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## For the Defense of East Asia: Recommendations for US Policy

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States's pivot to Asia has suffered from inconsistency across its diplomatic, military, and economic fronts. A coherent strategy benefits the U.S. by properly balancing and consistently applying its foreign policy tools in the region. The U.S.'s Joint All-Domain Command and Control—a strategy of military primacy—is a resource intensive strategy that endangers U.S. personnel and assets and encourages a security dilemma with China. It does not promote burden sharing between the U.S. and the states of the Indo-Pacific because any country participating in an offensive strategy will face backlash from China because China represents a huge economic partner for most nations in the region.

Instead, the U.S. should pursue a strategy of Defensive Defense. Defensive Defense is the strategy which focuses on the U.S. providing equipment and training to allies and partners in order to empower them to defend themselves. Also, Defensive Defense considers the concerns of Indo-Pacific neighbors—the fear of punishment from China if they appear to have offensive capabilities—and the goals of the United States—regional stability.

Though Defensive Defense has not been implemented yet, there are certainly states who would benefit from developing their defensive capabilities with U.S. support. A Defensive Defense strategy could work in the case of Taiwan. Increasing Taiwan's defensive capabilities to deter China from being able to conquer it would be a more viable strategy than explicitly committing to Taiwan's defense. Additionally, the U.S. already participates in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogues with India, Japan, and Australia, meaning that there is already a security group that the U.S. can pitch Defensive Defense to. Japan already invests in defenses for its islands that China claims, and Australia has invested in U.S. submarine technology. For this group, it is mostly a matter of steering the strategy towards a coherent defensive strategy to serve as an example to the region. The U.S. needs practical engagement in the region, and Defensive Defense answers this problem and fits into the existing partnership structure.

## **US Strategy in Asia Has Been a Massive Failure**

Since the ‘pivot’ towards Asia in 2011 during the Obama administration the United States has grappled with how to best address a region with growing economic importance and the rising power of China.<sup>1</sup> Increased American presence in the region is a given, but the correct balance between economic, diplomatic, and military action has yet to be achieved. The status quo of American foreign policy in Eastern Asia sees Freedom of Navigation Operations run through the South China Sea, bases in Japan, South Korea, and throughout countries surrounding the South China Sea, and engaging in diplomacy for economic deals.<sup>2</sup> The economic deals have been met with limited success due to domestic opposition in the United States, so it is difficult to demonstrate the fruits of its diplomatic efforts.

In fact, the most coherent policies from the U.S. government have been military, from the evolving strategy Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) to the many military bases scattered throughout Asia. The successive military plans sought to integrate military sensors not only to enable faster decision making but to combat Chinese Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.<sup>3</sup> But our efforts to thwart adversaries’ A2/AD capabilities is particularly dangerous because it creates a security dilemma for both the U.S. and China.

The United States needs a strategy that avoids the shortfalls of the current approach while continuing to promote regional stability. A strategy of Defensive Defense dampens the security dilemma that the current U.S. strategy generates while still promoting the U.S.’s aims of deterring aggression.<sup>4</sup> The strategy creates a more stable security environment in the region by promoting the security of partner countries through their own security efforts by building A2/AD in response, lends credibility to the defensive capabilities of the Asian states surrounding China, and is a more efficient use of U.S. tools in the region.<sup>5</sup>

In order to effectively balance China in the region the U.S. should focus on diplomatic efforts to convince its allies that an investment in a defensive, denial-oriented approach would be a better counter to China.

This new approach will better ensure the security of the U.S. and its allies without exacerbating the security dilemma with China.

## **US Priorities in Asia: Why Primacy Is a Failed Approach**

### **JADC2 Drives the Security Dilemma Between the US and China**

The Pentagon’s Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) is the current strategic posture of the United States Armed Forces in the Indo-Pacific. On its face it is a modernization program built around connecting the sensors from each of the military services in order to “share intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data [...] to enable faster decisionmaking.”<sup>6</sup> Integrating intelligence gathering tools and giving each of the branches the same information in an efficient manner is not a bad thing, however the real motive for this modernization is that the United States perceives that its adversaries have modern A2/AD capabilities that would threaten the United States’s ability to project its power across the globe.<sup>7</sup> In a potential conflict with China, JADC2 aims to not only stop an offensive Chinese push outwards but also to attack China’s A2/AD capabilities to allow for total U.S. dominance of the battlespace.<sup>8</sup>

The United States’s military aims in Asia are “to preserve allies’ territorial integrity by maintaining a stable balance of power among regional states.”<sup>9</sup> Not only does the U.S. have limited military aims that do not require the JADC2 strategy, but it is also not a useful strategy for the nations neighboring China. The offensive style of operations that the U.S. employs creates a number of issues for its armed forces. The U.S. has to develop even more expensive systems and capabilities to successfully overcome relatively cheap Chinese A2/AD defensive capabilities.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, China has “[familiarity] with local geography and conditions—and with what is normal background clutter—[that] helps sensors and their operators pick out attacking forces in nearby skies and seas.”<sup>11</sup> Chinese forces would reap the benefits of concealment on the coastline, while U.S. assets at sea would be exposed to China’s A2/AD capabilities.

In the event that the JADC2 strategy must be executed in response to Chinese aggression, the United States would need around three attackers for every defender in order to win a quick and decisive victory, based on the conventional wisdom on force ratios.<sup>12</sup> Not only does the U.S. require more troops to fight on these terms, it needs to spend more money to match its capabilities to the relatively cheap Chinese defenses.<sup>13</sup> JADC2 is a direct challenge to China's A2/AD capabilities, even if the strategy is meant to protect U.S. platforms from the dangers presented to them from the Chinese defenses.<sup>14</sup>

According to Brigadier General John Rafferty, director of the Long-Range Precision Fires Cross-Function Team “penetrating and disintegrating A2/AD is the fundamental problem of all-domain operations.”<sup>15</sup> This strategy—with its admitted aim of targeting Chinese defensive capabilities—creates a security dilemma, or the state in which two competing nations perceive the other’s defenses as an offensive weapon which it could use to attack, causing the two to fall into “the spiral of suspicion and investment in arms.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, an arms race like this could result in miscalculation, where one state, fearing for its security believes it can strike first at the other in order to protect itself and end the competition.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, this strategy may threaten stability in the region more than it promotes it.

A strategy of primacy forces the U.S. military to risk a disproportionately high number of troops’ lives, spend more money, and develop ever increasingly sophisticated technology in order to compete with Chinese defense systems. The defense systems coupled with China’s huge population, strong industrial base, and mandatory military service make this particular fight a massive resource investment that can be avoided with deterrence and power-balancing in the region.

### **Core US Interests Are Hindered By a Military-First Approach**

“We are committed to upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific in which all nations, large and small are secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with international law and principles of fair competition.”<sup>18</sup> This is a statement made by the U.S. Department of State in 2019, framing the

Trump administration’s objectives for the East Asia. The Biden administration’s stance—though it has not released either its official statement on the East Asia nor its National Defense Strategy (NDS) yet—seems to align closely to these aims. It has been diplomatically engaging with Asian countries, expressing its desires for cooperation based on shared interests and pragmatism in dealing with geopolitical issues and democratic values.<sup>19</sup>

The United States has a vested interest in maintaining stability in East Asia, and the United States and China will continue to compete for influence in the region due to the latter’s growing importance in global trade. Thus, the U.S. has committed itself to the defense of global commons, which has led it to dedicate resources to preserving international law and performing freedom of navigation operations.<sup>20</sup> However, the United States has trouble crafting a cohesive strategy leading to inconsistent diplomatic and economic relationships with East Asian states and an over-emphasis on military engagement.

The status quo of U.S. policy stems from disorganization and inconsistent application of policy measures that would assure the region of the stability of the American presence there. The Obama administration’s ‘pivot’ towards Asia was stalled by the Russian annexation of Crimea and new Middle Eastern terror groups which pulled the administration away from its promised policy agenda.<sup>21</sup> Later, the Trump Administration pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership which led to concerns from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) over whether the U.S. is a reliable trading partner.<sup>22</sup>

### **China’s Limited Aims Should Inform Best Practice**

China’s goals can be harder to discern due to both the language barrier and the opaque nature of the CCP, however, there are certain aims they have been made obvious and others that can be surmised from the strategic logic that would under-gird the more transparent objectives. Namely, China desires to control territory it can claim on an historical basis like the South China Sea and Taiwan, as well as other border disputes in both sea and land.

For China, bringing Taiwan under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and ending the ‘One China, Two Systems’ paradigm in favor of one system of China controlled completely by the CCP. Xi Jinping, the president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), has made statements about reunification as a step to rejuvenate the country from its ‘weakness and chaos,’ referring to when Chiang Kai-Shek and the nationalists fled to Taiwan after being defeated by the communists in 1949.<sup>23</sup>

For the South China Sea potential oil reserves have largely caused the dispute over the reefs and pseudo-islands.<sup>24</sup> China, like most states, would like to enjoy some level of energy independence so controlling the floor of the sea could potentially be very profitable for China. China has also driven fishing vessels from other nations bordering the South China Sea out of disputed waters in a bid to control the fisheries.<sup>25</sup>

The main focus of Chinese territorial acquisition is near its own borders, which means that U.S.’s best strategy involves balancing in the region by focusing on preventing China from bullying its neighbors. U.S. primacy does not directly empower China’s neighbors, and U.S. diplomatic and economic involvement in the region has failed to relieve China’s coercive pressure from its neighbors. Consistent economic and diplomatic engagement in the region benefits both the U.S. and its partners with the regional power balance.

## **Defensive Defense Will Make Allies Stronger**

U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific all have a vested interest in security challenges presented by China. China’s A2/AD systems encompass their coasts along the first island chain, many seafaring neighbors of China have disputes with it over various islands and reefs, and China has also asserted its values across borders, wanting to control the narrative about China in other countries. It has been extending its influence in the region through the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).<sup>26</sup>

China is undoubtedly a serious power in the region with military, diplomatic, and economic ties with all of the nations in East Asia. But it has also engaged in

territorial disputes that have security implications for the states surrounding it, so while many states are not prioritizing balancing against a rising China the U.S. should work to engage with countries that do have such concerns to create a route for other countries which decide that China may also become a challenge to them. The U.S. should promote Defensive Defense as a means of deterrence for nations threatened by China. Some states have already begun the process of bolstering their defensive capabilities, while others continue to hedge, the U.S. should continue to provide hedging states the option to invest in defensive capabilities while supporting those already building out their defensive capabilities.

## **The Quad is Well-Placed to Implement Defensive Capabilities**

The U.S. has already found states who have already begun to invest in defense technologies in the short term; states who have strong diplomatic and economic ties with the United States, concerns over Chinese aggression, and the economic wherewithal to invest in defense in earnest. Of the states surrounding China, many already have issues with an increasingly assertive China. Quad members Japan, Australia, and India are all Asian or Oceanic neighbors which are wealthy and wary of China. Japan and India both have land disputes with China and Australia has acted as a vanguard for states in the region to stand up to China.<sup>27</sup> Australia has taken umbrage with Chinese coercion against it for demanding an investigation into whether the Wuhan lab was somehow connected to the corona virus pandemic.<sup>28</sup> The U.S. can capitalize on the momentum of these more powerful states to propel its defensive defense strategy in the region.

Japan has disputes with China over the Senkaku Islands, both lay claims to the islands and value the “potential oil and natural gas reserves, [its nearness to] prominent shipping routes, and [surrounding] rich fishing areas.”<sup>29</sup> Despite concerns about Chinese incursions on the islands Japan has maintained strong trade relations with China, which is wise because it avoids China’s punitive economic measures, and still allows the Japanese economy to thrive. Finally, because China has flown war planes and sailed ships to violate the Senkaku’s space and Japan responded by building military infrastructure there is some momen-



tum in Japanese strategic thinking that coincides with Defensive Defense capacity building.<sup>30</sup>

Australia has come out as a defiant force against Beijing because of what it views as undue Chinese interference in domestic Australian politics and has bought U.S. nuclear submarines in order to arm itself.<sup>31</sup> The recent purchase of the nuclear submarines in particular do not imply a strategically defensive position however, due to the fact that they may be perceived as an offensive technology. It aligns openly with U.S. primacy in the region and therefore promotes the security dilemma.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, India has had a long-standing border dispute with China which has cooled partially because both sides banned firearms and now border forces fight each other with spears and stones. However, this is likely to be temporary as both sides are building up their armed forces in the disputed areas and negotiations to defuse tensions have failed so far.<sup>33</sup> Of the three countries, India's situation seems the most fragile and close to war so even a defensive military buildup could be misconstrued.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) already connects these three states and the United States. Using this existing relationship to implement defensive technologies, tactics, and strategies. However, this group of primary movers of Defensive Defense are very useful to as proof of concept for other nations in the region who would be willing to invest in defensive capabilities in order to balance China. If there is a large enough group, then this behavior is harder for China to punish. In fact, the Quad leaders have been outspoken about using the relationship to cover areas of shared interest in order to counter China's assertiveness in the region.<sup>34</sup> Though just three states seems like a small basis for a group with these aims, India, Australia, and Japan are all large trading partners with China and wield a lot of power in the region. Japan ranks number three and India ranks ninth as some of the largest trading partners of China.<sup>35</sup> China also cannot stop trading for Australian iron ore as it is a necessity for the Chinese economy.<sup>36</sup> Japan seems to follow a Defensive Defense approach most closely while the other two have more offensive approaches, however U.S. officials can continue talks to urge the other two to invest in defensive capabilities and systems.

## **A Strategy to Deter China from Invading Taiwan**

Though the U.S. formally acknowledges the 'One-China' principle it has maintained close unofficial ties with Taiwan for decades. The United States has maintained that China must have peaceful relations with Taiwan and sells "defense articles and defense services" to Taiwan in order to protect the island from Beijing.<sup>37</sup> The U.S. has maintained its policy of strategic ambiguity because of the flexibility it lends to future U.S. planning concerning the island.

Taiwan's importance to the two nations makes it a unique lynchpin in this region. If China wishes to take Taiwan via military force it has to gamble that it will win in a way that warrants national pride—a quick and decisive victory—and that by doing this it won't exacerbate the security dilemma in the region. China may bring about its own balancing if it proves to its neighbors that it is capable of launching an invasion against a fortified island.

These two factors create a push and pull for China, as China wants to move quickly to avoid more Taiwanese military build-up and to remain ahead of other nations in the region militarily. However, China may not be certain it could conquer Taiwan in a way that would benefit it right now. Implementing Defensive Defense in Taiwan deters China from invading the nation and delivers another proof-of-concept for Defensive Defense. The U.S. already sells arms to Taiwan, implementing defensive defense is only a matter of structuring the sales around defensive items.<sup>38</sup>

## **The U.S. Can Offer an Economic Alternative to China**

For the developing nations surrounding China who have yet to begin serious defense investing, there are a number of issues they must confront. These developing nations' economic ties to China mean that they are more vulnerable to Chinese coercion if the CCP judges that a certain nation is taking actions against China. Much of their trade outside of intra-ASEAN trade is with China both in terms of exports and imports, though the U.S. ranks closely behind China followed by other US allies.<sup>39</sup>

By virtue of simple geography, it makes strategic and economic sense for ASEAN states to continue to engage with China, however, this doesn't necessarily work against U.S. aims. Though these states may seem ambivalent towards China and its current assertive nature, U.S. strategy should account for the fact that these nations are vulnerable and benefit from a neutral or positive stance towards China. What these nations need is economic autonomy and a greater drive towards home-grown security programs which the U.S. can help them achieve this through consistent political and economic diplomacy, proving to these countries that the U.S. is a reliable presence in the region, not just a military interloper.

If the U.S.'s aim is balance of power in the region then these states engaging successfully in trade is a good thing as it will allow them the capacity build military force when they need to. Additionally, giving ASEAN states greater access to foreign markets like the U.S.'s and other U.S. allies' would give these states a choice to balance against China should the need arise.

Besides economic leverage, China has developed a much more assertive approach to the region, particularly in the South China Sea, where China has antagonized the other states surrounding the sea due to Chinese claims of sovereignty over it, preventing other nations from leveraging their energy resources under the sea-floor.<sup>40</sup> China has also aggressively pursued fishing vessels of smaller nations that they perceive as intruding on their territory.<sup>41</sup> This aggression puts pressure on its neighbors, impacting these nations' security and domestic politics, as they see that their maritime Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is being disregarded and domestic groups take exception to governmental inaction against China.<sup>42</sup>

While China asserts itself in the region, regional experts doubt that nations in East Asia regard China as a threat, saying that these nations "know how to get along with China and know how to push back against China."<sup>43</sup> These experts doubt that China's actions will create an arms race in the region.<sup>44</sup> However, that doesn't mean that these nations aren't open to increasing their defensive military capabilities. Malaysia has embarked on a process of military modernization in order to better protect its territorial claim to its own coastal waters. It has invested in boats,

aircraft, and defensive capabilities.<sup>45</sup> Vietnam and the Philippines have also pursued a similar path in order to be able to better defend themselves and pursue a strategy of "minimalist competition" to deter China but remain under the threat threshold for the powerful nation.<sup>46</sup> The U.S. should aid this pivot towards deterrence because it avoids the issues JADC2 presents.

In one notable event between the U.S., the Philippines, and China a volcano erupted in the Philippines. Mount Pinatubo erupted and compromised the U.S. Clark Airforce Base and the Subic Bay Naval Station which in turn lead to the departure of U.S. forces as the Philippine's government decided against renewing the bases. China, which was by then taking over various reefs and shoals saw an opportunity and took over Mischief Reef as there were no forces there to stop it.<sup>47</sup>

Though the moral of this story might seem to call for a greater U.S. presence in the region, it should instead be interpreted as a need for domestic defensive forces to protect smaller nations' claims. Public opinion and unfortunate circumstances could lead to a third-party protector being an inconsistent force in the region, if the Philippines had the ability to protect itself and its claims it wouldn't have become a problem. This example should be applied to the rest of Asia in case the U.S. cannot be there to balance against China. U.S. diplomatic efforts should focus on showing that the U.S. is invested in the region, but it is in Asian countries' interests to invest in their own defense as well.

## **Demonstrate Commitment Via Diplomatic and Economic Engagement**

On the diplomatic plane, a primacy approach cannot do much to encourage countries in the region to agree to burden share. It is expensive to try to overcome A2/AD capabilities using offensive operations because many nations in the region cannot maintain the necessary level of military spending. American diplomacy cannot ask China's neighbors to join into a strategy of primacy because China uses its coercive power to prevent nations from acting in ways it doesn't like. U.S. policy turning towards Defensive Defense means that nations in the region have the ability to burden share with the U.S., deterring China's aggression without earning its ire.

Additionally, because China is the largest trade partner for most of the countries in the region it can exert economic pressure on countries that it perceives as working against it. In fact, on other matters China has shown that it will use coercive economic pressure to punish and change behavior it does not like. Countries have been targeted by China for hosting human rights activists who disagree with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—like the Dalai Lama and Liu Xiaobao—, disputed territorial claims on islands and maritime features, even in retaliation against South Korea for accepting terminal high-altitude area defense (THAAD).<sup>48</sup>

In order to assure nations that the U.S. is in the region permanently the United States needs to complete its trade deals in Asia. Historically, U.S. trade deals in Asia have run into political trouble in the United States. During the Obama administration's pivot to Asia the Trans-Pacific Partnership was created to fulfill economic and geopolitical aims for the U.S.<sup>49</sup> The Trump administration left the TPP and did not join any successive regional deals like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)—the revised version of the TPP after the U.S. left. The Biden administration has also made no moves to rejoin the CPTPP and has said that it doesn't plan on a traditional trade deal with the region.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, China joined another trade agreement called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes many of the same Asian nations in the CPTPP, and China is even seeking to join the CPTPP.<sup>51</sup>

China occupies a large role in the region as an importer and exporter to Japan, South Korea, Australia, and countries in ASEAN.<sup>52</sup> This gives China the leverage to punish smaller states with deep trade ties to China and a higher degree of dependence on the Chinese economy.<sup>53</sup> The U.S. needs to give nations in the region the ability to become economically less dependent on China. Had the U.S. remained in TPP or renegotiated a new trade deal, it would have presented the ASEAN participants with greater economic access to the entirety of North America, some South American countries, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>54</sup> A deal adjacent to the TPP or an American bid to join the CPTPP could reintroduce the United States to the region as an economic alternative to China. Given that the U.S. damaged its influence in the region

through its abrupt exit from the TPP and failure to negotiate another deal throughout the Trump administration, it may be more difficult to procure a deal, but the U.S. is a huge market and still an attractive option for countries seeking economic development.

## Conclusion

The United States's pivot towards Asia has been incomplete and lacks coherent policy direction. U.S. policy makers agree that the region is important but cannot seem to agree on how best to address the issues concerning the U.S.—Freedom of Navigation, free trade, and regional stability. The JADC2's current application in the Indo-Pacific does not embody the sort of long-term thinking that will promote regional stability, in fact in the long term it promotes regional instability through the security dilemma it creates.

Instead, the United States should employ its substantial D.I.M.E. power and supplement Defensive Defense with political and economic diplomacy to build a balancing defensive strategy in the region that helps China's neighbors help themselves without further exacerbating the security dilemma with the rising dragon. Many of the nations surrounding China are pragmatic in their dealings with China and their own security. As the U.S. continues to be an inconsistent partner in matters of security and economics so that Indo-Pacific countries will continue to hedge towards China due to its economic prevalence in the region.

The Quad represents a foothold in the region in security matters, that stands as proof of concept for Defensive Defense if the U.S. can apply the strategy consistently. Taiwan also serves the same purpose, if the U.S. structures its weapons sales to Taiwan around the ideas of Defensive Defense. The U.S. has plenty of places to start implementing this strategy, and investments in it now will serve to stabilize the region in the long term by preventing a Chinese hegemony.

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