamp out any overt (including postings on social media) signs of dissent, clamping down on independent media, rights of peaceful assembly, criticism from intellectuals, student activism, and so forth. Those detained have been questioned in military camps and threatened with "attitude adjustment." Political detentions were ramped up and criticism of the military or the royal family were dealt with harshly. From 2014 to 2019, elections were scheduled and then cancelled. In 2016, the government held a referendum on a draft of a new constitution. Authorities rigidly controlled voting, and the new constitution weakened the role of political parties and the role of elected officials more generally and strengthened the power of unelected institutions like the military and monarchy.[8] Although Thailand held parliamentary elections in March 2019, it has not resulted in a return to democracy. No party won a clear majority, and despite the opposition Pheu Thai Party winning the most seats in the lower house, the upper house remains controlled by the military through its appointed seats. The combined power of the upper house and promilitary parties in the lower house resulted in the selection of retired general Prayuth Chan-ocha, the man who led the military coup in Thailand five years ago, as the country's civilian prime minister, a position he held since the coup anyway.[9]

Philippines

In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte won the 2016 presidential election (with only 39 percent of the vote). While overt dismantling of institutions that provide for checks and balances, like freedom of the press and the role of the legislature, has not occurred, there are troubling indicators. Senator Leila de Lima, an outspoken critic of the president, was arrested. Many believe her arrest was intended to silence her. Additionally, the president has relentlessly attacked the media for negative coverage, exacerbating an already dangerous environment for journalists in the country. Two reporters were killed in 2017. Despite a high degree of freedom (on paper) for nongovernmental organizations and activist organizations, President Duterte has issued public threats against activists who oppose his policies, and in December 2017, 10 activists were killed—nine by police or military personnel. The most critical violation of rights has been the extrajudicial detention, torture, and killing of those suspected of drug offenses. Since the 2016 election, more than 12,000 people have been killed. Duterte publically encourages

these actions, and few of the perpetrators of these extralegal killings have been charged or convicted.[10]

Photo courtesy Philippine Presidential Communications Operations Office

Figure 1. Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte talks with Myanmar's state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi during his state visit to Myanmar on 20 March 2017.

Myanmar

After much heralded elections in Myanmar in 2015, the events of the past two years have demonstrated that competitive elections are hardly a bulwark against horrific violations of human rights. A military campaign against the Muslim Rohingya minority has included mass rape, murder, and wholesale destruction of villages and has caused more than 650,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. In 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD), a civilian party, won 135 of the 168 elected seats in the upper house and 255 of the 330 elected seats in the lower house. The president, Htin Kyaw is a NLD member, as is Aung San Suu Kyi who is state counselor (a position akin to a prime minister); yet, neither of these leaders said nor did much to reign in the violent attacks against the Rohingya nor even to criticize the military and police for aiding and abetting the atrocities. In addition to these horrors, press freedoms, which had increased through 2015, have worsened. Journalists face harassment, violence, and arrest. Online activities and academic freedoms are curtailed. Rights advocates are also at risk. U Ko Ni, a Muslim

lawyer and democracy activist, was killed in January 2017. Police do little in response to threats from hard-line nationalists against rights activists.[11]

Indonesia

Indonesia has long been a (relatively) bright spot in Southeast Asia. After the fall of President Suharto in 1998, the country made a surprising transition to democracy. From 2000 to 2016, Indonesian leaders took many important steps to consolidate the political reforms: allowing for local elections and local control, creating an anticorruption agency, and allowing for a wide range of political and social freedoms. Despite positive changes, troubling elements persisted. Ethnic and religious minorities were targeted for violence while hard-line Islamist groups were tolerated and have more recently been given wider latitude for carrying out rallies, demonstrations, and campaigns against perceived enemies. Over the past two years, these two troubling elements in Indonesia have grown: discrimination and violence against minorities has escalated, and hard-line groups have seen their popularity, influence, and room to maneuver grow. These factors came together in the Jakarta governor's election of 2017. Sitting governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), a Christian and Chinese politician was accused of blasphemy against Islam during a campaign appearance in September 2016. Despite this, he led in the first round of voting in February 2017. Hard-line Islamist groups like the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islam Defenders Front) ramped up rallies and campaign activities against Ahok and pressured the courts to file criminal charges against him. Ahok lost the final April election and was then sentenced to two years in prison for the blasphemy charges. Since then, other political candidates and outspoken activists have been charged with blasphemy. The courts seem unwilling to dismiss these kinds of charges and are increasingly seen as bowing to hard-line pressure. During the 2019 presidential election, the forces of religious intolerance and religious nationalism seemed to have become mainstream. While the incumbent, Pres. Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, won reelection, he chose Islamic hard-liner Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate. This may have given Jokowi cover against charges that he is somehow not pro-Islam enough, but it also normalized and legitimized intolerant rhetoric, discourse, and behavior.[12]

Malaysia

Malaysia is the one positive example in the region of an improved political climate for democracy. After ruling Malaysia since independence, the United Malays Nasional Organization (UMNO), and its coalition partners in the Barison Nasional (BN), lost in the general elections of 2018. An on-going corruption

scandal had plagued UMNO prime minister Najib Razak, and the Pakatan Harapan (PH) opposition coalition led by Mahathir bin Mohamad (who had previously served in numerous positions, including prime minister, in earlier UMNO governments) finally beat the ruling coalition. Freedom House had consistently rated Malaysia's political system under UMNO rule as "partly free." The government had held regular and competitive elections, but these elections were highly distorted to favor the ruling party. Electoral districts were malapportioned and gerrymandered to favor rural and ethnic Malay voters, and a series of laws restricted the media, political speech, gatherings, and other civil and political rights. Since 2008, opposition parties had come close to knocking the BN out of power, but despite winning a majority of votes, they could not topple UMNO rule. Mahathir served as head of UMNO and prime minister from 1981–2003, presiding over both an economic boom and the crash of 1997. Additionally, he helped implement many of Malaysia's antidemocratic laws and practices. Despite this, over the past few years Mahathir has become a vocal critic of Najib Razak. Commentating as an elder statesman, he lambasted Najib for his suspected involvement in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal and his refusal to step down.[13] Mahathir left UMNO and took the reins of the opposition PH. They won the 2018 election, and at age 93 Mahathir reassumed the role of prime minister. He pardoned his former deputy prime minister and outspoken UMNO critic, Anwar Ibrahim, who then ran in a by-election and won a seat in parliament. The PH took some early steps to roll back some of the most antidemocratic measures, such as the recent "fake news" law. However, many of the needed reforms have stalled in the Senate, which the UMNO still controls.[14]

Southeast Asia has never been a bastion of good governance and democracy. But, how can we explain what we are seeing now? Malaysia has taken a significant step toward greater democracy, but other countries have moved in the opposite direction. What's driving the change? Is it coming from larger structural issues? From changes in attitudes and values (public opinion)? Are changes coming from above (from elites) or below (from genuine changes in mass attitudes)?

Structural Issues

Have there been larger changes to the political, regional, economic, or international order that help explain what we are seeing? We know that the underlying political systems in Southeast Asia suffer from significant weaknesses: elections are heavily influenced by money and patronage, campaigns are not waged freely and fairly, and press freedoms are questionable (there is a great deal of variation across Southeast Asia in terms of press freedoms). Since the 2014 coup, Thailand has little to no press freedom. The government has tightly muzzled Malaysia's

press, but there has been a sliver of online activity that tries to act as a check on government-sponsored or approved information. Indonesia and the Philippines have relatively free press climate, but in the Philippines there is now a significant amount of risk attached to criticizing Duterte. Observers once viewed the rise of social media as an asset to democracy; however, the opposite appears to be true in many cases. On Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms for election campaigning, misinformation is inflating negative and accusatory behavior that in the past might have had only minor influence. We know from the US, French, Brazilian, and other relatively recent elections that populists and nativists are more likely to read and repost inflammatory articles, and this is playing a role all over the world in increasing support for autocrats.[15] There is good information that this dynamic was at work in the Philippine election, and in Indonesia. Jokowi was targeted by false claims and the government is forced to play a game of cat-and-mouse monitoring and shutting down of fake news sites and provocative material.[16] Human Rights Watch officials and others say that this is barely scratching the surface of what is out there. Interestingly, the region's economy is doing relatively well.

Table 2. Economic Growth, GDP growth per year

	1998	2003	2008	2013	2017
Indonesia	-13%	4.8%	7.4%	6.0%	5.2%
Malaysia	-7.4%	5.8%	4.8%	4.7%	4.5%
Thailand	-7.6%	7.2%	1.7%	2.7%	3.7%
Philippines	-0.6%	5.0%	4.2%	7.1%	6.6%
Singapore	-2.2%	4.4%	1.8%	5.0%	2.5%

Knoema, Virginia. https://knoema.com/atlas/Indonesia/Real-GDP-growth. Site used for all countries.

This is an interesting and counterintuitive finding. Researchers seldom make an argument that links economic growth with populism. Usually, the connection is that populist candidates capitalize on a weak economy to convince people that only they can provide economic gains and greater financial security. In Southeast Asia, economic growth is fine, yet to win elections populist candidates are nonetheless capitalizing on insecurity (writ large) and fear.

Are there regional or global factors that are playing a role in domestic politics? Perhaps, three interrelated phenomena may be important to understand: changes in the United States; the growth of Chinese power, and local contagion. The election of Pres. Donald Trump in the United States has given cover to autocrats around the world. Not only has Trump frequently refrained from criticizing dictators like Putin, and Kim Jung-Un, his criticism of the press as the "enemy of the people" and his public support of using violence and the criminal justice system against his enemies (real and perceived) has given license to others around the

world to do the same or to feel emboldened to do more of what was already happening in more vigorous and systemic ways.[17] Second, with the United States retreating from global commitments and agreements (undercutting the World Trade Organization, exiting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiating North American Free Trade Agreement, etc.), countries are left unsure of US partnerships and commitments to economic and security frameworks. China has been happy to fill this void. And, China is rarely concerned with human rights violations or curtailment of political rights and liberties. Third, as more countries in the region undermine democratic norms and practices, the easier it is for others to do the same. Indonesia used to be the leader advocating for democracy and human rights within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—the Bali Forum on Human Rights in 2008 is an example of this—but Jokowi's focus on domestic issues over regional and international politics has put this on a back burner. In 2008, norms were shifting, and it seemed that public demands and regional and international pressure were moving in the same direction toward greater rights and liberties. Now, the opposite is true—regional and international norms have shifted again and there is little or no pressure on countries to protect and promote rights and liberties within their borders.

Public Opinion in Southeast Asia

A number of surveys have been conducted in the region that give us a good deal of information about public attitudes and values relating to democracy. The information gathered is mixed. The results of the World Values Surveys and separate surveys done in Indonesia (not done in Wave 6), Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia demonstrate that, although respondents say they favor democracy, public opinion is lukewarm on values that undergird democracy. Perhaps the best way to summarize findings from the surveys is to say that the findings are often contradictory (see table 3). For example, people across several countries report high levels of support for democracy and respond that democracy is the best way to organize politics. Yet, there are also high levels of support for having a strong leader who does not need to bother with elections and a parliamentary check on their power. And, large numbers of people surveyed prioritize "maintaining order" over giving people more say in government, and both of these answers dwarf "maintaining freedom of speech" as a priority.

Table 3. World Values Surveys, Wave 5 (2006) & Wave 6 (2012)

Which priority is most important to you?

v. 62 (responses are from 2012, except for Indonesia, which are from 2006)

	Philippines	Thailand	Malaysia	Indonesia
Maintaining order in the nation	42.2	31.7	59.1	60.4
Giving people more say in important government decisions	21.8	23.0	17.7	9.0
Fighting rising prices	27.0	33.0	19.0	21.4
Freedom of speech	8.9	9.0	4.2	6.4
No answer	0.1	3.3	0	2.8

I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?
The government (in your nation's capital)

V.115: Wave 5 & Wave 6

	Philippines	Thailand (2006)	Thailand (2012)	Malaysia (2006)	Malaysia (2012)	Indonesia (2006)
A great deal	12.4	5.7	15.8	29.7	19.0	10.8
Quite a lot	45.3	32.8	35.3	45.7	56.1	43.0
Not very much	34.4	53.5	28.1	21.3	19.7	36.2
None at all	7.7	7.9	15.9	3.3	5.0	6.1
No answer	0.2	0.1	0.6	0	0.1	1.4
Don't know	0	0	4.3	0	0.1	2.5

I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country: Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections or answer to a parliament:

V127: Wave 5 & Wave 6

	Philippines (2001)	Philippines (2012/13)	Thailand (2006)	Thailand (2012/13)	Malaysia (2006)	Malaysia (2012/13)	Indonesia (2006)
Very good	16.9	19.2	16.1	8.2	17.5	15.6	3.8
Fairly good	44.9	39.9	54.4	22.5	42.5	34.7	17.4
Bad	30.0	20.3	26.3	40.6	26.3	32.5	50.4
Very bad	7.1	19.4	2.8	28.4	13.6	17.2	17.8
No answer	1.1	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.1	0	0.3
Don't know	0	1	0.1	0	0	0	10.3

I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country: having a democratic political system:

V130: Wave 5 & Wave 6

	Philippines (2001)	Philippines (2012)	Thailand (2006)	Thailand (2012)	Malaysia (2006)	Malaysia (2012)	Indonesia (2006)
Very good	27.9	33.9	44.9	68.3	43.5	47.8	54.5
Fairly good	53.8	40.9	47.3	23.5	48.1	44.9	36.4
Bad	15.3	17.5	6.8	5.5	6.6	5.5	2.1
Very bad	2.2	6.5	0.5	2.3	1.7	1.8	0.9
No answer	0.8	0.1	0.4	0.4	0.1	0	1.5
Don't know	0	1.1	0	0	0	0	4.6

Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means "not at all an essential characteristic of democracy" and 10 means it definitely is "an essential characteristic of democracy": Civil rights protect people from state oppression:

V136

	Philippines	Thailand (2006)	Thailand (2012)	Malaysia (2006)	Malaysia (2012)	Indonesia (2006)
1 – Not an essential characteristic of democracy	10	5.1	2.8	2.2	3.5	1.9
2	3.6	2.9	2.5	2.5	2.9	0.7
3	3.7	4.2	3.8	3.3	3.3	0.6
4	4.8	6.6	4.7	5.3	4.3	0.9
5	13.6	17.5	11.9	20.8	7.7	3.5
6	8.1	18.3	8.1	15.2	8.8	4.0
7	6.4	16.3	11.4	18.1	9.6	6.1
8	8.4	13.3	14.3	14.7	14.4	10.6
9	7.0	8.5	13.5	7.1	15.9	13.1
10 – An essential characteristic of democracy	34.2	6.6	25	10.7	29.6	53.5
No answer	0.2	0.7	2.0	0.1	0	5.1

How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is "not at all important" and 10 means "absolutely important" what position would you choose?

V140, Wave 6 (2012)

	Philippines	Thailand	Malaysia
1 – Not at all important	5.0	0.3	0.2
2	0.7	0.3	0.1
3	0.6	0.6	0.2
4	2.5	1.6	0.8
5	9.6	7.4	3.6
6	7.0	10.0	8.6
7	7.3	8.9	8.8
8	9.9	11.8	19.8
9	7.5	10.1	12.2
10 – Absolutely important	49.4	47.0	45.8
No answer	0.5	2.0	0

A similar question was asked in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) 2017 survey in Indonesia. Respondents were asked if democracy was the best form of government for Indonesia: 79.8 percent agreed that democracy was the best form of government, 4.7 percent disagreed, and 15.5 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.[18]

The ISEAS survey results from Indonesia provide us with additional information on public opinion. When asked what the most important issues/problems facing Indonesia are, answers were as follows: 38.8 percent of respondents chose "corruption," 30.7 percent "economic management and growth," 24.6 percent "infrastructure and transportation," 20.9 percent "price stability," followed by poverty, social welfare, education, unemployment, then "crime, law enforcement, and security" at just 16 percent, followed only by "health care" at 9.53 percent.[19] While this question does not give respondents specific political concerns as answer choices, it is notable that security and law enforcement is the second to the bottom of people's concerns. Often, populism plays on insecurity and uses threats of crime, instability, or economic problems like unemployment; yet, in this survey, those issues rank low on people's priorities. While Duterte has used crime and insecurity as his selling point and justification for antidemocratic measures, in Indonesia the same strategy might not work.

The ISEAS survey also asks people their views on the role of Islam, and here we see important answers. Forty-nine percent of people thought that the government should prioritize Islam over other religions, 37 percent thought that Islamic

religious leaders should play a very important role in politics, 41 percent that that regions should be allowed to implement sharia law at the local level, 39 percent thought that sharia law should be implemented throughout Indonesia, 63 percent thought that blasphemy against Islam should be punished more severely, 58 percent thought that when voting in elections it was important to choose a Muslim leader, and 36 percent responded that Islam should be Indonesia's only official religion.[20] These responses provide a snapshot of a way that an antidemocratic leader could maximize a divisive issue. In playing up Islamic values, identity, and fear of violations of this identity and value system, a politician can come to power democratically and then chip away at, or completely destroy, rights and protections for those outside this majority.

Not only are Islamic values a high priority, there is still a pervasive sense that Chinese Indonesians are outsiders and that they have too much economic power. Sixty-two percent of respondents held such views, and 41.9 percent believe that Chinese also have excessive influence in politics. Although the World Values Survey overwhelmingly shows that Indonesians say they support civil rights, they also have negative views of minorities.[21]

Across the region we see relatively supportive attitudes about democracy yet significant curtailing of democratic rights and procedures. How can we explain this disconnect? What is the driver? There are several possible answers: it could be that democracy means different things to different people. If democracy is solely about competitive elections and nominally open or free competition of ideas within society and from the media, then by that more limited definition, democracy is holding on. Yet, high degrees of civil rights and liberties, and a wide level of acceptance of these rights for others (minority religious or ethnic groups, or those further outside the mainstream like LGBTQ groups) may be either less important or in fact not at all included in what many people think of as part and parcel of democracy. Jeremy Menchik discusses this in his work on tolerance without liberalism. *Liberalism* can be understood economically as a system of free markets and a bundle of civil, social, and religious rights accorded to all equally. Liberalism as equal rights and treatment is not at the heart of Indonesia's democracy.[22] This is a highly circumscribed notion of tolerance. Another answer is an institutionalist one; that the nature of political institutions is shaping and constraining behavior. So, for example, Jokowi may genuinely be a reform-minded leader, but because of his need to maintain support in parliament for his agenda and to keep control over his government, he has been forced to tone down his initial pledge of promoting tolerance and protecting civil rights. Moreover, his need to win reelection led him to choose a conservative Islamist as his running mate.[23] Perhaps this national phenomenon is simply a scaling up of local dynam-

ics that have been under way for more than 10 years. Michael Buehler has shown that local politicians have chosen to adopt sharia laws not because (or not just because) they are pious Muslims but because it enables them access to the *zakat* (religious tithing) to benefit from patronage networks that help them reward supporters and maintain their positions of power.[24] Greater piety and favoring of Islam is more an instrument to maintain support than an end unto itself.

In this view, politicians are trying to capitalize on growing religiosity to maintain political power. In Indonesia there is intrinsic support for Islam having a place in the public sphere. But, people also say they value democracy and civil rights. So, politicians are using this to shape and carry out their campaign. Yes, there are vigorous and mostly free and fair elections in Indonesia, but candidates are using competitive elections simultaneously with increased use of blasphemy laws to stifle and delegitimize some candidates running for office. Underlying public opinion about the importance of Islam is making this a viable electoral strategy, but it is ultimately the elites using this strategy who I believe are the drivers of this dynamic. If we look at leaders since the fall of Suharto, moderate voices like Abdurrahman Wahid—who served as president from 1999 to 2001 and is popularly known as Gus Dur—were important at a moment when sectarian violence was high and there was concern that democracy would not stick. So, his message about the compatibility of Islam and democracy and tolerance was critical. He had credibility as an Islamic leader (of Nahdlatul Ulama, [NU]) and critic of Suharto. Former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014)—commonly referred to by his initials, SBY—and Jokowi in his first election and term in office had more mixed records. Both talked about the importance of tolerance and diversity in Indonesia, but both failed to take significant action to reign in groups like FPI and to speak forcefully when violence was used against unpopular minorities like the Ahmadiyya. Jokowi moved even further away from a tolerant, pluralist position when he selected Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate. For many people, this signaled his acceptance of the conservative Islamist agenda and an acknowledgment that tolerance and a broad array of civil rights for all in Indonesia continues to be a lower priority than winning an electoral victory.

It matters who is running for office, who leaders surround themselves with, and what they choose to do after taking office. Elites who find that they can gain power by playing on underlying attitudes such as a desire for order, a mistrust of others, and group affiliation that views minorities as less than and unequal to the majority, find that it is possible to make political changes detrimental to democracy. So, Duterte empowers the police to engage in extrajudicial killings and makes the Philippines even more dangerous for journalists. Duterte made no secret of his desire to shut down critics or his disdain for following the rule of law. While the

Philippines has been a dangerous place for journalists and for marginal groups in society for a long time, it has become even more so under the current regime.

Thailand's situation also reflects a similar but more blatant phenomenon. Elites in the military and within the bureaucracy of the monarchy had hoped they could hold power through nominally democratic means. However, in relatively fair elections from 2001 to 2006, and again in 2011 Thaksin Shinawatra and then his sister Yingluck Shinawatra won. Support for the Shinawatras threatened and undermined the more traditional elite alliance of bureaucrats, the military, and the monarchy. Unable to win power through elections, judicial activism, or mass protest activity, the military took matters into its own hands in 2014 and carried out a coup. The aftermath of this coup was a far more draconian curtailing of political and civil rights than at any time in Thailand since the 1970s. There is nothing in the World Values Survey data that indicates lower levels of support for democracy. If anything, the opposite is true; prior to the coup there were higher levels of support for democracy in Thailand than in neighboring countries and lower levels of support for "order" as the highest priority in the country. Only through brute force and now the rewriting of the political rules of the game (the new constitution) have antidemocratic elites been able to hold on to power.

In Myanmar, political elites have little interest in stopping the violence against the Rohingya, as they have little or no political price to pay for these atrocities. In Malaysia, Mahathir may not be a committed democrat (he certainly was not in the 1980s and 1990s), but he saw a way to capitalize on Najib's weakness and win power for himself and for opposition leaders and groups that do genuinely want to see political reforms in Malaysia.

Analysis and Conclusion

Looking at Southeast Asia now and over the past 20 years, leadership matters. It is important to highlight that when there are reform-minded and tolerant elites in power or vying for power, we see both greater efforts at creating and consolidating democracy and protecting rule of law, and when antidemocratic elites are able to come to power, they then have the opportunity to undermine democracy. This undermining is easier if there are weak institutions to check their behavior, public opinion is only weakly supportive of democracy, or if the public is supportive of democracy while also prioritizing things like in-group favoritism or concerned about order over other public goods. Prodemocracy elites may see greater democratization as working in their favor (for example, leaders like B.J. Habibie, Gus Dur, Anwar Ibrahim, and Mahathir [post-2017] may see democracy or democratic procedures and processes as benefiting them rather than having a steadfast

or committed belief in the intrinsic worth of democracy); yet, regardless of their motivations, such attitudes and behaviors matter.

Photo courtesy of Office of the President of Russia

Figure 2. Eastern Economic Forum, September 2019. Russian President Vladimir Putin addresses the plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sharing the stage.

This article argues that curtailing of democratic elements is a product of elites capitalizing on five interrelated phenomena: 1) underlying contradictory support for democratic values that simultaneously favor order and democracy; 2) contingent norms of tolerance: public support for protection of civil rights and liberties does not necessarily apply to all equally; 3) the increased use of social media as a source of information has led to greater disinformation and it has increased the power and reach of identity politics and demonization of minorities; 4) failures of more moderate and mainstream political elites to strongly make a case for why tolerance and civil rights matter and who take steps to back up this rhetoric and failure to solve deep underlying problems in society like corruption and failures of governance issues like better provision of public goods; and 5) a shift in structural factors like regional and global norms where US influences has both shifted and shrunk and China's power and influence has grown all to the detriment of democratic norms. These interrelated factors open the door to antidemocratic elites to make a case for why their solutions or message offer a better way to fix society. If a significant number of people are already contingently supportive of democracy, if they already have waffling levels of confidence in government (versus other in-

stitutions like the military or religious organizations) and have low levels of support for minorities in their communities and country, and if they are reading hyperpartisan and possibly fake news, it makes it easier to mobilize support for antidemocratic measures.

In Southeast Asia, populism and the rise of appeals to religion are antithetical to democracy and tolerance. If one defines democracy as having robust protections of civil rights, then populism, which preys on unpopular and weak (politically speaking) elements of society, is highly problematic; people's safety and rights are at stake. What mechanisms might exist for preventing democratic backsliding or minimizing the extent of it? It may be stating the obvious and be unrealistic to say, but the most critical element would be that elites commit to protecting democratic norms and practices and preserving crucial elements of democracy like freedom of the press and protection of civil rights for all citizens. Failing this, what other institutional features may provide a bulwark against creeping authoritarianism? Certainly having a robustly independent judiciary and system of rule of law including freedom of the press and genuine civil rights to allow for opposition groups to gather, plan, and articulate their criticisms would help. This enables critics of the regime to have legal protections to operate and hold elites accountable or at least to raise issues and call attention to violations of democratic norms and procedures. Having a system of local elections and local power sharing can, in theory, provide greater opportunities for local control and localized protection of rights; yet, the opposite can also be true. Local elections and control can heighten populism and demonization of minorities if there are few protections or weak protection from the national government.

Cumulatively, do these disheartening trends signal the end of democracy in Southeast Asia? Civil rights are under assault. It is absolutely critical that civil society groups and activists continue to call attention to this. Not surprisingly, property rights face few challenges; it is political rights that are the open question right now. Will regimes mostly respect the ability of groups to articulate interests and participate in the political process, or will the backsliding also include dismantling of political rights? If the latter occurs to a further extent in Indonesia and the Philippines, like it has in Thailand, we will be witnesses to the end of democracy in Southeast Asia. Civil rights may be the canary in the coal mine. They are often the first rights to go, and in their absence make it easier to chip away at political rights more broadly. Voters can prevent this by choosing leaders who are more likely to respect and promote civil rights and to play by the rules of the game and hold the line on protecting political rights. While Jokowi won reelection in Indonesia, the official announcement of the vote tallies led to rioting and violence in Jakarta. It is too soon to know how he will govern in a second

term. However, given who his vice president is, it seems unlikely that he will push for greater rights protections and more likely that he will continue move to placate conservative religious forces rather than to act as a check on them. We are at a moment in time in Southeast Asia when it is impossible to know if democracy will stick or be further eroded.

Political changes in Southeast Asia may further hurt US interests in the region. US interests in Southeast Asia have been consistent: protect regimes friendly to us, protect and facilitate economic and trade interests (particularly freedom of navigation at sea and in the air), and balance against other dominant powers that might threaten the first two interests (during the Cold War this was the Soviets, and now it is China).[25] President Trump's withdrawal from the TPP and his reassessment of core US alliances has signaled to countries in Asia that their interests are of little consequence. If US support is called into question, countries have little choice but to realign their interests more squarely with China. It can hardly be to the America's benefit to have countries in the South China Sea shift their support to China when Beijing aims to have many of the shipping lanes delineated as part of sovereign Chinese territory. Increased Chinese naval power makes Japan and South Korea nervous, and as a result, we may very well see a new arms race in Asia. Moreover, as countries in the region throw their support behind Chinese-led trade deals like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership over the TPP, there will be fewer protections for workers, the environment, and even for US-owned companies more generally. Since the United States is not a party to this agreement and has pulled out of TPP, Washington may find that it has fewer economic opportunities in the region than before and that improved trade links between Southeast Asia and China have hurt US producers and consumers. More authoritarian leaders will have cover in fostering better ties with China, leaving the United States less leverage in fostering its own relationships in the region. For both these economic and geostrategic reasons, it is shortsighted of Washington to pay so little attention to Southeast Asia and to seemingly care so little about domestic political changes. If countries do continue to move away from democratic norms and practices, the United States may find it has lost long-standing friends and allies, and these relationships will be hard to replace. ✪

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Notes

1. Recent books warning about this include Madeleine Albright, 2018. *Fascism: A Warning* (NY: Harper Collins); Timothy Snyder, 2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (NY: Tim Duggan Books); and Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018. *How Democracies Die* (NY: Broadway Books).

2. Work on transitions from authoritarian rule includes Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2012 and Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter et al. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives,* John Hopkins University Press, 1986.

3. Amy Freedman, *Political Change and Consolidation Democracy's Rocky Road in Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, and Malaysia*. NY:Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

4. Dani Rodrik and Sharun Mukand, "Why Illiberal Democracies are on the Rise." *Huffpost,* May 18, 2015.

5. Rodrik and Murkind, 2015.

6. Just to give one example of this, see Febriana Firdaus, "Indonesia's LGBT Crackdown." *The Interpreter*, the Lowy Institute, June 8, 2018.

7. The Ahmadiyya community originated in British India in the late nineteenth. Although adherents believe themselves to be devout Muslims and follow the Quran, orthodox Muslims consider the Ahmadiyya as heretical because they not believe that Mohammed was the final prophet sent to guide mankind. The Ahmadiyya takes its name from its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who was born in 1835 and is regarded as the messiah and a prophet, assertions held to be blasphemous by mainstream Muslims.

8. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Thailand" 2018 report.

9. BBC, "Thai Parliament elects ex-military government chief Prayuth as Prime Minister." June 6, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48537664?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/c4l37mgp4q4t/thailand-election-2019&link_location=live-reporting-story

10. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Philippines" 2018 report.

11. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Myanmar" 2018 report.

12. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Indonesia" 2018 report.

13. In 2015, Najib, then prime minister, was accused of channeling over RM 2.67 billion (nearly USD 700 million) from a government-run strategic development company, 1MDB, to his personal bank accounts.

14. Freedom House "Freedom in the World: Malaysia" 2019 report.

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FEATURE

China in the South Pacific

An Emerging Theater of Rivalry

Pankaj Jha

Abstract

China has been trying to make serious inroads in the placid waters of the South Pacific, seeking to position itself as a rising power with a global imprint. The South Pacific provides the Beijing a fertile ground for furthering its debt diplomacy and undertaking a larger business of island reclamation, given the fact that climate change threatens many low-lying Pacific islands' submersion in the coming decades. While, China has very effectively countered the global recognition that was initially given to Taiwan as an independent nation in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War, Beijing is facing resistance from select island countries in the South Pacific. In addition, the friction between Fiji and major regional players like Australia and New Zealand, due to the 2006 Fijian military coup and the continued rule of those involved in the junta, created space for China's charm offensive, upon which Beijing plans to capitalize. China has been working on its First and Second Island Chain strategies, and Beijing believes that in the next three decades it will have to develop Third and Fourth Island Chain strategies; in that context, these Pacific islands would be critical supplements to meet those objectives. China, to project itself as a global power, has started looking for military overseas bases, with Djibouti housing the first such installation. Media reports have mentioned Vanuatu as the site for a possible second base, providing Beijing with an installation in close proximity to Guam, American Samoa, and Hawaii. Lastly, China would like to harness resources in the large economic exclusion zones (EEZ) of these islands, as these small nations have neither the resources nor capital to undertake "blue economic" activities—the exploitation and/or preservation of the maritime environment. In such a context, this article outlines Chinese activities and strategic purposes for reaching out to the South Pacific. It will delve into whether there is an impending competition between India and China, which would manifest itself in the South Pacific.

Introduction

The Western countries, primarily European nations and the United States, infused norms related to human rights, democracy, and gender equality to create a template for development, governance, and people's participation in developing

economies. However, China has provided a new alternative through a new template of acceptance that does not interfere in political regimes or governance systems in any country and does not raise questions of human rights, religious freedom, or gender issues as parameters. To a great extent, Beijing prefers authoritarian regimes to further its economic and strategic interests. Over the past decade, China has been making inroads through its Belt and Road Initiative, meant to create captive markets through extensive infrastructure road and port networks through locked loans and financing on Chinese terms. The primary beneficiaries of this project are Asian and African countries, with a few European nations also being recipients. As part of this outreach activity, to further its economic and strategic interests, China ingresses into US and European dominated regions and might challenge their suzerainty in Oceania. Apart from Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea (PNG), the South Pacific has 14 Pacific Island countries (PIC) scattered across the region. The core questions at this juncture are what China's objectives are in this region and whether the recognition of Taiwan is the only factor or there are many other factors that have propelled China's charm offensive in this region. Given the size of market in this region is rather limited, trade is not a significant inducement—but marine resources are.

The three most notable changes that have influenced politics in Oceania have been the antinuclear sentiment, the trend toward independent defense and security policies, and the presence of extraregional powers in the region. The antinuclear sentiment manifested in the breakdown of the defense cooperation between the United States and its ally, New Zealand, and gave birth in the South Pacific to the world's third nuclear-free zone.[1] The biggest challenge for the existing major power matrix has been the increasing interest of China in the region. The core issue that facilitated US dominance in the region has been security and regime stability in the region. However, China's charm offensive has incrementally challenged this status quo.

Since the early 1990s, Beijing has questioned many aspects of the Indo-Pacific collective security system. Over the period of nearly three decades, Chinese leadership has advocated for a unilateral approach, conventionally projected as bilateralism. Beijing has strongly refuted Australian and Japanese proposals such as the East Asian Community and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia, which many consider would-be precursors to a larger multilateral Indo-Pacific security conference. Chinese reservations have been so profound that any multilateral maritime exercise, such as the trilateral Malabar Exercise, which brings together the naval forces of India, Japan, and the United States and excludes China, is seen as an anti-China program. As a result of this diplomatic offensive, institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM Plus), and East Asia Summit have to accede to a certain extent to Chinese demands. Beijing has advocated that any disputes related to China should be resolved bilaterally with the country, as demonstrated by its rejection of international bodies' rulings on the South China Sea situation. China's convenient mute stance on regional arms control issues and disarmament obligations, in contrast to its activism in the United Nations, underlines Beijing's anxieties that the creation of an Indo-Pacific security organization would hamper its extensive regional strategic zone.[2] Hence, China has made diplomatic and economic overtures to the island nations of the South Pacific to promote ties through aid. The strong rebuttal against Western nuclear tests in the past have acted as catalyst. Increasing grievances from the island communities against nuclear testing and such testing's impact on the islands' limited natural resources have compelled these island nations to look for other sources of financial support for infrastructure development, and project-based grants. Beijing's charm offensive was buttressed through loans as comprehensive packages and has lured a few island nations into China's sphere of influence. This situation has created favorable conditions for China to expand its influence in the region. However, Beijing is also seen as a nuclear proliferator and a culprit in global carbon emissions, which indirectly threaten the existence of these islands.

US Air Force photo by SRA Kelsey Tucker

Figure 1. Pacific Angel 18-3 in Vanuatu. US Air Force SSgt Kristen Hill, medical technician with the 152nd Medical Group, Nevada Air National Guard, checks a patient's vitals at Tata Primary and Secondary School during Pacific Angel 18-3 in Luganville, Espiritu Santo Island, Vanuatu, 16 July 2018. US military and partner nation pediatricians saw approximately 200 children at the clinic during the first two days.

Taiwan also factors highly in China's interests in the region. While the recognition of Taiwan by select nations in the South Pacific may not pose much of a threat to China's stature at the international level do to their own low stature in terms of global power, any reduction in Taiwan's acceptance as a nation is a bonus to Chinese diplomacy. Therefore, Beijing's inroads in Oceania have a two-pronged objective. Firstly, to decrease recognition of Taiwan as an independent country among select island nations and increase Beijing's clout in the region where US dominance has gone largely unchallenged. Secondly, the issue of expansion of trade, assistance, and aid has also become the major lynchpin of Chinese diplomacy. In the recent past, the dissonance between the United States and these small island nations of Oceania on the issues of nuclear testing, trade, governance, and human rights violations have created a critical space for China to maneuver its diplomacy and create strategic influence in that geopolitical space. Furthermore, Beijing has always planned for the future and is looking to define the periphery of its Third and Fourth Island Chain strategy when it develops a formidable blue water navy.

China's engagement with the region has a long history. Most studies of Chinese in the South Pacific follow the four-stage evolution of Chinese diasporic communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries delineated by Wang Gungwu in his influential study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Chinese traders in search of commercial opportunities were among the first to venture into the region during this period. Later in the nineteenth century, Chinese indentured servants, who worked mostly for Western companies, spread throughout the region. Then in the early twentieth century, more diverse groups of Chinese immigrants established communities in the islands, maintaining commercial, familial, and other connections to the motherland. Finally, after the 1980s, Chinese involved in the global economy have moved to the region seeking new opportunities. The growing strength of Chinese diaspora across the Southeast Asia (especially, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand) and in Australia and New Zealand has acted as the support system for Chinese inroads in this strategic space.

Historical Backdrop

In the early nineteenth century, China's linkages with the far off South Pacific islands focused on the maritime trading routes, which were seen as natural extensions to China's engagements in Southeast Asia. For the Canton market, traders from North America and Europe (particularly Americans and Brits) explored these small islands for sea slugs (*beche-de-mer*), sandalwood, and other exotic products.[3] The British East India Company, which was active in the Indian subcontinent, began to export opium through "free traders," while compelling traders all

over the Pacific to look for pearls, spices, and other rare goods to purchase tea at Chinese markets. The sandalwood from these Pacific islands had a huge demand.[4]

In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries, European imperial powers employed indentured laborers from China's Guangdong province to toil in the plantations of French Tahiti, Samoa, German New Guinea, and other islands throughout Oceania. The relocation pattern was similar to that of Southeast Asia, with an initial influx of indentured laborers followed by unrestricted immigrants, who found economic vocations as artisans, carpenters, small traders, and merchants in these colonial economies. From the copra plantations of Western Samoa to the phosphate mines of Nauru and the trade stores of New Guinea, the Chinese played an important role in the region's economic development.[5] The indentured workers supported plantations and sugarcane cultivation in the region. French Polynesia suspended this system in 1872, and, as a result, the plantations were deserted and buildings abandoned. With the expiry of their contracts, many Chinese laborers returned to their homeland.[6] Miners found valuable metal ores such as nickel, chrome, and iron in French New Caledonia in the early 1880s. This discovery led to sudden spurt in demand for low-cost labor, as the convict laborers could not meet the rising demands. In 1884, the Société le Nickel mining company gave contracts to 165 Chinese laborers hailing from Macao. However, these contractors soon returned to their country because of adverse conditions.[7]

During the imperialistic rule, the Nationalist government of China had established consulates on a few PICs. Their first two consulates were in Apia, Samoa, and Suva, Fiji, to address concerns of indentured Chinese workers. Later, the Kuomintang party opened overseas branches in New Guinea and Fiji. During the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Chinese communities living in these PICs raised funds for their homeland. Chinese immigrant community preserved their political and cultural links with their native land. Meanwhile, the Australians in New Guinea and New Zealanders living in Western Samoa put curbs on Chinese immigration. These two regimes compelled mandatory repatriation of Chinese workers when work contracts expired. In areas such as Western Samoa, intermarriage between Chinese and indigenous peoples was a catalyst toward closer identification with native interests.[8] In the next century, the Pacific Islanders witnessed both competition and convergence between domestic and Chinese immigrant communities.

With the rise of People's Republic of China (PRC) in the early 1950s and in the wake of the subsequent Cultural Revolution, Chinese foreign policy promoted aid and assistance, buttressing Beijing's renewed interest in the South Pacific. This interest was highlighted in 1985 with the visit of Hu Yaobang, then–Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party, visited Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, New Guinea, and Western Samoa. Hu Qili, member of the Standing Committee

of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party, accompanied Hu Yaobang. Hu Qili was a close confidante of the General Secretary, Zhao Ziyang, who enjoyed strong support during the 13th Party Congress held in November 1987. Chinese aid to Western Samoa was primarily aimed at extending the international airport and turning taro (a starchy root crop with high nutritional value) into an export commodity. The United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union had been conservative in deputing ambassadors to this region and had resident ambassadors in Australia and New Zealand. In contrast, China stationed its diplomats in Fiji, PNG, and Western Samoa along with Australia and New Zealand. Thus, China had taken pioneering efforts to compete, albeit to a modest extent, with the other aid donors in extending its presence in the region.[9]

With the end of the Cold War, the United States reduced its association with Oceania but maintained its presence in select islands such as Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. China incrementally increased its own engagement. New evolving geopolitics between the major powers and the microstates of this region may have consequences for international security.[10] Beijing is integrating the Pacific islands into China's broader mission to become a major power with expanded strategic space beyond its adjoining oceans. Oceania might not become the epicenter of major power competition, but the region might be a congenial ground for China to establish footholds of influence, engage new allies, and command allegiance in a region historically dominated by the Western powers.[11]

China's long-term goal is to ultimately challenge the United States as the preeminent power in the Pacific Ocean. For the PICs, the strategy is to wave the "China card" so as to revive Western interest and ensure sustained aid payments. As a result, one cannot presume that Oceania will remain as the "American lake."[12] Since 2010, the United States has closed its diplomatic missions in Samoa and the Solomon Islands. Furthermore, Washington pulled out aid offices from Fiji and PNG, while also reducing US government scholarships and other financial assistance to the PICs. Meanwhile, US policy makers seemed oblivious of China's increasing influence in Oceania. Most PICs such as Fiji, Vanuatu, and Samoa view Beijing's growing role in Oceania with favor rather than fear.[13] From 2013–2018, China has hosted the leaders of PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Tonga, Kiribati, and Timor-Leste. It has increasingly seemed that any new head of government from the region prefers traveling to Beijing for their first official overseas visit rather than venture to Canberra, Washington, or Wellington.[14]

A major challenge facing China's continued economic growth is geography: it has a large landmass but a relatively small coastline. To overcome this constraint, China has created new islands in the South China Sea and has been scouting for

bases or civilian engagement in countries such as Maldives, Vanuatu, Fiji, and many other PICs. The Chinese objective in PICs is nuanced and based on statecraft and checkbook diplomacy.

China's Political Objectives in South Pacific

Historically, Taiwan has maintained diplomatic relations with six PICs—Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu. As a result, the PRC still faces diplomatic obstacles in the South Pacific.[15] As the two Asian contenders, China and Taiwan, have grown, their rivalry has escalated as the struggle for resources has increased. This multiplied in the South Pacific diplomatic space. The small PICs have nurtured this geopolitical rivalry, as they have gained considerably from cross-strait frictions. the situation has helped PICs to secure development assistance and project grants, thereby supplementing their finite resources. China's growth complemented its diplomatic offensive, an accomplishment Taiwan cannot match—and the gap is going to get bigger. These factors could weigh prominently in the diplomatic recognition equation. China has the economic capacity and development prowess to supplement the PICs' development aspirations; on its own, Taiwan does not.[16] This rivalry has a long history.

The PICs' independence between the late 1960s to early 1980s triggered Sino-Taiwanese diplomatic rivalry in the region. The PRC's ascension to China's permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC), displacing Taiwan, gave Beijing a decisive advantage in this competition. Beijing's sway in the UN, including the ability to veto UNSC motions, was instrumental in establishing diplomatic ties with PNG. Taiwan remained relevant because of its status as an Asian Tiger economy during the 1970s and 1980s. This helped Taipei in charming several PICs, thereby partially offsetting China's bigger international footprint. For example, Taiwan established diplomatic ties with the Solomon Islands, relying on Taipei's ability to offer attractive economic incentives. Such economic pursuits helped Taiwan to gain recognition from four PICs: Tonga, Nauru, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu. On the other hand, the PRC gained diplomatic acceptance from PNG, Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati, and Vanuatu.[17]

Taiwan offered economic incentives in terms of aid and assistance in kind to win diplomatic recognition. A major goal of this diplomacy was to reclaim Taiwan's UN membership, which it had lost to the PRC in 1971.[18] Taiwan achieved initial success, with the inauguration of an official trade mission in Fiji in 1971. Later, Taipei also institutionalized nonresident diplomatic relations with Tonga and Western Samoa in 1972. However, US president Richard Nixon's historic 1972 trip to Beijing compelled Australia and New Zealand to establish ties with China. Still, in 1973, Taipei welcomed Western Samoan and Tongan prime min-

isters for visits focusing on development assistance programs. In June 1975, Taiwan established its resident embassy in Tonga.[19]

Diplomatic rivalry between Beijing and Taipei continued even during the decolonization process in the South Pacific in the 1970s and early 1980s. Taiwan established diplomatic relations with Tuvalu, Nauru, and the Solomon Islands. China subsequently established diplomatic links with Kiribati and Vanuatu. The two Chinas applied "visit diplomacy" to advance personal links with island leadership. High-level courtesy was rendered to visitors from these islands. Since the mid-1970s, the list of islanders who have made official visits to Beijing included those from Vanuatu, Fiji, PNG, Kiribati, and Western Samoa. Micronesian president Tosiwo Nakayama undertook an unofficial visit to China in 1987.[20] However, Taiwan's assistance policy to PICs paid long-term dividends. Tuvalu's support for Taiwan was extended for a yearly payment of about $0.25 million for 10 years. In 1998, the Marshall Island established full bilateral relations with Taiwan, which even with the transition of government in 1999 saw continued.[21] In 1997, the Samoan government, which favored China, suspected Taiwan of fomenting trouble, accusing Taipei of financing antigovernment marches. Taipei rejected allegations of shady financial support for such political rallies and blamed the Samoan government for the island's internal problems.[22] However, in 1998, Taiwan had to withdraw its ambassador to the Solomon Islands. There were similar allegations that Taipei had "enticed" two opposition legislators to support the government. The Taiwanese government had provided substantial financial funding to the overthrown government and, in return, garnered diplomatic backing. Following May 2000, with the overthrow of the elected government in the Solomon Islands, the militia-backed regime's foreign minister traveled to China to secure financial assistance from Beijing. However, the Solomon Islands remained in the Taiwanese camp in return for an improved aid package and even deliberated upon the offer to dump Taiwan's nuclear and industrial waste on some of the nation's remote islands.[23] In 1999 and 2000, China leveraged its position on the UNSC to postpone, instead of veto, Nauru's and Tuvalu's applications to join the United Nations, respectively, largely because both countries had extended diplomatic recognition to Taiwan.[24]

Photo by Brian Hartigan, Australian Federal Police

Figure 2. Help a friend. Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and Royal Solomon Islands Police patrol Honiara waterfront. Solomon Islands, 2003. Following years of unrest in the Solomon Islands, a sizable international security contingent of more than 2,000 police and troops, led by Australia and New Zealand and with representatives from six other PICs arrived in summer 2003 to help restore security. RAMSI, as the force was known, ended its mission in 2017.

This Sino-Taiwanese friction in the South Pacific changed with Taipei's transition toward greater democracy. During the presidential tenure of Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan moved closer to independence and abandoned Taipei's previous policy that dictated Taiwan would only establish ties with countries that have no relations with Beijing. According to Taiwan specialist Joel Atkinson, "This 'New Taiwan' continued to seek diplomatic recognition from the Pacific islands, but as a state separate from that controlled by the government in Beijing. It would also become interested in acquiring increments of recognition, such as permission for presidential flight stopovers."[25] The rivalry between Taiwan and the PRC has created both benefits and problems; for example, the "two Chinas" friction restrained the South Pacific Forum (precursor to the Pacific Islands Forum) from expanding its annual dialogue by inviting extraregional powers. In this sense, the China factor is a potentially divisive issue within the framework of South Pacific regional cooperation, which is based on consensus.[26] China has also opted for other means to expand its presence in the region, and aid serves as a form of benign and legitimate involvement in South Pacific affairs.

China's Aid Diplomacy in Oceania

The new rising powers in global politics have become important in the regional strategic equations. China has been one of the beneficiaries. This accommodation,

or in other words *enmeshment*, is at the structural level, which starts from smaller powers to middle powers (or "secondary states")[27] and subsequently becomes part of great-power policy. Small powers in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia have started accommodating the rise of China. South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, New Zealand, and Australia have shifted toward an accommodation strategy. Each nation calibrates its engagement with China, "combining containment, engagement and hedging strategies in myriad ways."[28] Taking into cognizance the developments, the smaller island states in Oceania are looking for economic advantages but are also wary of Chinese inroads into their economies. Nations like PNG have witnessed anti-Chinese riots in the past. Despite that, China has been undertaking significant endeavors to win over these small nation states.

Chinese investments in social goods, such as infrastructure in PNG and many other nations, have been appreciated, but there were apprehensions related to large influxes of Chinese entrepreneurs and laborers tied to such ventures. These so-called "new Chinese" have faced problems assimilating into their host nations' national fabrics because of culture, language, and social differences, often concentrating on profiteering instead of integrating with the local community. The PNG government granted concessions to the Chinese companies through tax holidays and indemnities. There have been concerns about the Chinese companies in PNG exploiting resources in a fashion akin to similar situations in Africa—reminiscent of such exploitation under colonial rule.[29] The 2006 China-Pacific Islands summit meeting in Suva underlined the significance of Southwest Pacific for China.[30] The South Pacific is identical to the developing world with regard to corruption and relatively less advanced in terms of quality controls of imported goods. Taiwan's aid money has been noteworthy in the internal politics related to the Solomon Islands crisis. In 2003 China-Taiwan competition cast a shadow on the domestic dynamics of Kiribati. However, this island remains relatively stable in the region. The new government has shown its resolve with the termination of its ties with Beijing, despite hosting China's satellite tracking facility at Tarawa.[31]

In current trends in Indo-Pacific security, China projects strategic strength and, in a way, challenges American hegemony in the region. While one must not make unnecessary assumptions about future projections for China's progress, Beijing's initiatives demonstrate China does have real interest in addressing external difficulties. For China, resource acquisition is an objective of foreign policy. However, sensitivity and concerns over China's military modernization, along with Beijing's assertive posture, raise concerns about the South China Sea and even the South Pacific.[32] Still, China's economic clout and aid program have seen few PICs gravitating toward Beijing's camp. Between 2006 and 2011, China doled out USD 850 million in bilateral aid to the eight PICs with which it has diplomatic

relations. Chinese aid is valued for its quick responsiveness, flexibility, and concentration on priority projects and unrepresented sectors. As a donor, China caters to the political ambitions of the Pacific leaders, who have, in turn, become more open about their relationships with China and, in veiled reference, stated that Australia is not the only regional power upon which Pacific leaders can rely. These leaders also boast of China's big-heartedness, hoping for more financial support from traditional aid donors.[33] According to Philippa Brant of the Lowy Institute, "Chinese aid helps these countries build much-needed infrastructure, from the National Medical Centre in Samoa, to water pipes in the Cook Islands, to university dormitories in Goroka, Papua New Guinea. China stepped up its engagement in 2006 when it held the first China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, pledging increased funding to the eight countries with which it has diplomatic relations."[34] Since 2006, China has given aid to the tune of USD 1.479 billion for 169 projects across the South Pacific.[35] Beijing has promised a total USD 5.9 billion, or nearly one-third of all aid pledged to the region's 14 countries by 62 donors.[36]

Nonetheless, concerns about China should not be over exaggerated as Australia has been the region's core security guarantor and its main source of aid, trade, and investment. Australia provides 62 percent of total bilateral aid through Development Assistance Committee donors to the region, representing 37 percent of its total aid budget (2009–2011).[37] Australia's dominance in percentage terms exceeds even that of the United States in the Middle East, where America provides 51 percent of the total bilateral official development aid received. For Australia, China's development assistance should be viewed not as a threat but as an opportunity. Australia's dominance in the region means that it is in a strong position to work with China for the sake of good development outcomes and to strengthen its bilateral relationship with Asia's rising power.[38] However, within Australia, there have been apprehensions about Beijing's objectives for these aids and grants apart from diplomatically leading regional states to withdraw recognition of Taiwan as an independent nation.

First and foremost, Australian cooperation with China will support PICs' efforts to exploit the development impact of Chinese assistance. China has instituted the China-Pacific Islands Economic Development and Cooperation Forum to cater to the needs of the Pacific nations. Furthermore, the Commonwealth and Pacific Island Forum suspended Fiji's membership in 2009 in response to the military dictatorship of Frank Bainimarama. This compelled Bainimarama to support an alternate forum known as the Pacific Island Development Forum in 2013, which garnered the support of eight PICs and China. Still, China's South-South cooperation approach suffers a trust deficit. Chinese aid is focused on se-

lective infrastructure projects with either no real development value or China-specific utility. For example, in Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, China has undertaken projects that have obligated these islands to join the China-controlled Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Observers often cite Chinese soft loans as responsible for raising the levels of national indebtedness. Chinese companies' along with immigrant labor in the Pacific Islands contributes to social tensions.[39] China has indicated that it is willing to engage in a collaborative approach to development in the region. Brant states, "The South Pacific boasts the world's first trilateral project involving China and a traditional donor—the jointly funded water improvement project between New Zealand and China in the Cooks Islands. The April 2013 Australia China development cooperation partnership memorandum of understanding (MOU) provides an important signal about collaboration with Australia. The MOU has resulted in Australian and Chinese experience-sharing activities in Papua New Guinea to fight malaria."[40] Given the fact that China would like to encroach into strategic waters, it seems likely Beijing would seek cooperation before asserting itself in the region.

China's Extended Reach: Signature of a Rising Power

The Australian government has carefully calibrated its statements and speeches to avoid being caught in a future conflict between the United States—Canberra's traditional security ally—and China, with whom Australia has rapidly growing economic relations, by promoting adherence to collective security and mediating through cooperative security discourse. Then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal to explore ways to forge an "Asia-Pacific Community" (APC) in June 2008 was a precursor to Australia's hard choices in the future. Rudd envisioned the APC as the means to build an institutional structure that would enmesh China and the United States to address security and economic agendas.[41] However, China did not endorse the proposal, and subsequent Austrian administrations have taken different courses.

China's outreach to PICs has its own share of problems. In the past, the local populations have resented Chinese encroachment in social and economic life. Chinese immigrant populations have never challenged the political dominance of indigenous peoples as the Indian population did in Fiji, but Chinese commercial success has often been a source of resentment and flashpoint for confrontation. John Henderson and Benjamin Reilly provide examples: "In Fiji recently, the trade union movement condemned the hiring of 900 Chinese garment workers, with union leaders complaining that the influx of Chinese immigrants had depressed wages, work conditions and employment opportunities. In 1998, a leading figure in the Tongan pro-democracy movement, Akilisi Pohiva, claimed that Chi-

nese immigrants were costing Tongans work opportunities and causing 'economic, political, social and moral problems.' In late 2000, several hundred Chinese shopkeepers and their families were ordered out of Tonga 'for their own protection.'"[42]

Given that China aspires to develop a blue water navy and seeks markets and resources to remain at the top of the manufacturing ladder, it is possible that China will provide lucrative loans and aid to keep these PICs on its side. However, increasing Chinese footprints in the region would mean that Australia and New Zealand as well as the United States would find themselves with less strategic maneuverability. Further, the regional multilateral institutions might find that major power rivalry can help them derive benefits both in terms of military assistance and economic aid playing one side against the other in much the same fashion other states did during the Cold War. In many of the PICs, it has been seen that regime change often follows in the wake of foreign funded coups or even small grants given to particular factions within the ruling elite. Beijing and Washington have both employed this tool in the past. However, the issues related to climate change, nuclear testing, and increased exploitation of natural and oceanic resources might put the major powers in a tight situation. The small states' consortium would also like to protect its EEZ and exploit it in a manner by which their own future generations can thrive rather than providing for the benefit of larger powers. Further, rising sea levels might force these island communities to look for relationships that would help provide their populations with migration prospects should relocation become necessary. In this regard China, the United States, and Japan have their disadvantages. For PICs, the only countries that can provide habitat would be nearby countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, PNG, and Indonesia. Many citizens of the PICs have easy visa norms and access to the United States, but for Asian societies, accommodating PIC citizens would be a political issue. The other option for easy migration could be Canada.

The Second and Third Island Chain strategy of China covers the whole of the South Pacific and completely challenges US control in the larger parts of the Pacific through American bases in Guam and Okinawa. China's offshore bases initiative have seen China opening a naval base in Djibouti very close to the preexisting US base. Furthermore, Chinese initiatives with regard to Vanuatu and Fiji and assistance programs in Samoa do have strategic imprints. China has a satellite monitoring station in the region, and Beijing is scouting for a similar facility in Vanuatu—and reportedly, a naval base as well. The satellite monitoring station would help the country in monitoring India and many other countries' launches and positioning of systems in space.

Conclusion

China has deep pockets, and the PICs have financial aid requirements. While Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as other European powers such as Britain and France, will have a say in the affairs of the region, China has inserted itself into the geopolitical balance. Beijing is trying slowly and methodically to create dependent states in the region that might serve as the destinations for Chinese travelers and the strategic waters for the Chinese navy to expand its reach. China is emulating the Soviet example from the Cold War era, when the USSR sent its submarine to these Pacific waters for patrolling and surveillance. Further, China feels that these PIC economies might not be that important in economic terms but strategically relevant as an extension of the South China Sea in this region would bestow China with greater maneuvering space. China's willingness to extend credit to the PICs for infrastructure projects might provide the economic lifeline these nations' economies need to protect their living spaces. Furthermore, China seeks to steer the microstates allegiance away from Taiwan and the West, hoping to convince them to join Beijing's designs or, at the least, not impede with its core interests in the region. Four of the six PICs are due for elections in 2019, and China fervently hopes that the new governments in these four islands will withdraw their nations' recognition of Taiwan as an independent country. Given the fact that China does have multiple reasons to stay in the South Pacific, Beijing would like to consolidate and maintain its presence in these waters. The problem is the ambivalent attitude of the United States and its allies and increased intervention regarding democratic governance and human rights, which might not resonate in the minds of the leaders of these islands. ✪

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FEATURE

Bringing Balance to the Strategic Discourse on China's Rise

Jared Morgan McKinney
Nicholas Butts

Introduction

"When you perceive a truth, look for a balancing truth," Lord Acton once observed.[1] If the United States is going to properly understand—and wisely respond to—China's rise, nothing is more needed than the prudent application of Acton's dictum. The truth American pundits and policy makers are now perceiving is that China's rise is not ephemeral: there is no imminent Chinese "collapse" or "crackup" and the nation is not about to democratize. Consequently, America's era of unchallenged unipolarity has ended. This is all perfectly true; recognizing this truth is the necessary first step in thinking seriously about international politics in the twenty-first century.

The problem is that American discourse on China, as Michael Swaine has recently observed, is increasingly resembling the "paranoid style" described more than half a century ago by the historian Richard Hofstadter.[2] The tendency of this style is to begin with accepted facts and then shift to a much more radical position without ever justifying the leap. During the Cold War, the tendency—as John F. Kennedy observed in a 1963 address—was to note the Soviet Union's vicious ideas and practices and then, making the jump, conclude that peace was "useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude."[3] In the present instance, having decided China's rise is real and that the nation has not been "socialized" to the extent desired by many, American elected officials, military officers, and civilian strategists now warn that the whole international order is threatened, that China wants to—or even, soon will—"dominate" East Asia, and that freedom and justice may be extinguished. The only thing that stands in the way of these grim outcomes is American power and resolve. Both must be boosted, we are told, to maintain America's unipolarity and keep the "Rising Dragon" from burning down the benevolent structures that enable the current order.

It makes for a nice story—the unambiguous kind that is useful for winning votes, reassuring yourself of your own righteousness, and boosting military budgets. However, it is out of balance and, in some cases, borders on the paranoid. This article seeks to bring balance to the discussion. To do so, we challenge a series of assertions made by two respectable and influential figures: America's Ambas-

sador to South Korea, Admiral (Ret.) Harry B. Harris Jr.; and Aaron L. Friedberg, a professor at Princeton and former official in the George W. Bush administration. We then seek to bring balance to the discussion by reflecting on two ideas that have almost been pushed outside the realm of respectful discourse: first, the time has come—to put a twist on Dr. Strangelove—to stop worrying and love the balance of power, and second, we need to (once again) "make the world safe for diversity." These two moves, we contend, are the most promising ways to preserve the most important elements of the existing international order that have benefited both China and the United States so much.

The essay proceeds by challenging the two great assumptions of contemporary discourse: that international peace is dependent on American primacy and that China is unambiguously seeking to undermine the existing international order. We then redirect the conversation to the salient features of contemporary international relations (nukes, norms, nationalism, defensive dominance, and globalization), arguing that these realities are more fundamental than any discussion about intentions. Finally, we outline an alternative: an emerging order regulated by balance and preserved by diversity.

Myths of the Reigning Hegemon

One of the most repeated ideas in international affairs discourse today is that after World War II the United States created a "free and open international order" and that this order has been responsible for keeping the Indo-Pacific "largely peaceful" for the last 80 years.[4] China is then typically said to be promoting a vision "incompatible" with this order—something that should make us worry, as it may herald the return of violent power politics.[5] Michael Lind has summarized the perspective: "in my experience, most members of the U.S. foreign policy elite sincerely believe that the alternative to perpetual U.S. world domination is chaos and war."[6]

It is indeed true that the years since World War II have been peaceful when compared with most of European history and that violence of all kinds has declined.[7] This phenomenon has been dubbed the "New Peace," and the United States certainly played some role in bringing it about.[8] However, there is no consensus among scholars to what extent US actions—or more abstractly, the supposed "order"—contributed to the decline in war and violence. Existing academic explanations stress the role of nuclear weapons restraining states from major war;[9] the evolution of territorial norms (as well as regimes and institutions, like the United Nations);[10] the development of globalized markets and "trading states";[11] the longer-term spread of reason, sympathy, and feminization alongside the rise of stronger states;[12] the settlement of territorial disputes after World War II;[13] the spread of democracies;[14] the declining utility of war as a rational instrument of

statecraft;[15] and hegemonic stability, which emphasizes (in its liberal form) how the United States helped create global institutions and shape norms[16] and (in its "realist" form) how US power has deterred or compelled rivals to behave.[17]

This is not the place to judge between the various explanations, but it should be clear that they are diverse and the overall explanation is likely multivariate. Only the realist version of hegemonic stability directly supports the narrative of the free and open international order. Christopher Fettweis has recently sought to test the theory by looking at the changing pattern of global peace/violence relative to US military spending, frequency of intervention, and selection of grand strategy across four presidential administrations (Bush Sr. to Obama). He found no relationship at all. "As it stands," he concluded, "the only evidence we have regarding the relationship between US power and international stability suggests that the two are unrelated."[18] If US officials and strategic pundits are going to claim that peace is dependent on an abstract *order* created *and maintained* by American power, they need to provide serious evidence for their claims. Until then, while we can be thankful that the United States contributed to postwar institutions like the United Nations, helped delegitimize colonialism, and did not abuse its power (as much) as many other states would have, policy makers and scholars should be highly skeptical of more sweeping claims.

Laying aside the question of how the New Peace came about, another oft repeated notion is that China is determined to undermine the contemporary international order, according to Friedberg, by corrupting, subverting, and exploiting it.[19] The proof for this claim is generally said to be China's "militarization" of the South China Sea (SCS) through "salami-slicing" and "grey-zone tactics,"[20] and occasionally, a retired Chinese official or *Global Times* commentator is quoted as representative of China's official (even if unarticulated) policy and intentions.

In the abstract, such claims are alarming—in context, and in balance, rather humdrum. In fact, the evidence of any Chinese intention to destroy, or even merely undermine and exploit, the current order is slight. China is certainly using its growing military power to defend its claims in the SCS and even—on occasion—to coerce its neighbors. It uses protectionist economic policies to boost the prospects of Chinese companies and reduce competition. It employs economic statecraft to serve its interests abroad. And it certainly is opposed to America's policy of global democracy promotion. However, none of these positions fundamentally challenge the existing order, none of them radically depart from America's own actions when it was a rising power in the nineteenth century, and none of them obviously surpass America's own contemporary record of order subversion.

When the United States was a rising power, it took half of Mexico and considered taking the rest, it colonized the Philippines and Hawaii, and it unilaterally

seized the maritime choke points of the Caribbean (Puerto Rico and Cuba).[21] The United States used tariffs—which by 1857 averaged 20 percent[22] and by the end of the nineteenth century were "the highest import duties in the industrial world"[23]—to protect its industries. It stole intellectual property,[24] and it ideologically challenged the governments of the "Old World." Today, despite no longer being a rising power, the United States has launched two disastrous invasions, tortured prisoners, and dispatches drone strikes at a whim with little international legal authority.[25] The point is not that two wrongs make a right; it is that international order is much more resilient than critics seem to realize,[26] and it is utopian to expect any rising Great Power to act in a way that uniformly satisfies one's moral scruples, evolving, in Friedberg's words, "into a mellow, satisfied, 'responsible' status quo power."[27]

Friedberg or Harris might object that America's rise took place in the context of a different order. This is perfectly true, but the more important point is that the long nineteenth century (1815–1914)—the era of America's rise—was the first iteration of the New Peace.[28] The implication is that relative peace can and has coexisted with limited wars, property and territorial thefts, acts of coercion, and aggressive assertions of status. This does not mean any of these are desirable—they are not—but it shows that they need not be fatal to the system. Insofar as there is a lesson from that first period of relative peace, it is that Great Power confrontation is the one thing that is fatal. Accepting this does not mean capitulating in every instance, as implied by some,[29] but it does mean rediscovering the rules of Great Power competition[30] alongside the art of strategy.[31]

Focusing only on areas that China's rise violates the scruples of the established powers, moreover, downplays the extent to which China, has, in fact, conformed to the existing order. As a RAND Corporation report published in 2018 concludes, China has been a supporter—albeit a conditional one—of the international order: "Since China undertook a policy of international engagement in the 1980s . . . the level and quality of its participation in the order rivals that of most other states."[32] The way in which Xi Jinping, following his 2017 Davos speech in defense of globalization, has been heralded as the most prominent champion of international order and defender of globalization underscores the fact that there are different elements of this order, and that China supports many, if not most, of them. Even in places where China is supposedly "altering" the current order, Beijing tends to simultaneously affirm that order. China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, for instance, actually mirrors existing structures, and China has intentionally copied elements and "best practices" of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. China is playing the same game, even if it is seeking a bigger role within it.[33]

Photo by US Mission Korea

Figure 1. Ambassador Harris. Ambassador Harry Harris meets with South Korean prime minister Lee Nak-yeon, a former Korean Augmentation To the United States Army (KATUSA) soldier, at the Fifth Korea–US Alliance Forum. The Korea–US Alliance Foundation and the Korea Defense Veterans Association cohosted the forum in July 2019.

To the contrary—Admiral Harris declares—China has a "dream of hegemony in Asia,"[34] in which it seeks economically to draw the region's states into a "China-centred Eurasian 'co-prosperity sphere'"[35] and militarily to "dominate East Asia," beginning with the SCS.[36] Such rhetoric has become the standard geopolitical interpretation of China's rise.[37] The implication—usually left unstated—is alarming: if China were to succeed, it could use the region as a base "perhaps even to attack the United States itself."[38] Alternatively, Ely Ratner declares, "uncontested Chinese dominance" to be the "biggest threat facing the United States . . . in Asia today."[39]

Purveyors of the coming Chinese domination and/or hegemony rarely define their terms. The best they often manage is some dark reference to Nazi Germany, Imperial Germany, or Imperial Japan, as Friedberg does above with the phrase "co-prosperity sphere." Hence we are often left with argument by aspersion, or—at best—by analogy, but reams of political science and cognitive science research have demonstrated how analogical reasoning typically is used as an alternative to serious thought and often, when left on its own, leads to poor decision making.[40] Balanced thinking about China's rise has to do better than this.

China's intentions and dreams entirely aside, the nature of contemporary international relations and the geopolitical realities of Asia and East Asia make "dominance" and "hegemony"—both taken in the sense of imperial or borderline-imperial control over other sovereign states and territories—impossible.[41] Nuclear weapons, norms, nationalism, defensive dominance, and globalization all tell a different story.[42]

Imperial dominance/hegemony, long a feature of states systems—from Hatti's conquest of Mitanni in the mid-fourteenth century BCE in the Ancient Near East to Japan's conquest of much of China and indeed Asia from 1937 to 1945—has ceased to be possible today among major states because of nuclear weapons, what Edward Luttwak calls "the irremovably extant court of appeal against an adverse verdict in the lower court of non-nuclear warfare."[43] Of course, not all states have nuclear weapons—even though some, like Japan, could acquire them easily—but here the other features of the modern era intercede.

Since the World War II, a powerful norm against taking territory through force has developed,[44] and any state that dares violate this norm in a significant way risks delegitimization and sanctions. Territory is no longer available just for the taking, with "souls" to be redistributed as needed. Even were China to violate this norm, the only thing waiting for it would be a bloody and likely unsuccessful insurgency, because we live in an age of nationalism,[45] in which citizens will fight to defend their state from occupation, as the United States discovered in Vietnam and Iraq, and the Soviets found in Afghanistan.[46] One might respond that, despite this norm, Russia annexed Crimea anyway, while China continues to maintain its claims in the SCS even after the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration dismissed notable elements of Beijing's legal case. However, neither aberration undermines the larger point. Putin's Russia—which seeks "controlled chaos," sustains itself through energy and arms exports and dismisses globalization as an elite conspiracy[47]—has much less to lose economically and in the court of public opinion than China, whose successful rise depends on integration in the regional and global economy.[48] As for the SCS disputes, they have already hurt China's reputation in the region, acting as a "curse" limiting the potential of China's aspirations to lead the region.[49]

At the same time, the response to China's assertiveness in the SCS has not been more drastic for the simple reason that the disputes are of limited importance—no states or peoples are at risk of being conquered—the result of the convoluted legacy of imperialism and World War II,[50] and have been handled by China recently with relative equanimity. The states of the region, including the various disputants, seem to recognize this in a way the United States does not, which explains why, despite the occasional episode of cheap talk, regional defense spending relative to GDP remains stable.[51]

Statistical data, internal Chinese documents, and interviews—in other words, the best open source evidence available—indicate China has acted assertively when it believed its resolve was in question, responding to other claimants' perceived provocations (such as oil exploration or island fortification)[52] or the relative weakness of China's own position though intense busts of activity (such as land

reclamation in the Spratlys in 2013 to 2015) shaped by perceived closing windows of opportunity.[53] Even those who might disagree with this assessment should recognize that China actually used lethal action to secure its claims in 1974[54] and 1988,[55] and already—still in the era defined by Deng's call for China to keep a low profile[56]—was accused of using "slicing of the salami tactics" in response to its 1995 occupation of Mischief Reef.[57] That the dispute has been conducted with no, or minimal, lethal violence since—despite China's increasingly strong military position—is a development that likely signifies China's interest in limiting the strength of the SCS's curse.

The geography of East Asia, furthermore, is a "tough neighborhood for hegemons," as US Naval War College professor James Holmes has remarked.[58] These seas do not have any dominant features that would make strong naval outposts. Moreover, in the event of a regional war, defensive strategies and tactics today have a decisive advantage: China's "base" on Fiery Cross Reef could easily be turned into a literal fiery cross by over-the-horizon use of precision-guided munitions, which are becoming increasingly cheap and prevalent.[59] Lt Gen Kenneth McKenzie (US Marine Corps), director of the Joint Staff, has recently said as much.[60] Detailed strategic analyses going back 70 years have judged control of the islets to be a "minor" issue absent overall sea control.[61] However, this is precisely what the islets make difficult today, for their true potential is as platforms for small units of soldiers armed with antiship cruise missiles and antiair launchers. A recent RAND study suggested that a network of ground-launched systems could potentially shut the entire SCS down in a contingency.[62] China is likely to acquire this antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) capability in the SCS, but the key point is that other claimants can too.[63] In other words, the geostrategic situation is one where balance, not dominance, is the favored outcome.

What about economic hegemony and coercion? The evidence here is still developing, but so far, as Robert Ross has recently argued with special reference to Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia, "China's rising asymmetric economic power does not generate strategic accommodation by East Asia's economically dependent small states."[64] The reason for this is, according to Ross, that economic power just is not very fungible, while the regional economic order, in which the United States is heavily invested, remains bipolar. As Luttwak argued now seven years ago, it is "inevitable" that states will hedge their economic bets.[65] This is a natural response, and globalization facilitates it.

So, what then of the alarming predictions of coming Chinese dominance? There is no reason to give serious credence to such projections, even if the Chinese government did "dream of hegemony," an assertion that itself remains unproven.

The nature of contemporary international relations and the geopolitics of East Asia make any such outcome singularly implausible.

In sum, there is little reason to believe that the New Peace is dependent on American dominance, that such peace is threatened by China's rise, or that China is a uniquely disruptive state. To the contrary, China has conformed—and is conforming—to the international order in its most important aspects and in a manner at least as convincing as the United States a century ago; even if China were to seek to dominate East or Southeast Asia through territorial conquest or economic coercion, the almost certain outcome—the result of nationalism, defensive dominance, norms, and globalization—would be a grotesque fiasco. That being said, China clearly has its own interests, some of which diverge from the status quo; quite naturally, it is pursuing them. Can these be restrained and checked without provoking a new Cold War or a quest for dominance?

The Alternative: Balance, not Dominance

Both Harris and Friedberg clearly believe the United States needs to work to maintain a favorable balance of power. A *favorable balance of power* is, in fact, no balance at all; the phrase is newspeak for ensuring there is *not* a balance of power. Instead, Harris and Friedberg, and other such analysts, insist the United States should maintain predominance, supremacy, hegemony, leadership, unipolarity, and so forth. For these analysts, a *balance* of power is highly undesirable and perhaps even *unimaginable*. Thus, the title of Friedberg's book: *A Contest for Supremacy*.[66]

In fact, the supremacy perspective ignores much of what we know about states systems. During the long nineteenth century (1815–1914), for instance, Europe's powers were able to experience a period of relative peace precisely because they accepted a balance of power in combination with a long-term systems perspective and a commitment to coexistence and cooperation.[67] By abandoning the quest for supremacy and settling their territorial disputes, these states facilitated the most peaceful era in all modern European history.[68]

A balance requires compromise and reciprocity: no longer will one state (the United States) get to dictate the terms. This will be a painful transition for a formerly unipolar power highly susceptible to nationalism and moralism in international relations.[69] In practice, as Michael Swaine, Hugh White, Patrick Porter, and Lyle Goldstein have all argued, this will require transitioning from a sea-control/offensive dominance model (exemplified by the AirSea Battle concept, now renamed Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons) to a sea-denial/defensive model based on mutual deterrence.[70] Along the way, understandings will have to be reached (or reiterated) over Taiwan; freedom of

navigation; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations; and the region's territorial disputes.[71]

Even as China's influence and military power continue to grow in East Asia, as they will, the United States can increasingly focus, as James Kurth has argued, on regional accommodation *and* global balancing, particularly in the Eastern Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region, where America has geographical advantages.[72] Even if Chinese power someday does become predominant in China's neighboring seas, American power will remain predominant in the great bodies of water to the East and West, allowing an equilibrium to be maintained and, if needed, a system of tit-for-tat deterrence established. This reality is recognized by the Pentagon's new branding of the *Asia-Pacific* as the *Indo-Pacific*: the game is larger than just East Asia, and it includes more than just two players. As Luttwak has commented, "Independent states will by all possible means resist losing their independence."[73] As the game progresses, the response of these states will be strongly influenced by perceptions of Chinese benignity.

Even as US strategy ought to be reoriented to a *balance* of power, US discourse needs to be transformed from the *ideological clash* model now fashionable—Harris, for example, tells us that "freedom and justice" depend on the United States maintaining its military superiority, while Friedberg insists that there can be no stable peace between those with ideological disagreements—to the *ideological diversity* model John F. Kennedy sought to promote after experiencing one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War.[74] In 1963 at American University, he declared: "I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary rational end of rational men. I realize that the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war—and frequently the words of the pursuer fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task."[75] Practically, that meant seeking to resolve differences with the Soviet Union, and, when they could not be resolved, agreeing at least to "make the world safe for diversity."[76]

To be clear, our argument here is not that China represents a new form of benevolent superpower nor that the United States should refrain from standing up for its liberal-democratic values. The United States must continue to engage China on difficult issues, such as the country's record on human rights and the current imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.[77] However, it is not the case that states with ideological disagreements cannot live peacefully together. After Pres. Richard Nixon's rapprochement, the United States and China were on good terms during the Cold War; in the long nineteenth century, liberal Britain coexisted with authoritarian Russia and Prussia; in the seventeenth century, Catholic France joined with Protestant states to fight the (Catholic) states of the Holy Roman Empire. Examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear

enough: ideological rivals can find ways to live and cooperate when the incentives are right. And as JFK highlighted in his speech in 1963, never have we had stronger incentives than in an age of total war and nuclear weapons.

The question today is whether the United States—and the world—must suffer some catastrophe or near-catastrophe before its strategists and pundits are awoken to the imperatives of balance and diversity. Unfortunately, historical and theoretical evidence indicates that paradigms tend to continue operating long after they have been undermined.[78] Today, primacy—because it has served the United States well for a generation—has become a comfortable habit for the United States and its strategists.[79] However, as facts evolve, so must strategy. Abandoning this habit will not be easy. The first step in the process must be to recognize that peace and order are still possible without primacy. The second step is to begin thinking seriously about balance and diversity. Such steps are not those of the wooly-eyed peacenik but the hardheaded realist; together, they are needed to bring balance to contemporary strategic discourse on China's rise. ✪

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FEATURE

Revision of India's Nuclear Doctrine

Repercussions on South Asian Crisis Stability

Sitakanta Mishra

An authoritative revision of India's nuclear doctrine, which was formulated in 1999 and operationalized in 2003, is long overdue. In its 2014 election manifesto, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pledged to design an "independent strategic nuclear programme" and "revise and update" India's nuclear doctrine, which prompted a debate over the change and continuity of India's "no-first-use" (NFU) posture.[1] However, neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor the BJP has ever revisited that pledge or taken any initiative to act upon it. Even in the 2019 BJP election manifesto, there is no mention of nuclear doctrine revision or Indian nuclear weapons policy whatsoever. Is this BJP's strategic silence before it resorts to a revision, or was the party's pledge in 2014 mere election rhetoric? Sporadic public pronouncements by the political and bureaucratic leaders, in the recent past, regarding the imperatives of doctrinal revision or shift have generated enormous anxieties in the South Asian strategic discourse, giving rise to varied interpretations of India's likely pathways to nuclear use. Scholars have gone to the extent of viewing India's "nuclear restraint less certain" today for the "development of a suite of capabilities and statements . . . that appear inconsistent with its professed strategy of minimum deterrence."[2]

The issue at hand gives rise to many intricate questions on the regional geostrategic discourse. Will India shift its current doctrinal position from NFU of nuclear weapons to first-use, and if so, why? Is the current doctrinal posture not flexible enough to meet any contingency? Do Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) create strategic paralysis in India, for which New Delhi feels compelled to acquire nuclear counterforce options? Is development of a suite of capabilities like diverse and more delivery systems, missile defense, and surveillance platforms indicative of "India's conscious pursuit of more flexible options beyond counter value targeting?" If so, what are the implications for deterrence stability in South Asia? Will India not use the conventional forces at its disposal to resist Pakistan rather than resorting to using nuclear weapons first? Or, will India resort to a preemptive nuclear strike at once to disallow Pakistan the use of nuclear weapons first?

This study delves into the nuances in vogue in the region in the contemporary strategic thinking surrounding the Indo-Pakistan nuclear discourse and the repercussions of doctrinal shifts in nuclear-use strategy regarding deterrence stability.

Doctrinal Shift Advocacy

The basic premise of the debate on doctrinal revision of India's nuclear weapons policy is the assumed illogicality and inadequacy of the NFU posture to deter an adversary who adheres to a first-use posture. Similar debate and doubt can be traced to the post–Pokhran II years,[3] when nuclear scientist Krishnamurthy Santhanam, who was part of India's nuclear weapons program, said that the 1998 nuclear test had fizzled out with a yield "much lower than what was claimed."[4] Thereafter, many in India criticized the country's self-imposed moratorium on further nuclear tests. As India has reluctantly acquired nuclear weapons, a sense of moral responsibility is embedded in its nuclear-use policy. Anecdotally the original draft doctrine prepared by National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) prescribed a first-use posture and punitive retaliation that was replaced with a NFU and massive retaliation posture at the insistence of the then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Other provisions like NFU, negative security assurance, disarmament goals, and declaring nuclear weapons as political weapons for deterrence are only symbolic of India's nuclear morality.

Subsequently, the basic premise of the debate on doctrinal revision has widened to include the aggressive posture of India's adversary. Nowadays, a realist-pragmatic faction appears to have overshadowed the idealistic-moralistic camp in India's strategic enclave who long propagated nuclear restraint during the post-Vajpayee decades. Therefore, India's usual value-laden "reputational commitment" strategies, postures, and policies are under realists' scrutiny now. The advocacy to reserve the nuclear first-strike option is part of this realistic-pragmatist drive that is unfolding and engulfing India's strategic discourse today. This trend is visible if one connects the dots of former Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar's assertions as portrayed in former National Security Advisor (NSA) Shivshankar Menon's 2016 book, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*. In addition to the usual fringe voices within India's strategic enclave, the highest officials in the government have increasingly shown their intention to move away from the idealistic-moralistic narrative. Retired bureaucrats and military officials have gradually become vocal in questioning the rationale behind India's self-imposed restraints.

However, these voices are "more likely a warning, than an indication of shifts. But it is difficult to judge whether former officials are outlining their personal views or reflecting an internal debate when they write."[5] Moreover, the highest political leadership is yet to come to terms with the proposed shift and readily agree to leave behind the idealistic-moralistic position. This is discernible from Rajnath Singh, the then-BJP president, and subsequently Narendra Modi, the prime ministerial candidate, clarified that no review of NFU was planned and "No

first use was a great initiative of Atal Bihari Vajpayee - there is no compromise on that. We are very clear. No first use is a reflection of our cultural inheritance."[6] In an April 2014 interview, Modi clearly stated, "No first use was a great initiative of Atal Bihari Vajpayee—there is no compromise on that. We are very clear. [It] is a reflection of our cultural inheritance."[7] Subsequently, as prime minister, in a meeting in Japan in August 2014, Modi said that "there is a tradition of national consensus and continuity on such issues. I can tell you that currently, we are not taking any initiative for a review of our nuclear doctrine."[8] Ever since, Prime Minister Modi has neither spoken a word on nor taken up the issue of revision of nuclear doctrine during the last five years. Interestingly, the BJP has learned of late that it is imprudent to bloviate on matters of nuclear strategy as a political gimmick; in its 2019 election manifesto, the party completely skipped any mention of a determination (*sankalp*) to shift India's nuclear posture—unlike its 2014 manifesto.

Figure 1. Modi and Trudeau. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets with his Canadian counterpart, Justin Trudeau, at the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC.

Nuclear Decisions in Retrospect

In India, political leaders, especially the prime minister, play more determining roles than the political party or party members in shaping India's nuclear weapons policy. In other words, in nuclear matters, the views of the leadership of the party are paramount over the aggregate views of other members of the party. Indian party leaders and/or prime ministers have taken important nuclear decisions amid

unique circumstance in the past. Today have those who champion a doctrinal shift engaged in introspection as to whether any such unique situation has arrived?

For example, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's decision not to foreclose India's nuclear weapons option and authorization of the subterrainian nuclear explosion program was the result of intensive pressure from the Congress Party and opposition party members in the wake of the Chinese nuclear tests in 1964. Shastri's nuclear decisions were a manifestation of his weak position in the Congress Party and his consequent strategy to manage party members' resentment. Similarly, other Congress prime ministers like Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Narasimha Rao, and Manmohan Singh have equally taken important decisions concerning nuclear weapon program in unique political contexts. By the time Mrs. Gandhi became prime minister, the split between "pro-bomb" and "no-bomb" factions in her party was wide. Her rival, Morarji Desai, the deputy prime minister, was a staunch supporter of the no-bomb policy; whereas, K. C. Pant, a young Congress leader at the time, argued vociferously in favor of the bomb. Mrs. Gandhi was more concerned about the stabilization of her leadership in the Congress Party and her government. Therefore, she avoided the liabilities of either embracing nuclear weapons or rejecting the option completely. She did not pursue the nuclear issue during her first term, focusing instead on consolidating her position within the Congress Party and in the national political scene. However, during her second term as prime minister, Mrs. Gandhi had absolute faith in and control over her party. Moreover, the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 and her decisive action won her the identity of a "strong" leader. It is believed that during this time she gave the green light for the first nuclear explosion.

The Congress Party under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi won 415 out of total 542 Lok Sabha seats in the 1984. From 1983 to 1985, Mr. Gandhi was also the president of the Congress Party. Using his image as a young dynamic leader with the backing of 49 percent of electorate, he advocated his proposal for the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2010 in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Had his proposal been seriously considered, Gandhi could have given a different tilt to India's nuclear weapons program. Realizing the difficulty in the nuclear disarmament initiative, he constituted a committee (following the suggestion of ADM Radhakrishna Hariram Tahiliani, his Chief of the Naval Staff) consisting of A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Rajagopala Chidambaram, Gen Krishnaswamy Sunderji (Chief of Staff of the Indian Army), VADM K. K. Nayyar, and Air Marshal Johnny Green. The committee produced a report saying a minimal credible deterrent of about 100 warheads could be developed in about seven years and would cost about INR 70 billion.[9]

Prime Ministers Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh are two distinguished Congress Party leaders whose nuclear policy decisions were equally important. After a long spell of Gandhi family leadership, Narasimha Rao took over the leadership of the Congress Party (1992–97) and the government. The strong tendency among various centrist parties to unite together to not allow "fundamentalist" parties like the BJP to come to power seemed to have helped Rao to manage his coalition government. However, by Rao's term the internal divide between pro-bomb and no-bomb factions had waned. Instead, the concern was whether any government could test and manage the wrath of the world community. From where Rao got the confidence to dare order for nuclear test in 1995, which was caught by US satellite, is a matter of speculation. On the other hand, Manmohan Singh pursued a policy of Indo-US civil nuclear cooperation for which he had to face a "no-confidence motion" in Lok Sabha, proving United Progressive Alliance coalition government's political mandate.[10] Though Indo-US nuclear cooperation is more about India's nuclear energy program, it nevertheless circumscribed India's option to conduct future nuclear weapons tests.

If this history is any guide, it is obvious that Modi did not unfold the nuclear weapons issue during his first term as prime minister. As a new leader in national-level politics in 2014, Modi's priority was to consolidate his position within his party and national politics, just as his predecessors had before him. Having won reelection this year, Modi could undertake some decision on nuclear weapons policy—probably revisiting nuclear doctrine but not necessarily altering the NFU posture. As the debate has resurfaced in political circles now and the BJP has pledged a reexamination of the doctrine previously, one can expect that the doctrine will go through an official scrutiny sooner or later even though the party's 2019 election manifesto is silent on this matter.

Interestingly, even during the tension between India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the Spring 2019 Pulwama terror attack in Jammu & Kashmir and India's consequent surgical strike against terrorist camps in Balakot, Pakistan, neither the BJP nor its leaders have raised India's nuclear weapons strategy. Only Prime Minister Modi, in his election speech in Barmer, Rajasthan, said that India's nuclear button was not kept to be used for Diwali.[11] Therefore, it is intriguing to examine why the party that takes pride in bloviating on India's nuclear weapons preparedness has backpedaled on its pledge to revise the country's nuclear stance. Is this the BJP's strategic silence before it resorts to a revision, or was the party's 2014 pledge to review and revise India's nuclear doctrine mere election rhetoric?

Imperatives of Doctrinal Revision

The felt need and consequent debate for a doctrinal revision did not actually start with the BJP's pledge in 2014. Rather the NSAB reportedly first pronounced this imperative in 2003, suggesting in its *National Security Review* report that the government overturn the NFU policy in light of the history of the previous four years.[12] Initially, the NSAB had supported the NFU policy, but by the board's third report, members argued for revision, because India was the only nuclear weapon state (NWS) committed to a NFU policy. Ever since, the status of the NSAB recommendation and consequent government action, if any, is unknown.

A decade later, in its 2014 election manifesto, the BJP made the issue of reviewing India's nuclear posture a priority, accusing the sitting Congress government of frittering away "the strategic gains acquired by India during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime on the nuclear programme."[13] Therefore, the BJP pledged to: "Study in detail India's nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to *challenges of current times*. Maintain a credible minimum deterrent that is in tune with changing geostatic realities. Invest in India's indigenous Thorium Technology Programme."[14]

The BJP's allegation against Congress of "frittering away" the strategic gains India accrued during Vajpayee government is debatable. The crowning achievement during the one decade of the Congress government (2004–2014) was the Indo-US nuclear deal that saw India emerge from being considered a rogue nuclear state to being perceived as a legitimate multialigned, nuclear power. This was achieved without compromising India's nuclear weapons capability. India also passed the stringent Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act in 2010. On the strategic front, during this period, the fielding of the Agni-V missile, with a range of approximately 5,000 km, extended India's nuclear delivery capability to China. Additionally, production of the third leg of India's nuclear deterrent was initiated: *Arihant*, India's first indigenously built nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine. The ballistic missile defense and multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles programs also advanced during this time. Considering all these, the report card of the UPA's handling of strategic matters seems impressive, and Western scholars have remarked upon the fact that India's current missile modernization has exceeded what is necessary for a minimum credible deterrence.[15] Therefore, the BJP's remarks regarding the previous Congress-led governments' lack of performance on the nuclear weapons issue is rather disingenuous, says Chengappa.[16] In fact, the Vajpayee government would not have been able to order the 1998 nuclear tests just months after his second tenure had the previous Congress government not kept India's nuclear option in a state of readiness.

Though the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance coalition government self-imposed a test moratorium in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests, in the BJP's view the Indo-US nuclear deal has curtailed, under US pressure, India's sovereign right to perpetually test. This is probably what the BJP refers to when it claims Congress "frittered away" India's strategic gains.

With Pakistan's introduction of TNWs in the South Asian strategic theater, and with Islamabad reserving a first-use nuclear option, some have argued that the nuclear threshold in South Asian has been significantly lowered. In addition to Pakistan's newly developed capabilities, the China-Pakistan strategic nexus is another of the "changing geostatic realities" and "challenges of current times" with which India needs to contend. Undoubtedly, India has to take stock of the new security environment and readjust, if required, its nuclear strategy. That is a valid exercise for any government; therefore, a revision of India's nuclear doctrine is long overdue. In fact, some Western scholars view India's current nuclear doctrine as archaic, drawing similarities with the US doctrine of "massive retaliation" from the 1950s.

The Plausible Scenarios

One can assume that an authoritative revision of India's nuclear doctrine will be undertaken sooner rather than later. With Narendra Modi's reelection and the strengthening of his position within the party and on national political scene, it would not be unrealistic to assume that during his second term as prime minister he is likely to initiate such an undertaking. One can only speculate at this juncture what the upshots of such an endeavor will be. However, based on available information the following are plausible outcomes.

First, even if the doctrine is officially revisited, decision makers may opt not to make significant alterations to the provisions, keeping in mind the doctine's wide acceptability today and India's Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership aspirations. Most probably, Modi's new government may authorize the NSAB to debate alternative doctrinal options and do nothing thereafter. The debate would, in itself, fulfill election promises to revisit the issues, and the doctrine in its current form corroborates India's stature as a "responsible state." A shift toward a first-use posture would raise eyebrows, hampering New Delhi's prospects for NSG membership. Furthermore, the doctrine in its current form seems to have met its objectives. The criticisms advanced against the current doctrinal posture, and consequent suggestion to reserve the first-use option, are primarily based on the notion that India should not foreclose its options when a hostile neighbor with a first-use posture resorts to nuclear brinkmanship at the slightest pretext. One such critic, India's former defense minister, Manohar Parrikar, has advocated for a change in India's posture from NFU to "Not-Use-Irresponsibly."[17] However, one must pon-

der what incentive India would provide to Pakistan in terms of maintaining strategic stability in South Asia if New Delhi undertakes such a shift.

Meanwhile, contrary to the speculations regarding India's shift to a first-use posture, New Delhi vociferously advocated for, and expressed its readiness to negotiate on, "an international treaty banning first use"—an objective mentioned in India's 1999 draft nuclear doctrine as well. Two weeks before the 2014 election, India's sitting prime minister, Manmohan Singh, in an international seminar in New Delhi, said "more and more voices are speaking out today that the sole function of nuclear weapons, while they exist, should be to deter a nuclear attack. If all states possessing nuclear weapons recognize that this is so and are prepared to declare it, we can quickly move to the establishment of a global no-first-use norm."[18] On 27 September 2013, addressing the UNGA High-level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament, former External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid said that as a responsible nuclear power with a credible minimum deterrence policy and a NFU posture, India refused "to participate in an arms race, including a nuclear arms race. . . . We are prepared to negotiate a global No-First-Use treaty and our proposal for a Convention banning the use of nuclear weapons remains on the table."[19] In the early 1970s, China had supported this sentiment with the view that "This is not something difficult to do."[20]

Though India has not abandoned its advocacy for a global NFU treaty, there is no momentum visible in this direction yet. Besides highlighting the imperatives of a global NFU treaty in the UNGA, India has not taken any concrete initiative to mobilize support and action. Meanwhile, NWSs have modernized their nuclear arsenals, while keeping their options open for first-use. The United States has at no stage agreed to a NFU policy, and Russia has abandoned its Soviet-era posture. Though China has asserted not to use nuclear weapons first, in recent years there has been some ambiguity in Beijing's stance—especially vis-à-vis Taiwan. Pakistan maintains an opaque nuclear policy with a first-use option as "last resort." India is the only NWS that has voluntarily committed itself to a NFU policy. That fact could be the pretext Indian policy makers use to switch to a first-use option. In fact "India acquiring nuclear weapon was partly due to other countries not announcing a NFU policy."[21]

Second, as a logical evolution, India could opt for "flexible response" options. Scholars often equate India's nuclear posture with America's strategy during the 1950 when "President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles adopted a 'massive retaliation' strategy against the Soviet Union, based on clear US nuclear superiority in an era when Russian delivery systems could cross the Atlantic."[22] Gradually lost credibility in the face of a growing Soviet retaliatory capability. During the 1960s, America shifted toward the strategy of flexible re-

sponse, while keeping massive retaliation as one of many options. Robert McNamara, Pres. John F. Kennedy's secretary of defense, could see that America needed usable options. The perceived difficulty in executing the massive retaliation option if deterrence failed led to the adoption of formal the flexible response doctrine. If Cold War experience is a referent, "India's doctrine must create similar options, allowing policymakers every possibility in a crisis—pre-emptive strike, counter-force and counter-value targeting, even assured destruction through massive retaliation."[23]

While some members of India's strategic enclave have every intention to see India move away from the NFU posture, some Western scholars argue that "India has already devoted considerable resources since 2003 to develop and acquire capabilities that exceed what is required for a strictly retaliatory nuclear arsenal."[24] Retired Indian officials like Shiv Shankar Menon, former foreign secretary and NSA, and B.S. Nagal, former commander-in-chief of the Strategic Forces Command, question the morality and sanctity of NFU. Menon highlights that "there is a potential gray area as to when India would use nuclear weapons first against another NWS. Circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against an NWS that had declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were certain that adversary's launch was imminent."[25] He further says, "India would hardly risk giving Pakistan the chance to carry out a massive nuclear strike after the Indian response to Pakistan using tactical nuclear weapons."[26] For that matter, in a democracy like India, could any political leader afford or dare take a decision to absorb a nuclear first strike from Pakistan, killing millions of Indians, and then retaliate? If India detects Pakistan moving TNWs into the theater of battle and intent to use them, India must initiate preemptive strike. Political scientist Vipin Narang believes India's preemptive strike would be "preemptive nuclear use"; therefore, "the party that goes first in the most likely pathway to nuclear first use in South Asia may not be Pakistan, but India, if and when it believed that Pakistan might be ready to cross the nuclear threshold. The nature of that first use might be a full attempted counterforce strike against Pakistan's strategic nuclear capabilities, and whatever tactical capabilities it could find."[27] Narang's narrative omits, inadvertently or otherwise, Pakistan's policy of nuclear use as a "last resort . . . if Pakistan is threatened with extinction,"[28] and the conventional preemptive strike option available to India. Professor Narang seems to whimsically elevate the escalation ladder to the strategic level at once. It is another intriguing matter to speculate on Pakistan's response if India's conventional preemptive strike accidentally hits a TNW battery, leading to nuclear explosion within Pakistani territory.

Stressing upon the flexible response option, Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, in their research paper "India's Counterforce Temptations," argue that India's apparently discrepant capability developments like diverse and growing number of accurate and responsive nuclear delivery systems at higher states of readiness, an increasing array of surveillance platforms, and both indigenous and imported air and ballistic missile defenses, and so forth are results of India's conscious pursuit of more flexible options beyond countervalue targeting, not just the product of either technological drift or strategic confusion.[29] While there is logic to this argument, one can also argue that India's military-technological capability development is meant to effectively defend against Pakistan's nuclear first-strike doctrine. Clary and Narang seem to have mixed up and linked forthwith India's defense capability development with a potential nuclear strike by India to disarm Pakistan. In their analysis, they overlook India's ability to disarm Pakistan's strategic assets through conventional strikes. Moreover, "there is little indication of any spurt in the numbers of India's missile," and other war-fighting machines.[30]

Above all, what is abysmally overlooked in the entire debate is the nature of India's nuclear weapons as *political instrument for deterrence* and not *military tools for war fighting*.[31] The 1999 draft doctrine unequivocally says, "In the absence of global nuclear disarmament India's strategic interests require effective, credible nuclear *deterrence* and adequate retaliatory capability should *deterrence* fail."[32] [emphases added] So, India's existing nuclear philosophy does not promote *nuclear use* except in extreme circumstances. India's nuclear doctrine acknowledges the fact that nuclear weapons are special weapons, not just any other weapons that could be used indiscriminately. As Manpreet Sethi rightly argues, "Indian nuclear doctrine with its emphasis on deterrence, actually seeks to obviate the possibility of the use of the nuclear weapons in the first place."[33] Sethi puts forward a few genuine benefits of the NFU posture for India: first, the NFU posture removes the temptation to launch a disarming first strike in case of a crisis not just for itself, but also for the adversary. Second, NFU necessitates measures for increased survivability to reduce the vulnerability of the nuclear arsenal and mitigate the use-or-lose syndrome. Third, declining a first-use option removes the need for retaining nuclear forces on hair trigger alert, a situation not at all conducive to strategic stability given the geographical realities of the neighborhood. Fourth, NFU forecloses the chance of an irrational preemptive strike and minimizes the risks of an inadvertent or unauthorized nuclear use. Therefore, Sethi concludes that "a no first use policy is morally the most correct one."[34]

US Department of State photo

Figure 2. US engagement in South Asia. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Pakistan and India, 4–7 September 2018. In Islamabad, he met with Pakistan's new Prime Minister Imran Khan, Foreign Minister Qureshi, and Chief of Army Staff Bajwa to discuss US–Pakistan bilateral relations and potential areas for cooperation.

Two Prevailing Myths Nullified

The rational for revising and updating India's nuclear weapons posture emanates from Pakistan's nuclear brinkmanship and possession of TNWs, which are viewed to have lowered the nuclear threshold in the region. As a corollary, the temptation behind Pakistan's nuclear brinkmanship is India's conventional superiority. These two myths—Pakistan's low nuclear threshold and India's conventional superiority vis-à-vis Pakistan—stand recently nullified in the wake of India's retaliatory surgical strike in Balakot, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), in response to a terrorist attack by Pakistan-based terrorists, and Pakistan's consequent counterstrategy.

It is intriguing to evaluate just how low nuclear threshold in South Asia truly is. At the slightest pretext, Pakistan threatens to use nuclear weapons against anyone toward whom Islamabad feels insecure—most frequently India. Many have portrayed the presence of Pakistan's TNW inventory having significantly lowered the regional nuclear threshold. Islamabad appears to believe there is no space for conventional war between India and Pakistan and that Pakistan can use nuclear weapons on the battlefield if it can cross New Delhi's redlines without triggering a massive nuclear retaliation from India. Pakistan seems to have deliberately blurred the distinction between Pakistan's conventional war strategy and its nu-

clear war strategy. On the other hand, New Delhi appears to believe that a limited conventional war can be fought and won below Pakistan's nuclear threshold. More than two decades have passed since India's and Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests during which the existence of "nuclear weapons may have limited the risks of war, but they do not inhibit either side from engaging in low-level conflicts."[35] The logic of deterrence no doubt holds in South Asia, but the same does not obviate limited conventional conflicts. The Kargil War in 1999, Operation Parakram in 2001–2002, and the surgical strike by India in 2016 represent rather a combination of Pakistani boldness and Indian calibrated action that have surprised proponents of the stability-instability paradox.

During the last few decades, the dominant narrative of the Indo-Pakistani deterrence stability discourse revolves around the notion of a low nuclear threshold. It was presumed that a subconventional conflict would ultimately escalate to the strategic level in a short span. In response to a terror incident in India unleashed from Pakistani territory would invite New Delhi's swift action, as envisaged in its Cold Start strategy, through shallow penetration a few kilometers inside Pakistan, leading to violation of Pakistan's redlines. It was unclear until the Balakot air strike as to "how deep into Pakistan would be deep enough for India to obtain its objectives; and how deep would be too much for Pakistan."[36] As Pakistan did not acknowledge or attribute any such action unleashed by India, the first surgical strike in PoK in 2016 understandably did not warrant Pakistani retaliation. However, India's airstrike in Balakot, deep inside Pakistan, was a blatant challenge to Pakistan's so-called 'redlines'. Evidently, Pakistan's response to India's air strike in Balakot has been conventional. Besides, Islamabad has often resorted to nuclear brinkmanship at the slightest pretext ever since Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons. The Balakot surgical strike proved Pakistan's nuclear brinkmanship "a bluff which was long due."[37] Therefore, the assumption that Pakistan's nuclear threshold is low is arbitrary, unrealistic, and unfashionable now. Irrespective of the compelling circumstances, if Islamabad considered the Balakot surgical strike as not breaching its threshold and not necessitating a nuclear response, Pakistan's threshold is, at least, a level up. Moreover, Pakistan's official position has been nuclear "first use" but as "a last resort," which suggests that the nuclear threshold is not as low as it is perceived.

Also, one needs to understand what factors lower the nuclear threshold in South Asia. Is it the miniaturization of nuclear warheads and short-range nuclear-capable vectors, or constant harping by Pakistan on the nuclear conflict scare? As India does not differentiate between *strategic* and *tactical* weapons, the lowering of the threshold does not bring any qualitative change.

Evidently, limited conventional conflict remains a viable option in South Asia even under the shadow of possible nuclear options. India will likely continue with the straightforward nuclear posture of *deterrence by punishment*, where *strategic* and *tactical* are irrelevant. Therefore, for India TNWs have little utility in the South Asian context—especially since they seem to provide no major advantages to Pakistan. The hardest lesson for Islamabad is that its "nuclear romanticism,"[38] based on the idea that TNWs can solve its conventional military imbalance vis-à-vis India, only guarantees a larger nuclear exchange should such hostilities erupt.[39] For some decades the advisor to Pakistan's National Command Authority and pioneer director general of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division, Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai, retired, formulated Pakistan's nuclear redlines that drove the strategic stability debate in South Asia, which proved to be vague at best. Another staunch advocate of Pakistan's vague rhetoric was retired Pakistan Army lieutenant general cum director general of Inter-Services Intelligence cum political commentator Asad Durrani, who said in 2003 that Pakistan does not "identify those core interests that, if threatened, could trigger a nuclear retort. These are elements of operational planning and stating them could betray a country's conventional limits."[40]

Therefore, given such opaqueness, Pakistan's nuclear threshold is subject to India's interpretation; *undeterred by the TNWs India will decide on its own terms the level of Pakistan's threshold*, which would be proportionate to India's concerns and grievances against Pakistani misadventure. For example, getting inside Pakistan to conduct air strikes on terror training camps, as was done with the Balakot air strike, which was demonstrated to be well below Pakistan's nuclear threshold!

Similarly, the prevailing notion of conventional military superiority of India vis-à-vis Pakistan seems shaken in the wake of Pakistan's response to India's air strike. Certainly, India's conventional military capability is numerically larger than Pakistan's; practically, Pakistan will not be able to sustain a long-drawn war with India given the latter's huge force strength and wherewithal. However, in terms of operational strategy, Pakistan seems well matched to India, and this is likely to continue to be the case. Islamabad has proven that Pakistan would prefer "eating leaves and grass" to maintain parity with India, especially in terms of strategy and tactics. Islamabad is capable of causing damage to India through Pakistan's conventional military capabilities. Here the intention is not to underestimate or downgrade India's capability of causing massive damage to Pakistan or to defend against Pakistani threats; rather, the aim is to highlight the fact that India has much to lose in a conventional war, keeping in mind its significant economic progress. Logically, therefore, in the years ahead, India will resort to a massive conventional force upgrade, including induction and procurement of sophisticated systems and defense capabilities designed to take the Indo-Pakistani con-

ventional military disparity to a greater height. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that in the future the disparity in terms of conventional force levels between the rivals will widen.

Repercussions on Deterrence Stability

A revision of India's nuclear posture will be a reality sooner or later; the doctrine is not cast in tablets of stone. However, what its final shape and outcome will be is a matter of speculation. If India shifts toward a first-use posture, it is logical to argue that there would be lasting repercussions on the regional deterrence stability currently in vogue. Pakistan's persisting ambiguity and opaque nuclear strategy on one side and India's massive retaliation posture on the other side have effectively restrained the two rivals. During this period, a conventional war, many terrorist incidents, several military standoffs, and surgical strikes have taken place, but none of these broke the nuclear threshold. Would India changing its nuclear posture upset this perceived strategic stability? Conventional wisdom suggests that with nuclear first-use option, coupled with counterforce strategy, "every serious crisis will risk a potential strategic nuclear exchange" on the subcontinent.[41]

To evaluate the repercussions on regional deterrence stability, one needs to deconstruct, first, the prevailing value-laden question: Does India's shift toward first-use strategy matter much to Pakistan, which does not trust even India's current NFU pledge?[42] Pakistan is not convinced of India's moralistic abhorrence to nuclear weapons and self-imposed NFU. From the very beginning, Islamabad has believed that India already has a first-use doctrine. In fact, India's nuclear doctrine is a unilateral decision; Pakistan is aware that New Delhi can revoke that doctrine anytime the situation warrants doing so: "Pakistan believes that there is no way of making the NFU policy incapable of first use."[43] Islamabad is especially suspicious of India's Cold Start strategy, which seeks to circumvent a nuclear response from Pakistan, making the strategy independent of India's NFU pledge.[44] For that matter, no country takes NFU pledge at face value: "neither China nor India takes one another's NFU seriously. Similarly, neither the United States nor Pakistan has expressed absolute faith in the NFU pledges of China or India, respectively."[45] Therefore, due to the enduring widespread distrust between the two South Asian rivals, India's shift from NFU to a first-use or an ambiguous posture will have *limited impact* on the prevailing regional deterrence stability.

However, according experts participating in a 2017 discussion hosted by the Pakistani think-tank Centre for International Studies (CISS), "revision of nuclear doctrine by India would exacerbate Pakistan's security concerns and undermine South Asia's deterrence-based stability."[46] At the meeting, CISS executive director Ali Sawwar Naqvi highlighted two concerns in this regard: "the growing

Indo-US cooperation, and the ambiguity shrouding the narrative." Specifically, experts agreed that "the resulting environment could further reduce space for dialogue between" Pakistan and India.[47]

Additionally, adoption of nuclear first-use policy will prompt stringent operational preparedness and place nuclear forces on hair trigger alert, with operationally ready nuclear forces forward deployed. As a first-use posture is vulnerable to a preemptive attack, dispersal of warheads is prudent, requiring large inventories for survivability and swift mobilization. Rajesh Rajagopalan, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, worries that in response to India's shift, "Pakistan may move toward a nuclear force that is in a constant state of readiness, instead of keeping its nuclear forces disassembled."[48] Whatever will replace the strategic nuclear restraint prevailing in South Asian today, a tempting atmosphere of nuclear use and vertical proliferation will persist; if one side ever resorts to a nuclear strike, the pressure and compulsion will mount on the other side for immediate retaliation.

In addition, the number game of nuclear warheads would be insurmountable, and a mad rush to stockpile such weapons will be the norm of South Asian nuclear discourse. A first-strike strategy would require India to have a far larger weapons inventory than Pakistan possesses, which will ultimately alter the existing nuclear balance that is in favor of Pakistan. Rajagopalan assumes that, hypothetically if two warheads per aimpoint are considered, India will need "at least 60 warheads even for a conservative target list of 30 aimpoints in Pakistan. Of course, Indian decision makers will also need to keep some weapons in reserve to target any surviving Pakistani nuclear assets and to retaliate if Pakistan attacks India with these. If we assume just 30 warheads, India needs a total of about 90 warheads just to conduct a surprise 'splendid' first-strike against Pakistan, which will leave India with barely two dozen warheads to deter China."[49] Therefore, India's shift to a first-use strategy, premised on preemptive strike, will prompt India to achieve significant numerical superiority that will lead to an arms race because Pakistan will be forced to respond.[50]

Moreover, to address the requirements of a first-use posture, India would expedite production of more warheads, possibly opting for TNWs. This would allow India to strategize a *graduated response*, or *flexible response*, instead of massive retaliation. In this context, India's current policy of not differentiating between strategic and tactical nuclear weapons will end.

Also, the most intriguing repercussion on deterrence stability in South Asia would be, as Thomas Schelling described, the emergence of a condition of "reciprocal fear of surprise attack," as both sides will be worried that the other might launch first. Demand and race for fielding robust surveillance technology and systems would also grow. Moreover, the entire nuclear discourse would be colored

by the competition to *win* a nuclear war, rather than striving to see that deterrence does not fail.

Additionally, even though India's doctrinal shift would not surprise Pakistan, Islamabad would be under tremendous pressure to maintain parity with India. Given Washington's current apathy toward Islamabad, Pakistan would likely inch closer toward China in pursuit of such parity. The thriving missile-nuclear nexus between them would further intensify, making China a forceful stakeholder in Indo-Pakistani nuclear discourse.

This entire scenario would not be conducive to sustaining crisis stability in South Asia. Given the geographical realities, any inadvertent use of nuclear weapons will be devastating. Theoretically, the greater number of warheads and the greater frequency of their deployment, the higher chances increase of their potential misuse or inadvertent use.

The culmination of the debate over India's nuclear doctrine revision is a matter of conjecture. A detailed authoritative study of the utility of India's current nuclear doctrine is required to address all the relevant issues in their totality. However, as circumstances have changed since India articulated its nuclear doctrine, periodic reviews of India's doctrine is essential for greater clarity. ✪

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FEATURE

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Old Geography and the New Strategic Reality

Yoichiro Sato

Many observers have explained Japan's foreign and security policy in terms of its geostrategic location. A trading nation far from the sources of energy and natural resources, dependent on exporting manufactured goods for economic growth and security of the sea lanes for trading, Japan needed an alliance with a hegemonic maritime power—the United States. This alliance assured connectivity between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, guaranteeing Japan's economic survival, while protecting its territorial integrity against external threats.

The age-old geography, however, faces a dynamic transformation of external strategic environment. The relative weight of the United States in the world economy has declined, and so has Washington's relative weight in the trade portfolio of Asian countries, including Japan. While a strong growth of China during the 1990s and 2000s initially led this transformation, the gravity of the growth is gradually shifting toward Southeast Asia and South Asia. The US military dominance is gradually eroding, yet without showing a clear successor. The uncertain transition necessitates that Japan's strategy includes hedges.[1] What does Japan's hedging strategy look like? Why would Japan adopt such a strategy (especially as opposed to bandwagoning with the United States)? What are the implications of Japan's hedging in regards to the US-centered alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region?

In this broad perspective, this article will analyze Japan's Indo-Pacific policies with selective focuses on sea-lane security, strategic alignment, and economic diversification. The article will first summarily review key features of geography that are relevant to Japan's strategic thinking, the ways the country has dealt with these features, and the limitations on Japan's actions. Then, the article discusses key changes in the external strategic environment surrounding Japan in the post–Cold War era and into the projected future. Lastly, the article analyses how Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has steered Japan to deal with the new external strategic environment and the implications of his efforts for the US-centered alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region.[2]

A "Reactive State" in the Old Geography

Continuity in Japan's geographic features has not been affected in a way to fundamentally alter its strategic thinking. An archipelagic nation off the eastern edge of the Eurasian continent, Japan is located on a geostrategic front line of the world's dominant maritime power—the United States. Since the end of World War II, US military presence on Japanese soil enabled American deterrence against and responses to security challenges against US interests. Air and sea military assets stationed throughout Japan have provided the United States a strategic power of sea deniability against hostile continental powers, be it the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China. Japan held a key geostrategic location, essential to the US Cold War containment strategy.

This locational advantage alone, however, did not allow Japan to free ride on US protection. As the neorealist theory of international relations would predict, the dominant ally demands a bandwagoning junior ally to make a due (or more) contributions.[3] While financially aided by the United States during the early days of the Cold War, Japan repaid the United States with foreign policy autonomy and toed the US strategy of containment in East Asia. Japan continued to rely on the US naval dominance in the South China Sea (SCS) and the Indian Ocean for safe passage of its merchant ships into the post–Cold War period.

Japan has strategically viewed maritime security in Southeast Asia from the early Cold War days, although it did not define its role in military terms due to the restrictive interpretation of its constitution against collective defense. Politically, Tokyo emphasized friendly relationships with capitalist states of the region through Japan's official development assistance (ODA) and economic interdependence built through business investments. For security, the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency has contributed to the capacity building of the littoral Southeast Asian states.[4] While the main choke point of the Malacca Strait was the initial focus of security cooperation, Japan's assistance has gradually expanded to antipiracy efforts in general throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.[5]

Tokyo's assistance to the littoral states has expanded into the Indian Ocean region (IOR), keeping pace with the expansion of Japan's naval activities in this region since late 2001. Under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Japan quickly offered its naval refueling assistance to the navies of the United States and its allies and friends in a coalition effort to curtail smuggling activities by the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. This operation continued until 2010.[6] Japan, under a new government of more liberal-leaning former opposition parties, then switched to an antipiracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, a choke point connecting the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and ultimately

the Mediterranean Sea.[7] With the opening of Japan's first post–World War II overseas military base in Djibouti, Japan is also enhancing its military intelligence gathering in liaison with the US forces in the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, Tokyo started inviting civilian coast guard trainees from the Indian Ocean littoral states into Japan's capacity building courses. The Japan-initiated Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP), which initially focused on piracy in the Malacca Strait in the late 1990s, now operates an Information Sharing Center that disseminates information on piracy-related issues and offers a model of regional cooperation to the Red Sea littoral states. As a result of these initiatives, Japan's image as a "reactive state" has lost some validity.

Thus, Japan's post–World War II strategic thinking has been keenly aware of the importance of connectivity between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. The gradually evolving Japanese maritime security roles in both Southeast Asia and the IOR do attest to a high degree of continuity in Japan's strategic interests. The extension of Japan's military and security outreach into the Indian Ocean has also kept pace with the ongoing extension of Japan's economic interests into South Asia and Africa. Japan's preoccupation with maritime security in the IOR and especially choke-point security in the two ends of the region (the Malacca Strait in the east and the Red Sea passage in the west) is clearly visible.[8] However, Japan has also provided official aid for development of economic infrastructure in key African states as part of its Cold War burden sharing[9] and further post–Cold War economic focus through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development mechanism.[10] Such assistance has led some East African nations and South Africa to achieve rapid economic growth in the past two decades. These nations' importance to Tokyo no longer exclusively relies on their exports of natural resources and commodities to Japan; their importing of manufactured Japanese goods is of growing significance as well.[11] Together with India, Japan competes against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in African economic connectivity infrastructure development,[12] but Tokyo's limited budget does not allow an expansion of the ODA, therefore the focus is now on private investments.[13]

The constitutional constraints against collective defense, political sensitivity against any potential use of combat military force, and the Japanese government's caution not to reignite historical fears of a militarist Japan in Asia led to the growth of Japanese activism at an incremental pace. While the geographical scope initially started in Southeast Asia and then expanded into the IOR post-2001, direct use of military assets other than occasional transit training and port call visits did not start in Southeast Asia until after the naval refueling dispatch to the Indian Ocean in late 2001. Japan's civilian focus in Southeast Asia contributed to the country's good diplomatic image (soft power). This soft power was applied not only toward

Southeast Asia but also to China, where Japanese foreign direct investment fueled the engine of economic growth. Not risking the ongoing regional economic integration in East Asia was clearly Japan's priority throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. However, a growing tension in the SCS between China and the littoral claimants of Southeast Asia and the growing concern about seemingly lacking involvement of the United States as a key outside stakeholder gradually raised an expectation among Southeast Asian littoral states (like Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia) for Japan to play a more active security role in this region. On the other hand, the new strategic environment in the two regions does not clearly allow Japan a definite strategic choice.

The New Strategic Reality

Continuity in the geographic conditions surrounding Japan is just one factor in determining the country's overall strategy. Both economic and political factors interact with geography, posing a dynamically altering external strategic environment for Japan.

For a brief decade, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union simplified mainstream thinking about Japan's external strategic environment. Under the new unipolar world leadership of the United States, Japan elevated its collective security efforts in a bandwagoning alliance for fear of abandonment by the United States. A series of new legislation dispatching Japan's Self-Defense Forces overseas during the 1990s and the 2000s set the basis for reinterpreting of the national constitution to permit collective defense[14] and a provided a foundation for more comprehensive security legislation in 2015 under Prime Minister Abe.[15]

To some observers the rise of China and an economic forecast of its surpassing the United States in the near future appeared to be a hegemonic transition from the United States to China. To neorealists, an alliance with the declining (on relative terms) United States predictably now appears a balancing behavior on the part of China's concerned neighbors like Japan.

On the other hand, it is hardly convincing to view Japan's strategy as simple *balancing*. First, there are indications that China's rise may not be as consistent or as lasting as previously projected. More recent economic forecasts for the year 2050 places India closely behind China in the global GDP ranking, for example.[16] It is unrealistic to assume that Japanese strategic thinkers are unaware of such long-term prospects or that they are acting on the straight-linear projection of the relative bilateral power balance between the United States and China.

Second, Russia's return to international power politics adds complexity to the power balance projection in Asia. Despite the absence of any credible economic

forecasts that predict Russia's rapid rise, Moscow will likely remain a formidable military power. In short, there are numerous signs that Japan sees as portending the coming of a multipolar world.[17]

Predicting what kind of order would prevail in a new multipolar world is not easy, however, let alone proactively leading it. At the end of the Cold War, Japan did proactively lead institutionalization of economic and security order in the Asia-Pacific via its joint efforts with Australia to promote Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-centered frameworks (i.e., ASEAN Regional Forum—ARF and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation—APEC). The kind of multilateralism inclusive of both the United States and China then aimed at anchoring US interests and commitment to the region and disciplining Chinese (and to a lesser extent American) behavior within the existing and enhanced multilateral rules and institutions based on economic liberalism and the prevailing US-led security order.[18]

To Japan's dismay, ARF and APEC have failed to achieve much. Instead, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) cooperation became prominent in Japanese diplomacy on the back of growing intraregional trade and investments in East Asia. Japan, China, and South Korea joined the ASEAN in regularized APT meetings to discuss both economic and political matters, but Tokyo remained more focused on economic discussions, fearing growing Chinese domination in such a forum. Soon Japan courted Australia, New Zealand, India, the United States, and Russia into an expanded East Asia Summit for political discussions, to dilute the Chinese influence.[19] The Obama administration reversed the previous US aversion to ASEAN-centered forums and joined the East Asian Summit.

Japan's pursuit of a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, based on the APT membership, is another tactical move to gain greater leverage in negotiating a free trade agreement that includes the United States. The strategic rationale here is that a prospect of trade diversions from such an agreement would compel the United States to commit itself to a greater free trade grouping that includes East Asia, and multilateralism in such a forum would restrain the United States from exercising negotiation advantages Washington would otherwise enjoy in bilateral settings.

Thus, regional economic dynamics have compelled Japan to simultaneously seek greater integration with East Asia and promotion of trade liberalization with the greater Pacific Rim, including most importantly the United States. The basic dimension of the Japanese economic strategy to pursue greater economic integration under a freer rule remains solid. The Indo-Pacific emphasis of Japan's strategy also speaks to its growing expectation of economic opportunities with populous

South Asian countries, such as India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka and beyond (including developing East African states).[20]

On the other hand, how to properly engage in power balancing for security in this multipolarizing region is far from clear. Japan's hedging amid this uncertainty involves enhancing internal balancing (building its own military capabilities) within the existing US–Japan collective defense framework, seeking supplementary "alignments" (security partnerships with other US allies and friends, such as Australia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and France), and further exploring new security partnerships (such as India, Indonesia, Russia, and Vietnam).

With Australia, Japan has been in a trilateral security dialogue (including the United States) since 1996 and closely coordinates security policy in nontraditional threat domains, such as counterterrorism and natural disasters in Southeast Asia.[21] The attempted sale of the *Soryu*-class advanced diesel submarines to Australia, despite Japan's loss to a French competitor, indicated that mutual interests in a closer security alignment do exist. The ongoing collapse of the French deal may reopen a window of opportunity for Japan.[22] Since 2013, Exercise Southern Jackaroo, a trilateral ground exercise, has epitomized the evolution of the security cooperation beyond the maritime domain, although bilateral ground troop cooperation had continued for two decades under UN peacekeeping missions' auspices. Moreover, the May 2017 iteration of Cope North, an annual multinational military exercise taking place in and around Guam, which has been trilateral since 2011(Japan, Australia, and the United States) upgraded the trilateral security cooperation to a more comprehensive coverage of missions beyond humanitarian and disaster relief, including :the training such as air-to-air combat, covering combat, fighter combat, air-to-ground firing and bombing, electronic warfare, air refueling, strategic air transportation, searching operations."[23] The inaugural bilateral Australia–Japan air combat drill Bushido Guardian in 2018 was postponed due to the earthquake in Hokkaido but is to be rescheduled in 2019.[24]

With Singapore, Japan's security ties have been built on civilian maritime safety and security cooperation. Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) vessels have regularly made port calls in Singapore without fanfare en route to their training missions. With the United Kingdom, in 2018 the first British participation in a ground exercise in Japan marked a new page of security cooperation, but here again a precedent can be found in the British escorting of the Japanese engineering corps in Samawah, Iraq, during reconstruction efforts following the Iraq War. The British have been keen on entering the Japanese arms market and are discussing possible offers for Japan's next-generation fighter-support plane development, which to the Japanese would at least serve as leverage in negotiations with US suppliers.

With India and Vietnam, the most notable examples of security cooperation are found in the maritime domain. Since 2014, Japan's participation in Exercise Malabar, a trilateral naval exercise involving the United States, Japan, and India, has enhanced India's security cooperation with the United States. The strong efforts of Prime Minister Abe overcame the general resistance of the Indian defense bureaucracy against transforming any New Delhi's existing bilateral security cooperation arrangements.[25] Japan made its first sale of military equipment to India by exporting ShinMaywa US-2 large amphibious air-sea rescue aircraft. With Vietnam, Japan completed the first delivery of promised 10 patrol boats to Vietnam. Japanese MSDF ships have made port calls in Vietnam since 2014, and in 2018, the first submarine and Japan's new and largest helicopter carrier, JS *Kaga*, made a port call in Vietnam en route a joint antisubmarine warfare exercise in the SCS with the United States.

Security cooperation with Indonesia and Russia, by and large, is confined to nontraditional security and search-and-rescue domains, but a notable ongoing development is Japan's negotiation with Russia over a peace treaty and return of the disputed "northern territories" at the same time the Western world imposes economic sanctions against Russia over the latter's interferences in Ukraine.

Abe's Indo-Pacific Policies

Given the opportunities and constraints in the external security environment and internal resources, Japan is in no place to proactively lead a new strategic realignment in the region. However, the extremes of undisciplined unilateralism by either China or the United States clearly hurt Japanese economic interests. China's suspected drive to achieve a military hegemony in East Asia is a threat to Japan, but the credibility of the US alliance to militarily deter China has proven insufficient to satisfy complex Japanese interests that stretch in both military and economic domains. Japan has supplemented the US alliance with its own economic and diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia and beyond. Japan fears a revival of the "Nixon Shock," in which the United States went behind Japan's back to improve ties with China in the early 1970s. This fear, in turn, prevents Japan from fully bandwagoning with the United States at the cost of risking economic benefits from China. At the same time, Tokyo builds its own capabilities and makes them selectively available for collective defense with the United States to prove Japan's worthiness as a partner in balancing against China if necessary.

Tokyo's efforts in enhancing Japan's sea-lane security into the IOR is limited due to the constraints in resources and willingness to project. Japan's promotion of a maritime coalition, often referred as the Quad (United States, Japan, Australia, and India), is largely for boosting the self-confidence of member states through

alignments against the fear of a rising China and the temptation to appease or even bandwagon with Beijing. It is more a diplomatic strategy than a military one.

Despite the connectivity between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, which the Indo-Pacific concept emphasizes, Japan's activities west of the Malacca Straits are limited. The antipiracy patrol in the Sea of Aden addresses the security of the maritime traffic in an important choke point, where Japan assigns two destroyers (rotating) for convoy escorting since 2010. The initiative started under the Democratic Party of Japan government, which let expire the Liberal Democratic Party–sponsored refueling of anti-Taliban naval coalition ships in the Indian Ocean and passed an antipiracy law instead.[26]

In the SCS, Japan has mostly limited itself to transferring coast guard patrol boats and planes to the littoral states of Southeast Asia and symbolically dispatching its naval vessels to the region in protest of China's militarization of the reclaimed reefs. Despite the increase in unilateral and bilateral naval drills and port call visits in the SCS region during the last four years, Japan has not joined the United States to physically challenge the Chinese with freedom of navigation operations through the 12–nautical-mile zones of the reclaimed land features and/or disputable baseline claims. Japan's growing yet restrained presence in the SCS can be explained through a linkage between the two disputes in the SCS and the East China Sea (ECS). In the latter, the Japan-controlled Senkaku Islands and Japan's claim of maritime boundary with China are disputed by China, and Tokyo fears that Japan's active participation in the SCS may provoke China and invite further assertiveness by the Chinese in the ECS.[27] On the other hand, an escalation of tensions may very well occur in a reversed manner, in which China's provocations in the ECS may unshackle Japan from its self-imposed restraints in both the ECS and the SCS. Tokyo's announcement in August 2019 that Japan will convert its two *Izumo*-class flat-top destroyers into an aircraft carrier and procure 42 F-35B short takeoff/vertical landing stealth fighter planes (presumably to deploy on a new aircraft carrier) is symbolic of the country's resolve to regain the ability to independently repel small-scale invasion of its island territories.

The strategic alignments Abe has promoted are indeed just *alignments*, literally significantly less than *alliances*. The limited utility of such alignments are due to Japan's partners' increasing economic linkages with China and Tokyo's own reluctance to expand collective defense commitments beyond its partnership with the United States. Tokyo does not hold unrealistically high expectations of Japan's alignment partners but is inevitably hedging against the possibility that its partners might opt to bandwagon with China. Even with Australia, Japan's longstanding friend, it is reported that Japan's failed submarine sale was the result of Abe's personal push against the reluctance of the Japanese Ministry of Defense.

Tokyo's economic policy does not neatly meet Japan's security strategy. Japan did not join the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations until the United States joined the negotiations. This suggests Japan's strong interest in having a free trade agreement with the United States but not through a bilateral negotiation, which gives strong leverage to the United States through linkage with security policy. When the United States pulled out of the negotiations, Japan salvaged the talks under the amended title of Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to lock in the tariff concessions in case the United States later decides to rejoin the multilateral agreement. The move was more of a tactical adaptation, looking at improving the terms of economic relations with the United States. What Japan strategically desires is not an alignment of trade policy with a military strategy of containing China, which the United States seems to be promoting. Instead, Japan is aiming at disciplining the behavior of both China and the United States with multilateral and liberal trade rules by leveraging the two negotiations (CPTPP and RCEP) against each other.

Conclusion

The post–Cold War transformation of the strategic landscape in East Asia is more complicated than an image of hegemonic transition from the United States to China. Based on economic projections, a more likely midterm prospect of an emerging multipolar system is driving Japanese strategic thinking more than the seemingly intensifying US–China competition *per se*.

The high degree of economic interdependence between China on one hand and Japan, other Asian countries, and even the United States on the other shows a different picture from the Cold War era bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. At present, China's aggressive behavior in the maritime domains of the ECS and SCS is clearly a threat to Japan, but to Tokyo, China is not a country to be contained. Japanese firms have established a strong presence in the Chinese economy, and these firms' regional and global linkages are being threatened directly and indirectly by the ongoing trade war between the United States and China. Diversification of this economic interdependence with China will primarily follow economic logic, and the government's ability to steer economic relations away from China for security considerations is limited, as seen in Japanese firms' strong linkages 10 years after the preferential Japanese ODA loans to China were terminated. With this recognition, Japan pursues a hedging strategy, which could evolve into a balancing alliance as needed and minimize the chance of "buck passing" from the United States to Japan. Japan can continue to enjoy the economic benefits of engaging both the United States and China on most-favorable terms under multilateral liberal economic rules, while minimizing

the cost of collective defense with the United States and seeking diversified security partnerships to possibly supplement the declining US credibility in countering the Chinese threats and encouraging key states in the Indo-Pacific regions not to bandwagon with China.

Applied in the Indo-Pacific regional context, Japan's strategic interests are summarized in the rhetoric of the free and open Indo-Pacific, but Tokyo's preferred way to maintain this order is a "rule-based" one, not a "power-based" one. The emphasis on multilateral rules show Japan's status-quo orientation, which intends to bind not only China's military and economic maneuvering in the region but also the US tendency to resort to nationalistic economic policy toward the region. Moreover, Japan's Indo-Pacific concept clearly eyes westward expansion of the integrated regional economic sphere beyond East Asia.

The US–Japan military alliance remains the foremost component of Japan's strategy. Maritime commerce and naval operability based on the open sea doctrine of the International Law of the Sea are in Japan's interests, and US engagement in the region is critical for maintaining this multilateral rule-based order. In addition, Japan's solicitation of likeminded states to join a coalition for this strategic purpose is clearly visible, most notably manifesting in its proposal of the Quad. A smooth transition into a multilateral regional order is, in the medium term, preferable in Japan's view due to the relative decline of the US capability, and efforts to enmesh US engagement in the region will lock in continuous US commitment to the region. The Quad is useful for Japan without fully being materialized in the form of a formalized mutual defense treaty because it raises the cost to the United States of abandoning Japan by collectively staking US credibility in the broader region. This in turn prolongs the status quo. This objective can coexist with the other, more commonly perceived objective of sending China a message of deterrence.

Japan's strategy draws on its long-held "comprehensive security" tradition. In the current global context, success of the strategy depends on Japan's own ability to arrest its ongoing relative economic decline and meet the challenge of worker shortage and upskilling. This will further enmesh the Japanese economy into the Asia-Pacific and increasingly Indo-Pacific economies. The westward extension of the regional economic integration, assisted by Japan's infrastructure aid and private investments, solicits partnerships of other Quad members and offers alternatives to the Chinese-led BRI projects.

At key junctures of security policy evolutions, more dynamic political leadership played a leading role in Japan's otherwise reactive foreign policy. However, the Japanese conception of *Indo-Pacific* today is not a part of the US grand strategy.

Rather, it is a grand strategy of Japan, in which Japan expects the United States to behave in certain ways. ✪

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Notes

1. The concept of *hedging* is used in this article to mean adopting a middle-of-the-road security strategy between *balancing* and *bandwagoning* in neorealist conceptualization, while concurrently taking advantage of all available economic opportunities. For a more elaborate discussion of this conceptualization, *see* Thi Bich Tran and Yoichiro Sato, "Vietnam's Post-Cold War Hedging Strategy: A Changing Mix of Realist and Liberal Ingredients," *Asian Politics and Policy* 10, no. 1 (2018): 73–99.

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