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Containment 2022: Rallying the Asia-Pacific Against Chinese Aggression

By David Winter

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The balance of power has shifted away from the favor of the United States, but the attitude of the American foreign policy elite has not reflected this reality. The Asia-Pacific region is home to multiple U.S. partners, valuable economic traffic, and to a rising near-peer competitor, the People's Republic of China (PRC). China has already surpassed America in purchasing power parity (PPP), but what happens if China emerges as the dominant economic actor globally?¹ China had been patient with its "hide-and-bide" approach from the era of former President Deng Xiaoping and has transitioned to the "loud-and-proud" approach introduced by current President Xi Jinping. Xi's address to the most recent Communist Party Congress highlighted the need to further improve military power and secure food, energy, and supply chain routes, indicating the insecurity of his leadership.²

It is more important than ever to foster and develop alliances so that the United States and its allies may protect their national interests from mutual threats. Such a move will require Washington to delegate power and authority to its partners, entrusting each member with a vested interest in securing the Asia-Pacific region to share the burden of mutual security against instability. Increased economic strength has allowed the PRC greater investment in defense and has contributed to China's ascension to near-peer competitor status.³ Defense investments span from improved nuclear capability to cyber and conventional military forces. The days of American hegemony are behind us, and the United States can no longer afford to face economic and security challenges unilaterally without imposing greater costs on itself.

The United States should establish new regional partners through economic and military partnerships to challenge the expansionist policies of Xi's China in the East and South China Seas. Multiple states in the region beginning to feel the threat of a rising China have challenged the territorial claims made by the Chinese but lack the power and influence to ward off invasive behavior.⁴ Washington can harness the concerns of these states to promote equal ownership of the Asia-Pacific region. The United States should enhance economic ties and military interoperability to promote cooperation with Asia-Pacific nations aimed at containing and deterring Chinese aggression in the region. This will require the United States to align with its regional allies and other interested parties in all facets of statecraft including diplomatic/political, economic, and military. In the subsequent sections, I will cover how China was able to attain near-peer competitor status, and how U.S. foreign policy can address this change in the global balance of power. The recommendation proposed is a model for developing

new partnerships with unconventional allies, using Vietnam as a case study.

China: Economic Wealth Transfers into Military Might

China has evolved significantly since the industrial boom it experienced and the economic reforms it enacted in the 1970s.⁵ Today, China has attained the status of the world's second largest economy and it already surpassed the U.S. as the largest GDP in PPP in 2013.¹ This is an indication of how rapid China's economy has grown in only the past four decades.

This influx of wealth has allowed the Communist Party to continue improving domestic development for its people, effectively lifting 800 million of its people out of poverty.⁶ However, this sudden availability of treasure has also provided it with the necessary resources to advance its military capabilities. As China's economy has expanded exponentially due to opening up to the world in the 1970s and joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, it has expanded its ability to maintain high defense and military budgets year-on-year.⁷

Relevant to this discussion is Xi's major investment into the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which has earned the title of world's largest naval force. China has sought to establish itself as a major regional naval power, a decision informed by its perception that external powers have historically enforced their will on Chinese foreign policy (namely the U.S. during the 1996 Taiwan Crisis).⁸ This investment has allowed China to pursue its territorial expansion in the South China Sea with the construction of manmade islands, naval bases, and stationing of its large navy.

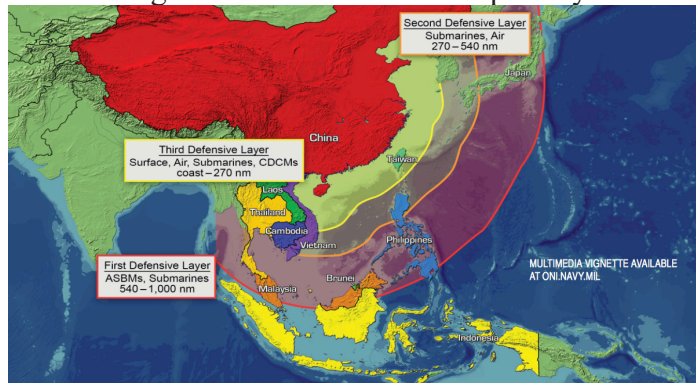
Owning the Area of Operations – Investments in a Modern Navy and Defense

China's title of world's largest navy was earned due to the fact that it currently possesses the largest number of ships. Even though a large portion is constituted by defense-oriented missile boats, PLAN still possesses considerable naval power through other means. For instance, it owns three aircraft carriers for power pro-

jection, sixty-six submarines for coastal defense and potential deep sea offensive operations, and a formidable amphibious transport fleet that would be needed for an invasion of Taiwan.^{9 10 11}

The historical fear of interference by a foreign power has also informed China's strategies to deny power projection and target the vulnerabilities of interloping forces. Development of Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities such as anti-ship and air precision guided munitions and ballistic missiles, have presented a credible long-range threat to U.S. forces deployed at sea, and potentially to those based throughout the Pacific. Figure 1 from the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance illustrates the increasing range of China's A2/AD capability, increasing the ability of China's military to strike and effectively destroy or disable U.S. naval forces.¹²

Figure 1: China's A2/AD Capability



The image shows the various layers of defense possessed by China. Nm = nautical miles

The exact cost of China's A2/AD capabilities is not known, but what is public knowledge is that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has spent 1.7/8% of its annual GDP for the past two decades to fund its military development and functioning.¹³ This means China has invested hundreds of billions of dollars annually to advance and expand its military capabilities in pursuit of its national security goals. It's no wonder that it has also earned the title of third most powerful military in the world, behind Russia.¹⁴

All these developments could not have been obtained without Chinese integration into global markets, and its increased market share of global manufacturing. For this reason, the U.S. and its allies should target China's economic power to further limit Chinese

military power and expansion. Without continual growth and an influx of surplus money, China will not be able to fund its growing naval power to match a U.S.-led coalition. China’s economic growth is projected to slow down over the next 10 years, and if a U.S. coalition can exacerbate this trend, then China will be disarmed as it will no longer have the necessary vast resources required for maintaining a massive military.¹⁵ It is imperative that the United States and its partners capitalize on this opportunity to minimize China’s window of opportunity for aggressive expansionist campaigns like a hostile takeover of Taiwan.

“Pivot to Asia” – Too Little Too Late

While the U.S. was engaged with wars in the Middle East, China was developing its economic power, and subsequently its military power. By 2009, the Obama Administration was overseeing the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan that it had inherited from the Bush Administration. Insurgency groups in both nations engaged U.S. forces for the duration of its occupations, and when one group was defeated, another would rise, like the Islamic State did when President Barack Obama decided to draw down forces and begin a withdrawal from Iraq in 2011.^{16 17} The job of setting up an independently functioning state, and “nation-building,” was not complete, so the U.S. was recommitted to fighting another insurgency, entrenching U.S. focus and forces on the Middle East region. Consequently, China gained additional time to garner its power and resources. Although China suffered an economic crisis in 2015, it was able to reverse the damage of that crisis and maintain steady economic and military growth for the remainder of the 2010s.

The U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 and formally ended combat missions in Iraq in December 2021, marking the official end of those major Middle East campaigns that began in the early 2000s.¹⁸ While the U.S. was fighting Islamic jihadist non-state actors vying for power and control within their own countries, China was developing its own capabilities, all the while bankrolling U.S. operations in the Middle East through large purchases of U.S. Treasury bonds.¹⁹ As of today, China owns 13% of U.S. debt, nearly \$1 trillion USD worth.¹⁹ While the United States was engaged in “Forever Wars” halfway

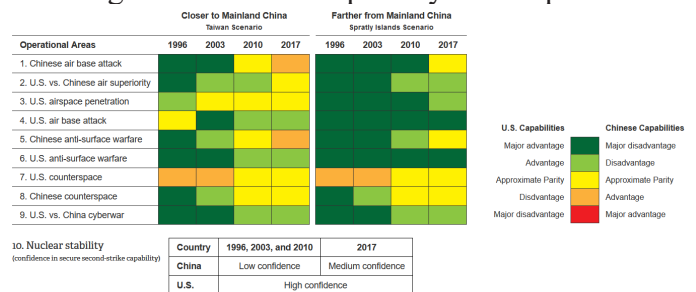
across the world draining its power, China was augmenting its own capacities, gearing up for the great power competition that was coming.

After Action Report: Results of Two Decades of Wars

Not only did U.S. intervention in the Middle East fail to ensure greater regional stability, but it also contributed to U.S. indebtedness to the PRC. China holds some leverage over the U.S. economy in that it could decide to sell large swaths of Treasury bonds to increase interest rates, hurting the U.S. economy. But China would have to recognize that this could also result in economic self-mutilation. Weaponization of debt might not be a prudent course of action as long as the world’s two largest economies are intimately tied and coupled.

During the two decades of U.S. wars in the Greater Middle East, China quietly developed and expanded its own military capabilities. Figure 2 from the RAND Corporation illustrates the military modernization achieved by the PRC, the result of which is that the major advantages enjoyed by the U.S. are no longer exclusive to U.S. military power. Make no mistake, the U.S. still maintains military supremacy over the PRC. However, the modernization chart over time indicates a closing of the primacy gap and a move toward parity in two scenarios, Taiwan Conflict and engagement in the South China Sea – Spratley Islands.²⁰ The Obama Administration was prudent in acknowledging the need to refocus efforts and resources toward Asia in 2012 to counter the rise of a regional hegemon which might develop the military means to enforce its interests.

Figure 2: China’s Capability Development



This image from Rand Corporation’s study on Chinese capability development indicates China is closing the military power and capability gap with the U.S.

Instead of increasing the militarization of the Asia-Pacific, Obama pursued partnerships with regional nations to improve economic ties, while maintaining a robust security budget for the region. Another significant component of this strategy was bilateral diplomacy with China to maintain U.S. interests and stabilization of the region.²¹ Engagement with China was important to project the image of peace-seeking through cooperation, but it did not lead China to be any more agreeable with U.S. initiatives in the region. This was especially the case when then-National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, phrased the “pivot to Asia” a “re-balancing”.²²

Why the “Re-balancing” to Asia Failed

Overall, the “pivot to Asia” can be considered a failure since it did not significantly improve ties with China, nor did it prevent its further economic growth and military development. A valid criticism of the “pivot to Asia” strategy was that it was an insincere attempt by the U.S. to reassure China it meant no harm to China’s ambitions, while aligning with regional forces to thwart it. The limited military component involved reinforcing Japan and South Korea’s defense capabilities and military preparedness. The economic component involved restructuring economic partnerships where the U.S. had greater leadership and influence at the helm, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). These two conditions stimulated concerns from China as it interpreted this strategy as containment sold under the pretenses of diplomacy and partnership.²³

In response to U.S. economic and diplomatic efforts to undermine China’s rise, China offered its own economic partnerships, such as membership in the nascent Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which enticed more regional nations. U.S. refusal to participate in AIIB showed the hand of the U.S. in its efforts to contain China, rather than pursue deeper economic partnership.²⁴ Furthermore, the TPP was not finalized before the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and it, along with other bilateral economic deals, was discarded by the subsequent Trump Administration. It seems that the Obama Administration was too distracted with ongoing commitments elsewhere to focus on the professed priority of securing American interests in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁵

Given the aforementioned wars in the Greater Middle East, Obama’s efforts to limit Iran’s nuclear program, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the focus and commitment of resources and appropriate planning to the “pivot to Asia” was competing with other immediate global activities, rendering it a soft execution of grand strategic planning.

Middle East Wars End – Is the US Ready to Commit to Asia?

Although U.S. forces demonstrated initial success to the commitment of stabilizing the nations of Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. adversaries understood that they could wait America out. As seen in Afghanistan, once the signal went out that America would withdraw, the Taliban and other insurgent forces like the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), took their opportunity to reclaim the nation. The Afghan security forces trained and equipped by Washington gave up without a fight, providing a swift recapture by Taliban forces.²⁶ Perhaps, this demonstrates that a 20-year campaign of providing security and forces is not always conducive to independent security development.

The Afghanistan case study could be a major exception to the effort of using U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) to develop foreign military security forces. Again, Iraq has demonstrated relatively greater success and could potentially serve as a model to limit U.S. conventional force deployment to areas of concern. Relative to the Middle East, the U.S. is more familiar with the cultures of the nations that make up the Asia-Pacific region, and with good reason. U.S. military operations and involvement in Asia has been longstanding since the early 1800s.²⁷ Due to the regional and global instability of World War II, and the following U.S. victory, reconstruction, development, and stability of Asia has been in the interest of U.S. national security.

What the United States needed in Afghanistan was to develop a foreign military force with vetted members who demonstrate commitment to their state and motivation to defend against a mutual threat. This may be less of a challenge in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, the United States would need to develop a nation’s military force with the SOF skills required to counter military threats, whether conventional or

unconventional (insurgency). To achieve this, U.S. forces and this foreign military would need to develop interoperability so that the United States would have the option to cooperate with the foreign military, if necessary. Otherwise, the military could operate independently of U.S. forces.

Afghanistan is a case study of the greatest challenges such a feat faces. Loyalties are highly divided in the unique cultures within Afghanistan, perhaps more so than in Iraq, due to the various tribal affiliations of individuals that run external to basic religious sectarianism. That is not to say other countries are not complicated, but U.S. forces entered the Greater Middle East with a poor understanding of these cultural and ethnic divides, which obfuscated who was a friend, foe, or a neutral party pursuing U.S. partnerships for ulterior motives. National loyalties are divided within the Asia-Pacific, but mutual interests in security can motivate cooperation with one another, particularly when facing a rising China.

Existing US Strengths in Asia

The U.S. is very familiar with Asia and its member nations, especially since some of the staunchest U.S. allies reside in the region. Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) are invaluable allies that have contributed to the stability of the region by serving as major economic and cooperative security partners, engaging in regular military exercises and freedom of navigation (FON) operations. This coordination and cooperation between the U.S. and these longstanding allies prevent the U.S. from becoming entangled in both nations' potential conflicts.

Maintaining and even strengthening these partnerships is vital to preserving U.S. regional economic and security interests; however, the U.S. may need to start expanding its array of partnerships and alliances outside of those nations who identify and function as a democracy. Not all nations in the Asia-Pacific region are democracies, but some are beginning to re-evaluate whether the benefits of status quo diplomatic and economic relations with China outweigh the potential costs in terms of security.^{28 29 30}

Nations are currently facing the decision of whether to align with the U.S. or bandwagon with China to

gain economic and security benefits. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initially proffered valuable economic ties with China, but the costly infrastructure development challenge has placed major limitations on those plans.³¹ Nonetheless, nations like the Solomon Islands have already placed their lot with China in an attempt to gain as much as possible by being an early committer.³² Other smaller nations may find such agreements appealing as China further progresses towards regional hegemony, slowly displacing the U.S.

Time is running out for the U.S. to begin its rally of the Asia-Pacific nations against China's incremental development of increased economic influence and prowess, as well as militarized expansion of the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. will have to work with untraditional allies to displace China's growth in hopes of securing a peaceful resolution to this trend toward greater Chinese expansion.

Lessons From the Past – New Cold War?

During the Cold War, the U.S. strategy was to isolate and expel forms of influence operating at the behest of the communist Soviet Union in the U.S. sphere of influence – from Western Europe westward. The divide of Europe after World War II forced a bipolar world defined by competing ideologies – liberal democratic internationalist capitalism vs authoritarian internationalist communism. The stakes of such a competition had never been higher due to the advent of nuclear weapons, which could not only decimate entire nations, but threaten the existence of humanity. George Kennan's strategy of containment, paired with the Truman Doctrine, drove U.S. military and diplomatic missions to push back Soviet influence aggressively.³³ These policies led to arms races, resulting in strategic mirroring between the two superpowers to the point that, for the most part, power and capability parity was maintained between both sides.

What defeated the Soviet Union was not the fear of an overwhelming onslaught of American nuclear or conventional forces, but the cost of maintaining and further developing those capabilities. For example, the Soviet Union suffered from fiscal mismanagement, which left it unprepared to respond to exogenous shocks that affected its most valuable markets, like energy. This influenced Soviet capability to capitalize

on or reduce suffering from the dramatic rise or drop in natural energy prices.³⁴

The *perestroika* reforms toward greater openness in hopes of improving the stagnant Soviet economy were too little and too late to save the Russian empire.³⁵ On top of all the financial mismanagement, lack of economic growth, and fleeting resources available on hand, the Soviets continued to invest in military projects to maintain parity with the United States. U.S. estimates regarding Soviet military spending during this period range from a whopping 10-20% of its annual GDP, indicating that this was a catalyst for the fall of the Soviet Union.²⁹ The Cold War was not won with the most high-tech weapons, but by simply outspending the Soviet Union. It dug its own grave through economic mismanagement and continuous overspending on defense, which it could not afford. This is a valuable lesson for the United States. in terms of understanding how to undermine and defeat an adversary. In a world where more nations are armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), perhaps warfare should be avoided. The post-Cold War world led to a unipolar one led by the hegemon, America, which enjoyed primacy for only a limited time due to inattention to regional developments that would later threaten its hegemony. China has risen to near-peer competitor status and continues to challenge U.S. power and authority through revisionist rhetoric.³⁶ Engaging this near-equal competitor in warfare would have limited benefits, but engaging in the economic dimension, in which power and influence may be diverted away from China, may offer the peaceful route to deterring this threat.

Where the US Went Wrong in Rapprochement with China

Partnering with non-democratic China helped it develop economically, but partnerships with non-democracies like these were done unconditionally. China then and now does not respect the same values for human rights that American presidents champion. For instance, the 1989 Tiananmen massacre resulted in temporary U.S. diplomatic and economic sanctions on China, and so China became a “social outcast” during the 1990s.³⁷ But the Clinton and subsequent Bush Administrations wanted to integrate China into the global economy to help it further develop, in hopes of

creating a middle class that would demand democratic reforms.³⁸

Perhaps Washington overestimated such a goal, or perhaps worse, it was willing to overlook the authoritarian character of China in hopes of securing further economic development and growth for itself through China’s economy. This is to say that for most of the Cold War, the United States did not trade or forge economic relations with the Soviet Union (with the exception of during *détente*, of which that trade constituted a very small percentage of overall national trade).³⁹ The Sino-Soviet split could have provided a greater basis for trust between the United States and communist China, but it is hard to believe that American strategy would not engage China in a similar fashion to the Soviet Union to prevent the rise of a competitor.

Some have called the ongoing competition between the United States and China a “New Cold War,” but what differentiates the original Cold War from this “new” one is that America is deeply tied to China economically, in a way that resembles nothing from its relations with the Soviet Union. Now the United States is dealing with an increasingly aggressive competitor that no longer sees merit in hiding its power and biding its time, while exercising economic influence globally. All the while, both the United States and China are intimately coupled economically, making this situation all the more confusing. Perhaps if this were not the case, the two nations might have already engaged in conflict.

Moving Forward with the Biden Administration

American policymakers should study the past and remember how their country defeated the Soviet Union. The strategy of outspending seems to be out of the cards, but that does not mean China’s economy cannot be a viable target. Perhaps if the United States begins to cooperate with other nations outside of its traditional democratic allies, it could reorient the global economy away from China.

This would involve developing diplomatic and military relations with undemocratic nations. This might clash with President Joe Biden’s proposal to put human rights at the center of his foreign policy, but then again, the U.S. sidelined human rights concerns repeatedly when it came to cooperation with the PRC

in prior administrations. The repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang is shocking in what China is doing to a subjugated people, but even more so is the response of the international community, or lack thereof.⁴⁰

American policymakers are forced to make a decision to either continue relying on the limited number of allies Washington has in the region to potentially counter China in a military conflict or rally the nations in the region in an effort to cooperate economically, in hopes of denying China the resources it requires to continue maintaining its military (the means of expansionism).

Moving Away from the Framing of Democracies vs. Other Forms of Government

For the past five years, the world has witnessed democratic backsliding, or the rise of anti-democratic forms of government.⁴¹ This development runs counter to American global interests, but as the last two decades have demonstrated, American intervention to develop democracies does not have the greatest performance grade. Rather than reacting to this trend with more interventionism, the United States may have to adapt to it and cooperate with less democratic states than it did when the country was a global hegemon. By no means should the U.S. abandon its foundations as a constitutional republic. It should continue to demonstrate the power of the American people through its democratic institutions.

But for the time being, the U.S. may have to hide its preferences for greater democracy globally and bide its time, while it engages the greatest current threat to democracy, Chinese communism. Focusing on the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. luckily has two powerful democratic allies in the region, Japan and the ROK. Enlisting these economically and militarily strong partners, the U.S. should continue to engage the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for increased economic and security ties. Although most of the ASEAN nations are not democracies, they can serve a valuable function in reorienting economic ties away from China and exclusively among a U.S.-led coalition.

The U.S., Japan, and European Union (EU) have

remained the top three investors in ASEAN nations for the past two decades, demonstrating this commitment toward partnership and development. Relations between ASEAN nations and the West have warmed since these parties have displaced China as a top investor and offered better partnerships than China's BRI.⁴² Furthermore, China's prioritization of tending to its domestic and economic needs over partner nations have motivated these ASEAN nations to continue seeking partnerships external to China's deceptively generous offers.⁴³

By establishing these deeper relations and displacing China's influence, the United States could garner favor from these non-democracies in a post-China hegemonic pursuit world. It's important that the U.S. does not impose conditions to develop democratic or liberal values, but rather conditions of loyalty to this new coalition. Rather than pressing ideological beliefs on these new partners, the U.S. can entice them with improved economic offerings that could support domestic infrastructure development, funding of social programs, and the establishment of a modern, but modest, defense program to support alignment against the greater regional threat, China.

To provide an idea of what this type of partnership would look like, let us consider the case for Vietnam, an ASEAN nation with important strategic location along the South China Sea, which has growing concerns with China's activity.

Vietnam – Model for New US Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific Region

The U.S. should provide Vietnam with an array of economic packages and military partnerships in exchange for allowing the presence of a brigade of U.S. Army troops on its territory. This troop presence would not serve as a "tripwire" for American intervention, but rather for military advising, training, and coordination in the event of conflict.

Economic incentives should include stimulating the local economy. Since a brigade of U.S. Army troops consists of 3,000 – 5,000 soldiers, this would necessitate arranging housing/construction contracts with local Vietnamese contractors. In addition, the base

would require local merchants to offer food and goods services to these soldiers, and these contracts can be provided to the most competitive local merchants and industries. This would be dependent on the location of the brigade base, detailed below.

Other economic incentives would include improving educational exchanges and developing Vietnamese industry and manufacturing. Improved diplomatic and economic relations will support foreign alignment toward U.S. goals, including security.

Growing Tensions in the South China Sea

Hostilities in the South China Sea have increased over the past decade due to Chinese expansionism. The territorial waters of regional nations, including Vietnam, are violated by the PLAN and incursions by fishing vessels into foreign exclusive economic zones (EEZs) proceed unabated.^{44 45} Chinese fishing vessels continue to illegally fish within Vietnam's territory despite its internationally recognized claim to an EEZ 200 nautical miles from its shores. The only recourse Vietnam has is to threaten ramming with their own fishing vessels to deter Chinese fishing and navy vessels straying into their waters, but it is usually Vietnamese fishing vessels that are the victims of those tactics.

Were these salami tactics to escalate to a kinetic conflict, Vietnam would be overwhelmed by the regional presence of Chinese naval ships and bases. Should China take a conflict on Vietnamese soil, Vietnam would be overmatched by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), lending to the notion that Vietnam could benefit from the presence of U.S. armed forces. Such forces could provide the necessary training and equipment to arm the Vietnamese to prepare for such a conflict. Furthermore, training provided by SOF would help improve military interoperability between the United States and Vietnam to increase security burden sharing and military coordination between the two nations.

China has already taken territory from Vietnam in 1974 during the Vietnam War.⁴⁶ After a battle between China and South Vietnam, China took and occupied the Paracel Islands, despite protests to the United Nations (UN) by South Vietnam. This reminds Vietnam that China has not only greater military but diplomat-

ic power. The United States could provide a suitable rebalancing of power for the Vietnamese to increase security for itself and the region.

Militarization of the South China Sea by China and its hostile behavior have created regional insecurity, especially as Chinese President Xi refuses to recognize other regional nations' claims to the South China Sea, including Vietnam.⁴⁷ This might further increase the incentive to partner with the United States and host its armed forces. Currently, China serves as a valuable trading partner for all regional nations. These nations, and Washington, are looking for ways to supplant economic ties with Chinese markets due to the imbalance of benefits provided to China from current agreements.⁴⁸

Recommendation for Improving US-Vietnamese Relations

These conditions should motivate U.S. policy to focus on the following priorities:

- 1) Improve U.S.-Vietnamese relations to serve as a model for improving other regional relations.
- 2) Decrease Washington and Vietnam's economic reliance on China through mutually beneficial economic partnerships.
- 3) Prevent China from gaining additional military leverage over Vietnam through development of U.S.-Vietnamese military ties.

As for consideration of where to locate the U.S. Army brigade, the economically developed and modernized city of Binh Duong could serve as an appropriate center for improving industrial development and as a base for training Vietnamese forces. This city also serves as a geographic pathway to the largest metropolitan city in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, undoubtedly a city of interest to protect and maintain from foreign threats (located 50 miles south).

The economic partnership should proceed as follows: The State Department (DOS) should work with the House Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees to determine areas where the United States can expand trade with Vietnam, including sales of arms

and defense equipment. The best way to determine which arms and equipment should be sold would be to outline crossover between national self-defense roles, and interoperability roles with the United States.

Currently, the United States relies on Chinese manufacturing for defense related goods, from chips to simple pieces that are used to build complex machines and devices. The Department of Defense (DoD) should outsource labor and manufacturing to the developing industries of Vietnam and offer contracts on military goods such as electronics and other components essential to drones and satellites. The United States can supplant some Chinese manufacturing and labor with that from Vietnam, while developing Vietnamese industry.

To further incentivize the Vietnamese, the U.S. SOF can provide training and advisors to improve U.S.-Vietnamese military interoperability, all at the cost of the United States. To advance development of Vietnamese industry, DOS should promote more programs similar to the Fulbright Program that allow exchanges of students between America and Vietnam to pursue study for STEM degrees. Foreign scholars can gain work and experience that they may bring back to Vietnam to lead industrial development. Ideally, these would be the individuals the DoD could work with to lead those industrial developments for defense-related manufacturing.

Through extensive economic and military partnerships, the United States can provide weapons and training to partners like Vietnam so that it may defend itself, and if necessary, operate with U.S. forces in the field. This requires intense training drills and sharing of technology to ensure proper military interoperability. Such an agreement would serve practical purposes of providing security to its economy, since China is beginning to feel threatened by the rise of Vietnamese industry.⁴⁹

These early proposals for stationing U.S. military forces are concentrated in south Vietnam, where there may be greater initial positive reception of a U.S. presence. Furthermore, U.S. forces should not move further north so as to not provoke China by stationing military troops too close to its territory. The greater the extent of the partnership with Vietnam, the faster

the process of developing U.S.-Vietnamese relations can be expedited, while providing mutual economic and security benefits. This is something unique U.S. policy can offer: fair and balanced trade with the incentive of security benefits. Furthermore, this would serve as a model to other regional nations that would like to supplant reliance on Chinese economic interaction, while increasing their own security.

In addition, these options demonstrate American engagement with the world in a way that is mutually beneficial. As the distribution of power is changing, U.S. policy must ensure that power does not slide towards China, but rather towards the United States and partners that support U.S. efforts to stabilize the Asia-Pacific region. American policy should seek to raise regional security partners as quickly as possible. Delaying this process could afford China more time to develop its own counterplans to such a strategy, such as its bilateral deals with smaller Asia-Pacific nations like the Solomon Islands.

Conclusion: Economic Re-balancing First, Military Option Second

In the modern world of warfare, conflict is neither preferable nor winnable due to the risk of escalation and employment of WMDs. For this reason, warfare should be engaged at a less destructive level, with this being the economic dimension. The general decline of the use of force and increased usage of economic sanctions demonstrate a shift toward a preference for engagement in this form of statecraft. Although economic punishment has unforeseen consequences, it is relatively less destructive than military statecraft. In addition, economic statecraft bears less political backlash than military statecraft for the same aforementioned reasons.

China is an active member of the global community and serves as a valuable economic partner for all. But Xi's endeavors to further develop China's areas of influence and power have encroached upon an uncomfortable gray area where other nations are beginning to feel threatened. It is inadvisable that the United States engage China in kinetic warfare, and it is less preferable that the nation becomes entangled in foreign wars. Nonetheless, development of American

and partners' security is non-negotiable in a world driven by pursuits of power.

The best way to engage China is to target the power it most covets and requires for maintaining its power in other dimensions: economic power. The recently released U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) identifies China as the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁴ More importantly, it commits the United States to developing current and future partners economically and militarily through information sharing and improving interoperability. Furthermore, it discusses expanding economic prosperity and opportunity while strengthening deterrence against the PRC. Deterrence does not primarily mean the threat of force, but rather dissuasion through high-cost consequences for engaging in aggressive behavior in the pursuit of national goals.

To quote the NDS directly: "Mutually-beneficial Alliances and partnerships are our greatest global strategic advantage. We will strengthen...our Allies and partners based on complementary contributions; combined, collaborative operations and force planning; increased intelligence and information sharing... and our ability to draw on the Joint Force worldwide."⁵⁰ This commitment to partnerships and establishing new alliances is reflected in the Vietnam case study and could prove to be a powerful starting point for the United States to embark on the NDS's mission.

The development of novel economic and military partnerships with untraditional partners may provide Washington the key to shifting the security environment in its favor. The Vietnam case study serves as a single node in what could be a network of incentivized Asian-Pacific nations willing to protect a valuable relationship with the United States. This proposal could reflect the priorities and strategy laid out by the NDS and would provide a more restrained foreign policy in that greater power and responsibility for security would be delegated to partners entrusted with sufficient power to defend themselves from the regional threat of Chinese expansionism.

Review of Points for Success in Recommendation

To reiterate the key points of the Vietnam recom-

mendation, *the United States must engage potential partner countries at all levels of diplomatic and economic development.* Stimulating the local economy using the Army brigade or SOF forces would help support diplomatic efforts on the local level as well. The memories of the Vietnam War remain, and it is important for the United States to normalize relations with the Vietnamese at all levels to ensure mutual trust and cooperation.

Additionally, *DOS should work with domestic institutions and committees to allow for the sharing and sales of defense-related equipment to demonstrate America's trust and commitment to its potential partners.* Interoperability does not only serve the interests of militaries, but also state leaders in that they can trust partners are not only willing but able to cooperate on each level of statecraft to pursue mutual security.

Use of SOF to improve potential partner military command and capability demonstrates that commitment to security partnership. The United States will not only sell partners the equipment but also teach them how to use it and work with them on the battlefield if necessary. Lastly, educational exchanges for STEM studies, especially engineering, could establish the economic and manufacturing ties the United States seeks to replace from China. DoD could directly contract these future industry leaders to shift foreign industry and manufacturing to serve American defense needs while fulfilling a partner's economic growth. This could secure a lasting bond between both parties, which would be interested in insulating their economies from dependence on China.

Through progressive economic power shifting, China will slowly learn the cost of its aggression. The global economic slowdown we are currently seeing does not forebode well for China's economy either. As mentioned earlier, its ambitious BRI project has stalled and borne no fruit as of yet. If anything, it has provided it with bad PR as "BRI partner-nations" are finding themselves stuck with an unsustainable infrastructure development bill. As China is losing momentum and favor with larger nations, the United States should capitalize on this opportunity and step in to fill the gap, achieving a preferable shift in power and influence in its favor to hopefully contain China and avoid kinetic conflict.

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