

Liberty University  
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China Containment in East Asia:  
Preventative or Provocative?

A Nation Divided? Conference  
Assessing Freedom & the Rule of Law in a Post-2020 World

by

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## Introduction

Following the collapse the Soviet Union, the United States emerged victorious from the Cold War and solidified itself as the global hegemon, bringing peace and stability to the international order. However, in recent years China has begun to expand its economic, military, and diplomatic reach to establish itself as a competitor vying for power in the international sphere. In response, the United States strengthened its role as a hegemon and contained China by increasing its alliance posture and engaging in economic deterrence strategies. As tensions between the China, the United States, and its allies rise, the United States must re-evaluate its containment strategy in East Asia to prevent confrontation and war.

## History

### Origin of American Alliances

Before delving into the specifics of how the United States ought to approach China, one must understand the history of the American alliance system in East Asia and the rise of China. After World War II, the United States began to develop military alliances with other nations, beginning with the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949.<sup>1</sup> Following this, the United States branched out to East Asia, forming alliances with many of the nations there as well.

In 1951, the United States and Japan signed the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, which enforced a pacifist constitution on the Imperial Japan and allowed American troops on Japanese soil. This was the starting point for the Yoshida Doctrine, stating that Japan would rely on the United States for its security so that it could focus on rebuilding itself. The alliance's original purpose was two-fold: first, to bolster America's presence in East Asia while fighting the Korean War and the Cold War; and second, to serve as a check on Japan to ensure it did not become a revisionist military power again.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, in 1953, the United States and South Korea signed a Mutual Defense Treaty, which stood as a bulwark against communist expansion of the Soviet Union into Asia through North Korea during the Cold War. During the Korean War, South Korean President Syngman Rhee transferred operational control of the military to the United States to win support for the war and improve its military capabilities.<sup>3</sup> This arrangement continues to this day, as a permanent American military presence remains in South Korea with an American General Officer serving as the wartime commanded over all of the military forces in the country.

In August 1951, the United States established an alliance with the Philippines through the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. This became one of the first significant treaties the United States had in the Asia-Pacific and served as the cornerstone of American peace and security in the region after World War II. The United States military relationship with the Philippines has expanded throughout the years, as the two nations agreements allowing for the creation of American military bases on Filipino islands.<sup>4</sup>

In 1954, the United States and Taiwan signed the U.S.-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty to contain communist expansion into the Asia-Pacific during the Cold War. Once the United States

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Collective Defense Arrangements," last modified January 20, 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/treaty/collectivedefense/index.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael A. Panton, "Politics, Practice and Pacifism: Revising Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution," *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal* 11, no. 2 (2010): 167-172, [http://blog.hawaii.edu/aplpj/files/2011/11/APLPJ\\_11.2\\_panton.pdf](http://blog.hawaii.edu/aplpj/files/2011/11/APLPJ_11.2_panton.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Oh, "US-Korea Military Alliance," Wilson Center, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/resource/modern-korean-history-portal/us-korea-military-alliance>.

<sup>4</sup> Eleanor Albert, "The U.S.-Philippines Defense Alliance," Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-philippines-defense-alliance>.

formed its alliance with Taiwan, it enabled a complete network of military alliances between America and the East Asian nations to ensure democracy in the region. The signing of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act allowed the United States to continue unofficial relations with Taiwan after President Jimmy Carter acknowledged the One China principle through maintaining commercial ties with Taiwan and engaging in substantial arms sales that are still in effect.<sup>5</sup>

### **Origin of China's Rise**

In the mid-nineteenth century, Great Britain and France launched two Opium Wars against China to force it to sell opium after China stopped trading the drug. China lost both wars and was forced to cede Hong Kong to Great Britain and open ports with other nations, including the United States. To China, this was an unequal treaty signed as a result of Western aggression, causing China to view the West, particularly the United States, in a negative light.<sup>6</sup> Although the unequal treaties established free trade policies and benefitted China's economy, they were instrumental in building resentment towards Western imperialism.

The Opium Wars were a major contributing factor to the fall of the Chinese imperial dynasty and the beginning of what is known as the Chinese Century of Humiliation. Before the Opium Wars, China was considered the world's most advanced civilization, yet fell behind the superior technology of the Western nations, which resulted in its military defeat and subsequent collapse of its economic and political system.<sup>7</sup> As a result, China began to isolate itself from other nations and focused inwardly on improving its domestic problems.

According to the Chinese Communist Party, the Century of Humiliation took place from 1849-1949. Now, Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated that his goal is for China to restore itself to the great Chinese Empire it once was and overtake the United States in the next century. This strategy has becoming known as the 100 Year Marathon, as China seeks to upend the international order in the same time it took to lose its spot on the pedestal. Xi promised that China would become a global leader in its national strength and international influence to build a stable international order so China's national rejuvenation could finally be fulfilled.<sup>8</sup>

### **Modern-Day China**

China has already taken significant advances towards overtaking the United States. Specifically, China has vastly improved its economy<sup>9</sup> and its military capabilities to match that of the United States,<sup>10</sup> and is engaging in cyber activities such as espionage and cyber-attacks to steal data from the United States and threaten the American cyber infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, China

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," last modified August 31, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, March 15, 2016), 104, <https://thehundredyearmarathon.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Matt Schiavenza, "How Humiliation Drove Modern Chinese History," *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/10/how-humiliation-drove-modern-chinese-history/280878>.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Brands, "What Does China Really Want? To Dominate the World." Bloomberg, May 20, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-05-20/xi-jinping-makes-clear-that-china-s-goal-is-to-dominate-the-world>.

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Xu Elegant, "China's 2020 GDP means it will overtake U.S. as world's No. 1 economy sooner than expected," Fortune, January 18, 2021, <https://fortune.com/2021/01/18/chinas-2020-gdp-world-no-1-economy-us>.

<sup>10</sup> Ziyu Zhang, "US-China Rivalry: who has the stronger military?," *South China Morning Post*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3140681/us-china-rivalry-who-has-stronger-military>.

<sup>11</sup> Zach Dorfman, "China Used Stolen Data to Expose CIA Operatives in Africa and Europe," *Foreign Policy*, December 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/21/china-stolen-us-data-exposed-cia-operatives-spy-networks>.

has expanded its international influence by cooperation and trade with other nations through projects such as the Belt and Road initiative.<sup>12</sup>

In light of China's actions, the United States has rightly recognized the legitimate threat of China to its global hegemony. However, there are conflicting ideas of how the United States should engage China. Some, such as President Donald Trump, argue America should take a more aggressive stance toward China and treat it as an adversary to secure international influence. They have developed a growing list of grievances against China, including Chinese currency manipulation, cyber threats, and intellectual property theft. As a result, these individuals have begun to treat China as an outright enemy to preserve the current international order.<sup>13</sup>

Others, such as President Barack Obama, contend that the United States should pursue constructive engagement with China to welcome it into the international order. Some brush over its human rights abuses and aggressive territorial claims to befriend China. However, this paper proposes that a middle road between these two forms of engagement will result in a more productive relationship with China.

### **Benefits of East Asian Alliances**

The United States alliance system in East Asia is fundamental in providing peace and security in the region. During the Cold War, these alliances were essential to combatting communism from the Soviet Union. Now, their primary function is to guard against a rising China as it seeks to expand its global influence.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Benefits of the Japanese Alliance**

The Japanese alliance with the United States is one of the cornerstones of American foreign policy and international relations, as trade and interregional cooperation in Asia greatly benefit from a strong American presence. However, the most crucial aspect of the alliance is its geographic location, being close to China, as it allows the United States to maintain extended deterrence in the area. To Japan, the United States alliance and assurance of protection is key to regional security and brings Japan safety and security in deterring threats from nearby nuclear-armed nations such as China and North Korea.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Benefits of the South Korean Alliance**

The United States' alliance with South Korea is highly important to strategic policy in East Asia, as South Korea is located close to both China, the United States' strongest competitor, and North Korea, an upstart rival. As well. Thus, South Korea's strong military and defense capabilities hedge against threats coming at it from multiple directions. Specifically, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, which serves as a vital deterrent against North Korean missile testing, is also equipped with surveillance capabilities that make it possible for the United States to keep a watchful eye on both North Korea and China.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Philippe Le Corre, "On China's Expanding Influence in Europe and Eurasia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 9, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/09/on-china-s-expanding-influence-in-europe-and-eurasia-pub-79094>.

<sup>13</sup> Doug Bandow, "Why the Hawks Are Wrong about China Too," Cato Institute, November 14, 2019, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/why-hawks-are-wrong-about-china-too>.

<sup>14</sup> Lindsey W. Ford and James Goldgeier, "Retooling America's alliances to manage the China challenge," Brookings Institution, January 25, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/retooling-americas-alliances-to-manage-the-china-challenge>.

<sup>15</sup> Seth Cropsey and Jun Isomura, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Significance and Role," Hudson Institute, April 2018, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/files/publications/CropseyIsomura.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Ankit Panda, "What Is THAAD, What Does It Do, and Why Is China Mad About It?," *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/what-is-thaad-what-does-it-do-and-why-is-china-mad-about-it>.

## **Benefits of the Filipino Alliance**

The Filipino alliance is crucial to the American military presence in East Asia and combatting an emerging China through securing the freedom of the seas and deterring Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.<sup>17</sup> The Visiting Forces Agreement between the United States and the Philippines is vital to joint counter-terror operations, humanitarian aid, disaster relief, and military training. Ensuring a solid department for humanitarian resistance allows the Philippines to serve as a haven during times of environmental calamities that have wrecked the infrastructure of the Philippines and surrounding nations.<sup>18</sup>

## **Benefits of the Taiwanese Alliance**

After the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the United States ceased formal alliance operations with Taiwan yet continued unofficial diplomatic and military ties. The United States pledged to sell defense weapons to Taiwan and has stated that it regards any coercive moves by China against Taiwan as a breach of peace in East Asia.<sup>19</sup> There is a policy of strategic ambiguity between the two nations regarding to what degree the United States will support Taiwan. The main reason for the continued alliance between the United States and Taiwan is to deter Chinese aggression and demonstrate the United States' strong military power in the area.<sup>20</sup>

## **Benefits of a Cohesive East Asian Alliance Strategy**

Each of the United States' individual alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan are important to stability in the region, but the combination of these alliances is vital to a cohesive East Asian alliance strategy. Establishing a strong military presence in these countries allows America to continue to power project in the region and acts as a barrier surrounding China. It is only with all of the East Asian allies united that America can adequately deter China through its military presence, strong leadership, and solid strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Thus, if the United States were to abandon even one of its allies, its deterrence strategy would falter.<sup>21</sup> Although the South East Asian alliance partners of India, Australia, and Thailand are also needed for complete encirclement, they are not the main focus of this discussion.

## **Costs of East Asian Alliances**

However, the United States alliance system is not always perfect, as there are many disagreements and challenges that the nations face when determining how to ensure each countries' needs are met. Additionally, as the United States' strong presence in the area poses a threat to China, China has taken retaliatory moves such as strong economic sanctions and increased military presence in response to the allies' support against China.<sup>22</sup> In addition to costs in an abstract sense, these alliances have also had a substantial monetary toll on the United States. Thus,

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<sup>17</sup> Michael J. Green and Gregory B. Poling, "The U.S. Alliance with the Philippines," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 3, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-alliance-philippines>.

<sup>18</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, "Humanitarian, disaster ops training a must for PH," *Philippines News Agency*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1063301>.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Blanchard, "Timeline: U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in 2020 total \$5 billion amid China tensions," Reuters, December 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-security-usa-timeline/timeline-u-s-arms-sales-to-taiwan-in-2020-total-5-billion-amid-china-tensions-idUSKBN28I0BF>.

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Davis, "The US and its allies must ensure Taiwan doesn't fall to Beijing," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 11, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-us-and-its-allies-must-ensure-taiwan-doesnt-fall-to-beijing>.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Lucas, "A China Strategy," Center for European Policy Analysis, December 7, 2020, <https://cepa.org/a-china-strategy>.

<sup>22</sup> Alice Su, "Beijing responds to U.S. alliances with 'wolf warrior' defiance. Will it backfire?," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-04-26/china-us-alliances-wolf-warrior-nationalism>.

the United States and its allies must also weigh the costs of maintaining the alliances as they currently exist.

### **Costs of the Japanese Alliance**

Although it provides many benefits, there are several costs to the United States as a result of the alliance with Japan. There is a substantial amount of American military spending directed toward Japan, and according to reports, the United States spent almost \$20.9 billion on defense over the past four years, while Japan spent only \$12.6 billion.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the United States has committed to defending Japan in its territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands, meaning that if confrontation over the islands broke out, America would be roped into the conflict, which would escalate to nuclear war due to high tensions and offense military postures.<sup>24</sup> If Japan became less dependent on American assistance and improved its Self-Defense Forces, it could increase domestic deterrence, allow for self-sustainability, and establish Japan as a stronger global power.<sup>25</sup>

### **Costs of the South Korean Alliance**

As for South Korea, many problems in its alliance with the United States stem from tension over burden-sharing costs. The United States spend \$13.4 billion to maintain troops in South Korea, while South Korea spent only \$5.8 billion.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, South Korea sees the United States' hardline stance on North Korea as the barrier to improving relations on the peninsula. The United States' harsh sanctions, adversarial posture, and refusal to formally declare an end to the Korean War only increase tensions between North and South Korea, who have been seeking peninsular reunification for decades.<sup>27</sup>

### **Costs of the Filipino Alliance**

With regard to the Filipino alliance, although American commitments to assurance have been strong, Filipino guarantees wavered. Since Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte took office in 2016, the Philippines reneged on its agreements with the United States to allow troops and military exercises on the islands, and even threatened to abrogate the alliance entirely.<sup>28</sup> The Philippines began to distance itself from America and gravitate towards Russia and China, yet in spite of this, the United States recently increased its commitment to the Philippines, allocating more money to its military budget and expanding the scope of its treaty to apply to any ships or disputed Filipino territories, particularly in the South China Sea. This greatly exacerbates the potential for war between the United States and China to break out, as America pledged to respond militarily to any conflict that arises between the Philippines and China, who have been operating in each other's spheres of influence very frequently as of late.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Losey, "Here's What It Costs to Keep US Troops in Japan and South Korea," *Military.com*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/23/heres-what-it-costs-keep-us-troops-japan-and-south-korea.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Steve Fetter and Jon Wolfsthal, "No First Use and Credible Deterrence," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (April 9, 2018): 102-114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1454257>.

<sup>25</sup> Gavin Wax, "Let Japan Remilitarize," *Newsweek*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/let-japan-remilitarize-opinion-1506873>.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Tirpak, "US Pays Most of Shared Defense Costs with Japan, South Korea," *Air Force Magazine*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.airforcemag.com/u-s-pays-most-of-shared-defense-costs-with-japan-south-korea>.

<sup>27</sup> Ashish Kumar Sen, "It's Time for the U.S. To Rethink North Korea Policy," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/09/its-time-us-rethink-north-korea-policy>.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Hughes, "Is the U.S.-Philippines Alliance Obsolete?," *National Interest*, May 24, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/us-philippines-alliance-obsolete-185722>.

<sup>29</sup> Regine Cabato and Shibani Mahtani, "Pompeo promises intervention if Philippines is attacked in South China Sea amid rising Chinese militarization," *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2019,

## Costs of the Taiwanese Alliance

Concerning the alliance between the United States and Taiwan, the highest costs come from the potential for conflict over Taiwan and China. Recently, China has been modernizing its military capabilities and expanding its reach across the Asia-Pacific, while Taiwan has decreased its investment in defense infrastructure and military readiness.<sup>30</sup> With Taiwan falling behind militarily, any changes in the balance of power between the United States and China only exacerbates the likelihood that China could take steps to invade Taiwan, which would put to the test the United States' defense commitments to Taiwan. Furthermore, the United States has recently cast aside long-standing policies with China and Taiwan by abruptly lifting government decrees prohibiting interactions between American and Taiwanese diplomats, which only further increases the possibility of a conflict erupting between China, Taiwan, and the United States.<sup>31</sup>

## Chinese Containment

### Methods of Containment

In the Cold War, the United States introduced a foreign policy strategy known as containment to prevent the expansion of the Soviet Union and communism into Europe and Asia.<sup>32</sup> Since then, the United States has maintained its position of seeking to quell Chinese influence in East Asia. In recent American history, presidents have increased American military presence in the Asia-Pacific, launched trade wars, and implemented sanctions against China to prevent it from becoming a regional hegemon.<sup>33</sup>

During the presidency of George H.W. Bush, the American strategy was to prevent China from rising through military containment with doctrinal policies such as unilateralism, pre-emption, and missile defense.<sup>34</sup> However, this approach was inherently flawed and unsustainable, as no individual nation can adequately manage global security challenges alone. Following this, the United States shifted its containment policy to include its East Asian alliances through President Barack Obama's "Pivot to Asia." The main flaw in this strategy was that it signaled to China that the United States was taking offense actions to contain it militarily. In response to the aggressive containment policy in East Asia, China began to further modernize its military deterrence strategy to prepare for a possible conflict between it and the United States.<sup>35</sup>

After President Donald Trump took office, the containment strategy toward China took a different nature. The United States began to pursue geo-economic containment through aggressive economic sanctions to promote American economic growth, which started a trade war against China. In July 2018, the United States placed a twenty-five percent tax on \$34 billion of Chinese

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pompeo-promises-intervention-if-philippines-is-attacked-in-south-china-sea-amid-rising-chinese-militarization/2019/02/28/5288768a-3b53-11e9-b10b-f05a22e75865\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pompeo-promises-intervention-if-philippines-is-attacked-in-south-china-sea-amid-rising-chinese-militarization/2019/02/28/5288768a-3b53-11e9-b10b-f05a22e75865_story.html).

<sup>30</sup> Peter Coy, "Taiwan Needs to Spend More on Defense, Says a Former Diplomat," Bloomberg, April 15, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-15/taiwan-needs-to-spend-more-on-defense-says-a-former-diplomat>.

<sup>31</sup> Gerry Shih and Lily Kuo, "Trump upsets decades of U.S. policy on Taiwan, leaving thorny questions for Biden," *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/trump-biden-taiwan-china/2021/01/13/1bbadee0-53c0-11eb-acc5-92d2819a1ccb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/trump-biden-taiwan-china/2021/01/13/1bbadee0-53c0-11eb-acc5-92d2819a1ccb_story.html).

<sup>32</sup> Robert Wilde, "Containment: America's Plan for Communism," ThoughtCo, last modified October 29, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-containment-1221496>.

<sup>33</sup> Francis P. Sempa, "The Case for Containing China," *The Diplomat*, June 29, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/the-case-for-containing-china>.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Van Ness, "China's Response to the Bush Doctrine," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2004/2005): 38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209934>.

<sup>35</sup> Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "China's Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism," Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, April 15, 2019, <http://issi.org.pk/chinas-rise-offensive-or-defensive-realism>.

imports, and China imposed a retaliatory tax of twenty-five percent tax on \$34 billion of American imports. This escalation continued, and the trade war against China shattered global norms and paved the way for America to continue to pursue more aggressive policies against China.<sup>36</sup> As for President Joe Biden, he has maintained economic sanctions and spoken out against China's continued human rights violations, recognizing that the United States is still locked in competition with China and that removing the economic penalties too soon could legitimize China's actions.<sup>37</sup>

### **Benefits of Containment**

Containment of China is beneficial to quell its expansionist desires and prevent it from overtaking the United States as the global hegemon. If China is to surpass the United States, many argue China will export its authoritarian and community model to other nations, which would cause others to align with its model of government and become a front to democracy and capitalism.<sup>38</sup> Through American containment of China, the United States is able to prevent China from being militaristically expansionist. If the United States were to cede hegemony to China in East Asia, China could take offensive actions in disputed territories such as the Spratly Islands, the Senkaku Islands, and Taiwan. China is seeking to increase its influence in the region through any means necessary, which requires the United States to continue to contain China.<sup>39</sup>

### **Costs of Containment**

However, the containment strategy that the United States is employing against China is highly aggressive and has caused several negative effects that can only get worse. The current containment strategy fuels mistrust and increases tensions in East Asia which amplifies the risk of unnecessary war.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the monetary costs of containing China in East Asia have been monumental, as the United States has spent billions on increasing its military operations in the Asia-Pacific only for its allies to not improve their capabilities.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the United States' trade war with China has negatively affected American trade, causing economic growth to slow, business investment to halt, manufacturing plants to suffer, and farmers to lose business and go bankrupt.<sup>42</sup> China has made it clear that it is unwilling to continue to be contained by the United States, and maintaining this offense posture would put the two on a collision course.

### **Analysis**

For the United States, one of its biggest challenges is understanding how to approach China in East Asia. The United States has employed different containment and engagement strategies throughout the years, and once again, the environment in East Asia has changed. At its disposal,

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Mullen, "US-China trade war timeline: key dates and events since July 2018," *South China Morning Post*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3146489/us-china-trade-war-timeline-key-dates-and-events-july-2018>.

<sup>37</sup> Katie Lobosco, "Biden has left Trump's China tariffs in place. Here's why," CNN Politics, last modified March 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/24/politics/china-tariffs-biden-policy/index.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Rebecca Liao, "Beware of Chinese Hegemony," *National Interest*, December 19, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/beware-chinese-hegemony-11896>.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Haass, "A Cold War With China Would Be a Mistake," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/dont-start-a-new-cold-war-with-china-11588860761>.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Heer, "Rethinking U.S. Primacy in East Asia," *National Interest*, January 8, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/rethinking-us-primacy-east-asia-40972>.

<sup>41</sup> Justin Logan, "Rhetoric Aside, America's Asian Partners Are Giving Up on Their Own Defense," *The Diplomat*, August 5, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/rhetoric-aside-americas-asian-partners-are-giving-up-on-their-own-defense>.

<sup>42</sup> Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, "More pain than gain: How the US-China trade war hurt America," Brookings Institution, August 7, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america>.



the United States has strong alliances, a powerful military, and a cohesive containment strategy. Thus, the United States must determine how maintaining the status quo, increasing its commitments, and decreasing its commitments would affect the global balance of power.

### **Alliance Strategy**

Currently, the United States maintains a high degree of influence in East Asia due to its alliance strategy. If the United States were to maintain its status quo alliance strategy, it would continue to increase tensions but likely would not cause a war between the United States and China.<sup>43</sup>

Some allies, such as Japan and Taiwan, are in favor of increasing the United States' force posture in East Asia, as they view it to be necessary to prevent war. However, if the United States were to do so, this would generate an adverse reaction from China and likely cause it to attack Taiwan, drawing in the United States as well.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, allies such as South Korea and the Philippines are in favor of decreasing American alliance commitments to them, as they view it to be unnecessarily provocative and infringing on their ability to gain influence. If the United States were to cede East Asia to China, it would result in a hegemonic transition that could likely spark a nuclear war.<sup>45</sup> However, taking a strategic and thoughtful approach through actions such as these would likely not result in any offensive action from China.<sup>46</sup>

### **Geo-Economic Strategy**

As for its geo-economic strategy, the United States and China are still engaged in a sort of trade war, with both sides imposing sanctions on the other over political and ideological disagreements. President Biden has not removed the tariffs that President Trump placed on China, and he has begun to take offensive actions against China as well. If the United States were to remain the status quo in regard to its geo-economic strategy, there would likely not be any drastic changes to the global balance of power. The sanctions that the United States has placed on China have not had any substantial effect on the Chinese economy or military, but instead have only resulted in retaliatory sanctions against the United States.<sup>47</sup>

However, the United States could also increase its geo-economic competition against China, which could take either an offensive or a defensive form. A defensive approach would involve America imposing more sanctions and tariffs on China, yet this would be counterproductive, as not only would it negatively affect American businesses, but it would cause China to double down on its aggressive actions.<sup>48</sup> An offensive approach would require America to increase production and create supply chains in key industries such as farming and steel

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<sup>43</sup> Michael T. Klare, "Is a War With China Inevitable?," *The Nation*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/is-a-war-with-china-inevitable>.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Hunzeker and Mark Christopher, "It's Time to Talk About Taiwan," *Defense One*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/02/its-time-talk-about-taiwan/163291>.

<sup>45</sup> Zachary Keck, "America's Relative Decline: Should We Panic?," *The Diplomat*, January 24, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/americas-relative-decline-should-we-panic>.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin Herscovitch, "A Balanced Threat Assessment of China's South China Sea Policy," Cato Institute, August 28, 2017, [http://www.iberchina.org/files/2017/south\\_china\\_sea\\_cato.pdf](http://www.iberchina.org/files/2017/south_china_sea_cato.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Richard Nephew, "China and economic sanctions: Where does Washington have leverage?," Brookings Institution, September 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-and-economic-sanctions-where-does-washington-have-leverage>.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel R. DePetris, "Sanction China? Remember: Sanctions Rarely Succeed—And Often Backfire," *Newsweek*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/sanction-china-remember-sanctions-rarely-succeed-often-backfire-opinion-1498658>.

manufacturing.<sup>49</sup> Thus, a defensive approach is incompatible with an offensive approach, because the defensive approach negatively impacts the American economy and workers across all sectors of the market.<sup>50</sup> An offensive approach would reinvigorate the economy and have a strong potential to allow the United States to pull ahead in the economic race with China.

Instead of approaching China as an adversary to combat, the United States could also attempt to welcome China into the international order and help its economy transition to a fully capitalist system. As China's economy is expected to quickly surpass that of every other nation, including the United States, it would be an uphill battle to attempt to mitigate China's economy and trade.<sup>51</sup> With this understanding, the United States could pursue a policy of constructive engagement with China and seek to improve its economic relationship with China.

## **Recommendations**

### **Alliance Strategy**

In regard to its alliance strategy, the United States should continue to maintain its alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan, yet some adjustments are necessary to benefit the United States and its allies, as well as to prevent a war from breaking out with China.

For Japan, the United States should maintain its current force posture but encourage Japan to increase its Self-Defense Forces and take a more prominent role in the alliance. This would allow Japan to ensure its defense against China and for the United States to move away from an outdated strategy of preventing Japanese expansion.<sup>52</sup>

For South Korea, the United States should decrease the number of troops stationed there and encourage South Korea to modernize its military capabilities. In doing so, South Korea would be better able to establish itself as an independent power in the Asia-Pacific and be able to take charge of its international relations with North Korea as it sees fit.<sup>53</sup>

For the Philippines, the United States should rescind its commitment to respond militarily in the event of any conflict between the Philippines and China in disputed territory in the South China Sea. This policy provokes China to test the United States' commitment, because it is not realistic that the United States would launch a war with China if Chinese boats were to come into contact with Filipino fishing vessels, and thus China would be more incentivized to do so. If the United States did respond with military action, that would cause unnecessary escalation and death. If the United States did not respond, China would reveal that American commitments cannot be trusted and weaken American influence. In solidifying the alliance as something to be believed, it will prevent China from taking aggressive actions toward the Philippines.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Morici, "Opinion: How to win the trade war with China," Market Watch, September 14, 2019, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/how-to-win-the-trade-war-with-china-2019-09-03>.

<sup>50</sup> Craig Allen, "U.S.-China trade dispute harms Americans," Politico, June 24, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2021/06/24/us-china-trade-dispute-harms-americans-493351>.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas R. Lardy, "U.S.-China Economic Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy," Brookings Institution, April 25, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/u-s-china-economic-relations-implications-for-u-s-policy>.

<sup>52</sup> Ian Henderson, "Why the US Should Encourage a Militarized Japan," *Epoch Times*, November 15, 2018, [https://www.theepochtimes.com/why-the-us-should-encourage-a-militarized-japan\\_2716668.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/why-the-us-should-encourage-a-militarized-japan_2716668.html).

<sup>53</sup> Kathryn Botto, "Why Doesn't South Korea Have Full Control Over Its Military?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 21, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/08/21/why-doesn-t-south-korea-have-full-control-over-its-military-pub-79702>.

<sup>54</sup> Robert D. Williams, "What did the US accomplish with its South China Sea legal statement?," Brookings Institution, July 22, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/07/22/what-did-the-us-accomplish-with-its-south-china-sea-legal-statement>.

For Taiwan, the United States should make explicit its commitment to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, as establishing a clear guideline with China will deter China from invading Taiwan because China does not want to get into a full-on war with the United States. Additionally, China would trust the American commitment to defend Taiwan if the United States decreased its incredible commitments and made explicit its commitment to Taiwan. In doing so, the United States can further deter Chinese aggression and signal its commitment to protecting democracy and freedom.<sup>55</sup>

### **Geo-Economic Strategy**

As for its geo-economic strategy, there are several actions that the United States should take. First, the United States should clarify the sanctions that it is imposing on China and the justifications for doing so. This would decrease the ambiguity surrounding which sectors of the economy the United States is targeting, and give China further clarity as to what actions could be taken to reduce the sanctions.<sup>56</sup> Second, the United States should make efforts to improve the American economy through opening its markets and promoting domestic manufacturing, coupled with economic incentives. In doing so, America would be able to grow its economy and lessen its reliance on China for trade.<sup>57</sup> Third, the United States should work with its allies in Asia to develop a strong international order and promote fair trade. In cooperating with its allies, the United States can continue to demonstrate its commitment to these nations and to democracy.<sup>58</sup> Through these actions, the United States can improve its economy and the economy of its allies while being able to continue to hold China accountable for its actions.

### **Allied Assurance**

In taking these actions, the United States would be able to prevent a war with China and grow its economy without sacrificing the trust and support of its allies in East Asia. These policies are specifically tailored to the wants and needs of each ally and demonstrates the confidence and appreciation that the United States has for its allies. By taking a step back in Japan and South Korea, the United States will allow those two nations to have a more substantial role in the formation of their military and increased standing in the international arena. For the Philippines, the United States will continue to protect the country while adjusting its policy so as to not unnecessarily cause war. For Taiwan, the United States will end its policy of ambiguity and make clear that it intends to defend Taiwan. China would not view the United States' actions in Japan, South Korea, or the Philippines as aggressive, as the United States is allowing its allies to have a stronger role in their partnerships. The only action that might cause backlash from China would be the United States' declaration to protect Taiwan. However, China is already operating as if the United States would come to Taiwan's defense in the event of an invasion, meaning that the only thing this policy would do it make explicit to everyone the United States' intentions.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> George F. Will, "Opinion: 'Strategic ambiguity' is no longer a prudent U.S. policy on Taiwan," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/02/strategic-ambiguity-is-no-longer-prudent-us-policy-taiwan>.

<sup>56</sup> Jordan Brunner and Emily Weinstein, "The Strategic and Legal Implications of Biden's New China Sanctions," *Lawfare*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/strategic-and-legal-implications-bidens-new-china-sanctions>.

<sup>57</sup> William G. Gale and Grace Edna, "Economic relief and stimulus: Good progress but more work to do," Brookings Institution, December 16, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/economic-relief-and-stimulus-good-progress-but-more-work-to-do>.

<sup>58</sup> David Dollar and Ryan Hass, "Getting the China challenge right," Brookings Institution, January 5, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/getting-the-china-challenge-right>.

<sup>59</sup> Joshua Rovner, "Ambiguity Is a Fact, Not a Policy," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/ambiguity-is-a-fact-not-a-policy>.

## **Adversarial Deterrence**

However, by no means does this mean that the United States would give up on its overall deterrence policy against China. The United States is not abandoning any of its allies, and is in fact recommitting to Taiwan, which is one of the most contentious issues between the United States and China. Rather, the United States is backing down from its incredible commitments to make certain to China what it will protect and what it will not protect. In doing so, the United States will increase its deterrence and international credibility through only defending what it can and will actually defend.<sup>60</sup> In regard to its geo-economic strategy, the United States is continuing its containment and deterrence posture against China by maintaining its economic sanctions against it. This will signal to China that although the United States is not wholly opposed to China joining the international order, it is still expected to follow international norms such as democracy, protection of human rights, and freedom of speech.

Furthermore, even if China were to surpass the United States economically, it would not spell the end of American global hegemony.<sup>61</sup> China still faces several struggles, including its internal political issues as a result of its one-party Communist system, and its geographical issues through competitions from neighboring countries such as India and Russia. Thus, even with the United States decreasing some of its alliance commitments to its partners in East Asia, there is no need for the United States to fear the decline of its influence internationally, as it will still remain the dominant power.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the past few decades, China has solidified itself as the United States' primary competitor in terms of military, economy, and international influence. In response, the United States has pursued a policy of containment through anchoring its alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan, and through imposing economic sanctions on China. Now, the time has come for the United States to re-evaluate its current posture in East Asia and to determine how to best prevent war with China. To do so, the United States needs to improve its alliance strategy and its geo-economic strategy. Concerning its alliances, the United States must allow its allies to take a stronger role in security their military and security and resolve ambiguity about what the United States will defend. As for its geo-economic strategy, the United States must build up its economy and work together with its East Asian allies to create a global economy with strong international norms to allow China to integrate itself into the current system of power. In doing so, the United States will be able to assure its allies of its strong commitment to them, deter China from taking provocative actions in East Asia, and prevent war from occurring.

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Beinart, "America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age," *The Atlantic*, September 16, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010>.

<sup>61</sup> Ashok Swain, "China's economy and military can overtake US, but it still won't become global superpower," *The Print*, January 21, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/chinas-can-overtake-us-but-it-still-wont-become-global-superpower/588718>.

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