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Offshore Balancing: A Strategic Shift for US Policy in East Asia

By Nick Ayrton

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Asia emerges as a global economic powerhouse, the United States has intensified its strategic focus on the region. This involvement encompasses a robust economic relationship, substantial diplomatic initiatives (including significant foreign aid and healthcare support), and a strong security presence marked by substantial military assistance and alliances with key Indo-Pacific nations. This multifaceted engagement aims to ensure regional stability, uphold territorial integrity, and promote a “free and open” Asia.

However, the prevailing U.S. strategy, centered on maintaining military dominance, arguably misinterprets the nature of the threat posed by China. While China’s growing military capacity is a concern, many Asian nations are independently bolstering their military capabilities, aided by their economic growth. This natural counterbalancing indicates a reduced necessity for heavy U.S. military involvement. Furthermore, China’s internal focus on regime security, territorial integrity, and economic development suggests a more nuanced approach to its regional ambitions, potentially favoring domestic stability over aggressive expansion.

A shift towards a U.S. strategy of offshore balancing would better align with these dynamics. By supporting the inherent defensive strengths of Asian nations and their geographical advantages, the United States can effectively deter potential aggression without the need for extensive forward military deployment. This approach not only mitigates the risks of an unprovoked conflict but also reflects the evolved capabilities of U.S. allies in Asia, who are increasingly capable of safeguarding their interests. Ultimately, this strategy aims for a gradual reduction of U.S. troop presence, while maintaining the capacity to intervene if the regional power balance is threatened, thereby ensuring a sustainable, long-term stability in Asia.

Introduction

American strategic focus has increasingly shifted to Asia, a region projected to drive 70% of global economic growth in 2023 and contribute more than half of the world’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2040. With Asia’s GDP at \$29.8 trillion in 2020 and 60% of maritime trade passing through its waters, it is a linchpin in global commerce.¹ The United States engages comprehensively in Asia: economically, with \$1.75 trillion in two-way trade and as Southeast Asia’s top investor; diplomatically, through \$2 billion in foreign aid and 267 million COVID-19 vaccines distributed in 2022; and in security, with \$620 million in assistance and tens of thousands of American military personnel devoted to the region.² The United States maintains alliances with five Indo-Pacific nations, aiming to stabilize the region, prevent large-scale conflicts, preserve territorial

integrity, and ensure the region is “free and open.”³

However, current U.S. policies, centered around maintaining military dominance in the region, are counterproductive. This set of policies is reliant on a misreading of the threat China poses to American national security. To be clear, China is a powerful nation with a growing military that seeks to be world class before the middle of the century. It uses various gray zone tactics to apply small but constant pressure. While China’s rising military power is a concern, many Asian countries, leveraging their increasing wealth, are already actively enhancing their own military capabilities, suggesting a natural regional counterbalance that diminishes the need for extensive additional intervention from the United States.

There is also the question of will. With clearly defined priorities such as regime security, territorial integrity and security, and constant economic and social development, China’s focus is unmistakable.⁴ Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge the importance of internal, especially economic, dynamics in authoritarian states like China, where economic success defines their public legitimacy. It’s certainly possible that Chinese President Xi Jinping or his successor may attempt to secure regional hegemony by force. However, it’s also reasonably plausible that China will continue down its path of domestic development, with no future leader wanting to risk China’s current position on a roll of the dice. This approach seems even more likely given China’s current economic situation, as it is besieged by multiple crises that lack easy solutions.⁵

Additionally, any bid to expand China’s influence by force would be a long and arduous endeavor. It has fourteen land neighbors, four of which have nuclear weapons. Its maritime neighbors benefit from the stopping power of water, a military alliance with the United States or both.

Many argue that without a large U.S. military presence China would be free to seize regional hegemony by force and ensure that Asia would no longer be free and open. However, these arguments ignore the difficulties associated with offensive military operations, China’s own interests, as well as the value individual states place on their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

An offshore balancing strategy would seek to leverage these dynamics by harnessing the innate will of nations to defend themselves and capitalizing on their

defensive-oriented geographies. The strategy plays into China’s own risk calculus by raising the cost of any invasion attempt. The principal reason to adopt this strategy is to avoid a war that would be initiated at the time of American adversaries’ choosing. The concern is that adversaries might preemptively strike U.S. forces stationed abroad to prevent a controlled response from Washington, thus dragging the United States into war. The costs of a potential U.S.-China war are not worth it when weighed against national interests.

Moreover, unlike when these alliances were established, U.S. allies in Asia today are much more capable of deterring any would-be aggressors. The ultimate goal of this strategy would be (following a period of assistance to regional states that need it to better provide for their security) the removal of the majority of American troops from forward bases in Asia, while still preserving the capability to intervene in Asia if the balance of power were in danger.

The Precedent of Offshore Balancing

Offshore balancing has been a historical cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. This strategy is characterized by minimizing direct intervention abroad and instead leveraging regional powers to maintain balance and prevent the emergence of a dominant hegemon. This approach was evident in the 19th century when the United States focused on continental expansion and securing its position in the Western Hemisphere. As the United States turned its attention outward, it aimed to preserve the balance of power in key regions like Europe and Asia, stepping in militarily only when that balance was at risk. With the onset of the Cold War, the U.S. strategy shifted due to the unique challenge of the Soviet Union.

The United States established a significant onshore presence in Europe and Asia, forming alliances and stationing forces to contain Soviet influence when its allies simply could not. Conversely, in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. military maintained an offshore posture, initially relying on British leadership, then local powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia, to prevent any single state from dominating the region. It wasn’t until Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which threatened the regional balance and the security of Gulf oil producers, that the United States deployed a large-scale military force to the Middle East. For nearly a century, offshore balancing helped prevent the rise of regional hegemons and preserved a global balance

of power conducive to American security. However, when U.S. policy deviated from this strategy in theaters like Vietnam where the U.S. government had no vital interests, the result was often costly and unsuccessful military engagement.⁶

U.S. strategy in the post-Cold War era has continued to depart from offshore balancing, with the United States pursuing an expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) while overlooking Russian security concerns, contributing at some level to regional tensions and conflicts like the one in Ukraine. In the Middle East, the United States could have returned to an offshore strategy after the Gulf War, allowing Iran and Iraq to counterbalance each other. Instead, Washington pursued policies of dual containment and regional transformation, leading to prolonged military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, and failed interventions in Libya and Syria. The historical pattern suggests that a return to offshore balancing could prevent the rise of a single regional power and reduce the likelihood of the United States becoming entangled in costly and unnecessary conflicts.

Assessment of Current Security Posture in Asia

U.S. Alliances in East Asia are Evolving

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has been a dominant military force in East Asia, maintaining a robust network of alliances and military bases throughout the region. Washington justifies its large presence as a means to ensure regional stability, deter aggression, and protect its interests and those of its allies.

The U.S. military posture in East Asia is characterized by treaty alliances with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand, alongside strategic partnerships with other nations such as Taiwan, India, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam.⁷ The United States maintains a significant strategic footprint in East Asia, with permanent bases in Japan and South Korea, as well as bases that could be used in times of crisis in places like the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Australia. This network of bases supports a wide range of military capabilities, including naval forces, air power, and ground troops. The U.S. Seventh Fleet, stationed in Yokosuka, Japan, is the largest of the U.S. forward-deployed fleets, with approximately

a dozen ships, and the only forward deployed aircraft carrier. Additionally, the United States engages in regular joint military exercises with its allies and increasingly other regional partners.⁸

The operational costs of maintaining this posture are significant, with billions of dollars invested annually in defense spending for the region. This includes the costs of stationing troops, maintaining and upgrading facilities, and conducting continuous training and joint exercises. While this investment may demonstrate the U.S. commitment to regional security, it also raises questions about the sustainability of such expenditures in the long term, especially considering domestic fiscal constraints and the broader debate over the U.S. role in global security.⁹

U.S. alliances in East Asia are not static and have evolved in response to the changing security landscape. The alliances with Japan and South Korea, in particular, have grown more complex, with both countries seeking greater cooperation while still valuing the security guarantees provided by the United States. The recent US-Japan-ROK Camp David trilateral agreement is demonstrative of warming South Korean – Japanese relations.¹⁰

The U.S. security posture has significant implications for the regional security architecture, influencing the defense strategies of other regional actors and the overall balance of power. While the U.S. presence contributes to a general deterrence effect, it also compels adversaries to develop countermeasures and can fuel or exacerbate security dilemmas. An overly assertive U.S. military stance can undermine regional stability, souring relationships with neighboring states who prioritize regional peace and cooperation, thereby negatively impacting both multilateral frameworks and security initiatives in the region.

A Defense-Oriented Strategy Better Advances US Security Interests

U.S. policy makers need to consider whether relying mainly on military force to deter China is truly effective. Expanding America's offensive capabilities might reduce security in the region and raise the chances of a direct conflict with China. For now, the United States should concentrate on strengthening its existing positions in Asia, but in a purely defensive way.

Accordingly, the United States should prioritize reinforcing its own defensive capabilities while

also extending support to allies and partners in the region. Key to this approach would be the provision of arms sales, specialized training, and growing intelligence relationships. In doing so, Washington sets a precedent for a defense-oriented posture that prioritizes preparedness and collaborative security over aggressive posturing.

In the medium to long term, the strategy should adapt to the strengthening of regional allies' and partners' growing indigenous defense capabilities. As these nations become increasingly capable of defending their sovereignty, the U.S. military can consider repositioning its forces towards the Eastern Pacific. This would not signify a reduction in commitment but rather a strategic realignment that acknowledges the growing self-reliance of allied nations. Such a move would allow the United States to focus on broader strategic objectives in the Pacific while maintaining a supportive role in the region, ensuring that the collective security framework adapts to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

The Difficulty of Offensive Operations

Offensive military operations inherently favor the defender. The ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia provides a stark example of this. Despite Russia's significant military power and the advantages posed by the geography it shared with Ukraine—large land borders and open spaces that should theoretically benefit Russian military doctrine—their operations have encountered substantial challenges. A year and a half into the war, 300,000 Russians have been killed or wounded.¹¹ They have lost nearly 2500 tanks, 100 armored fighting vehicles (AFVs), 900 pieces of artillery, and 90 aircraft. They have even lost the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet and a submarine. All of this damage was inflicted by a nation that has received only 5.5% of the total U.S. defense budget.¹²

Logistics Lessons for Taiwan

One of the Russo-Ukrainian War's critical issues has been logistics. The Russian military has faced difficulties in sustaining a prolonged offensive, which is a common problem in large-scale land operations. These logistical challenges are often exacerbated in maritime operations, where the supply lines are even more extended and vulnerable to disruption.

In the context of a Chinese naval invasion of Taiwan, the logistical demands would be immense, and

China's own assessments state they are currently unable to sustain logistics support for an invasion.¹³ The People's Liberation Army (PLA) would require several years of significant improvements to its logistics capabilities to support a large-scale invasion of Taiwan. If the PLA opts for a gradual modernization approach, the time frame could extend to at least a decade to develop the necessary support for a substantial amphibious landing operation.

An operation like this would require a massive buildup of forces and resources, and it would be easily observable. The PLA would need to establish floating transfer platforms and temporary wharves, mobilize civilian shipping and aircraft—which are not adequately prepared for military requirements—and address the lack of war materiel reserves. This would take weeks and the flurry of activity would set off alarms in both Washington and Taipei, giving away the element of surprise.¹⁴ Furthermore, the PLA would have to improve infrastructure capabilities, which currently have poor layouts and inadequate throughput capacity for high-intensity combat support. More than 80 percent of airfield and port facilities are exposed above ground, making them susceptible to damage, and many transportation lines are vulnerable. The absence of the element of surprise would be a significant disadvantage, allowing potential adversaries to prepare and respond proactively.

The PLA's Structural Challenges

Moreover, assessments of current military capabilities suggest that China may not yet be fully prepared for such a complex operation, particularly when it comes to joint operations that require coordination across different branches of the military.¹⁵ The last time China fought a war was in 1979, but the last time it conducted a joint operation was all the way back in 1955, when it seized the Yijiangshan Islands in the East China Sea.

The PLA's fraught inter-service branch coordination compounds these challenges. For example, in the event of a Taiwan invasion, the Commander of the Eastern Theater would be responsible for planning and executing ground, naval, and aerial strategies. However, this commander would also have to synchronize actions in space and cyberspace, as well as operations within the electromagnetic domain, with the Strategic Support Force (SSF). Additionally, the coordination of long-range missile strikes would require collaboration with the Rocket Force.

Corrosive Corruption

Finally, corruption within the Chinese military is a persistent issue. In 2017, Liu Changhong, China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation's (CSIC) anti-corruption chief, was accused of accepting bribes and using his position for personal benefit. In 2018, several other high-ranking officials were arrested, including CSIC's general manager Sun Bo (who was found guilty of accepting bribes and abuse of power) and Jin Tao (who faced accusations of cronyism and extravagant spending). Most recently, former Chinese defense minister Li Shangfu was removed from his post due to alleged corruption, including within Beijing's rocket forces.¹⁶

Despite President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption efforts, which included the ousting of several senior generals, problems persist within the PLA and will most likely continue to do so. While the scale of corruption in the Chinese military remains below that of Russia, the Russian experience in Ukraine has starkly demonstrated the impact such malfeasance can have on military operations. Even a militarily capable nation can find its effectiveness severely compromised by the corrosive effects of corruption.

Shifting to an Asymmetric, Defense-Oriented Strategy

The conflict in Ukraine demonstrates how defensive positions inherently hold an advantage over offensive operations, a lesson relevant to China's potential ambitions regarding Taiwan. Despite Russia's formidable military strength, it has suffered significant losses against Ukraine while failing to achieve its goal of regime change. Russia's logistical challenges mirror concerns about the PLA's capacity to sustain an invasion of Taiwan. The PLA's acknowledged logistics shortcomings, exposed infrastructure, and the need for extensive modernization suggest a protracted timeframe for preparing a viable amphibious assault.

Furthermore, corruption within the Chinese military, as evidenced by high-profile arrests and ongoing internal issues, could further impede operational efficiency. The Russian experience underlines the destructive influence of corruption on military capability, serving as a cautionary tale for China's military planners as they assess their readiness for complex joint operations that remain untested in modern combat.

Given these lessons from global conflicts, the United States should prioritize supporting asymmetric modernization efforts tailored to the specific defense needs of its regional allies. This strategy would involve a nuanced approach; for Taiwan, given the significant risk of a blockade, the strategy should prioritize stockpiling critical munitions and spare parts.¹⁷ In contrast, for nations like the Philippines, where threats to sovereignty differ, Washington should emphasize anti-ship missiles and UAVs for enhanced maritime intelligence.¹⁸ The development of mines, mobile and survivable air defense systems, and UAVs are central to this approach, equipping these nations to establish a robust defense against potential aggressions. Such asymmetric capabilities are vital in that they disproportionately inflict greater costs on the aggressor.

Such a strategy would serve multiple purposes. Firstly, it would enhance the indigenous defense capabilities of U.S. allies and partners, allowing them to defend their sovereignty more effectively. Secondly, it would create a more balanced and resilient regional security environment, reducing the likelihood of conflicts or the need for direct U.S. military intervention. Finally, by focusing on defensive rather than offensive capabilities, this approach would likely not increase regional tensions relative to the present strategy of primacy, while also deterring naked aggression.

China's Calculus

China currently grapples with a myriad of domestic challenges that significantly impact its geopolitical strategies, particularly regarding Taiwan. At the forefront is its economic downturn, highlighted by a crisis in the real estate sector and record-high youth unemployment.^{19,20} These economic woes present a stark contrast to the once rapid growth of the Chinese economy. Additionally, the failure and abrupt abandonment of the zero-COVID policy, a cornerstone of the government's public health response since 2020, has led to public disillusionment.

China's economic troubles are further complicated by structural fiscal challenges. Local governments face dwindling revenues and rising debt, worsened by the decline of the property sector, a key revenue source. The central government's fiscal capacity is strained, with a tax system reliant on an ebbing investment-led growth model. This situation limits Beijing's ability to address these issues and sustain long-term

policy objectives, including strategic industry support and social services²¹. These complex, intertwined economic and fiscal problems pose significant hurdles to China's geopolitical ambitions, and the solutions are neither straightforward nor easily attainable.

These internal pressures serve as crucial constraints on Beijing's foreign policy decisions. Engaging in a war with Taiwan could further destabilize China's internal situation, exacerbating economic woes and potentially leading to greater public dissatisfaction. The leadership in Beijing, cognizant of these risks, may therefore be more inclined to avoid military confrontations that could deepen domestic instability. This cautious approach reflects a strategic calculation to maintain internal stability, which is paramount for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) continued hold on power. The convergence of these factors may make a war over Taiwan an unattractive option for Beijing.

Why a Diversionary War is Unlikely

The idea that the CCP becomes more aggressive when facing domestic crises is not supported by historical evidence or current observations.

In fact, contrary to the theory of diversionary wars, China has often displayed more conciliatory and cooperative behavior internationally during times of significant internal unrest. The CCP, with its extensive control over society and public opinion, has typically refrained from initiating conflicts as a means to distract from domestic problems. Instead, it has often taken steps to stabilize relationships with neighboring countries and address internal challenges directly, demonstrating a preference for maintaining internal stability over engaging in diversionary external conflicts.²²

Recent events further substantiate the pattern of China's diplomatic approach during times of internal challenges. During the November 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit President Xi and American President Joe Biden engaged in constructive discussions on various global and bilateral issues, prioritizing cooperation and competition management. The parties achieved progress in areas like combatting global drug manufacturing, resuming military communication, and addressing advanced AI risks.²³ Concurrently, China announced visa-free entry for citizens of five European countries and Malaysia, a move aimed at boosting business and tourism.²⁴ While not substantial, the aim

to improve people-to-people ties represents a move towards more conciliatory actions.

Guidelines and Guardrails for US-China Relations

Given these domestic limitations and the historical evidence, the U.S. government ought to concentrate on a select number of priorities for the U.S.-China relationship. Firstly, emphasizing diplomatic engagement over military confrontation is crucial. The accords reached at the recent APEC summit demonstrate the potential for productive engagement through diplomacy. The United States should prioritize such diplomatic channels to manage competition and resolve disputes with China.

The United States must communicate clear and credible assurances to Beijing. This involves a firm stance against any unilateral changes to the status quo by either party. The United States must consistently oppose both Beijing's efforts to compel unification and any moves by Taipei towards formal independence. It is vital that the U.S. government communicate these positions clearly to avoid any misinterpretations that could pointlessly escalate tensions. Furthermore, U.S. policy should avoid actions that could be perceived as moving towards formal diplomatic relations or a defense alliance with Taiwan. This includes the careful management of official communications and symbols. The maintenance of strategic ambiguity in U.S.-Taiwan relations is essential to avoid miscommunications about the direction of the U.S. - Taiwan relationship. Additionally, high-level U.S. officials, such as the National Security Advisor and the Secretary of State, should articulate a consistent U.S. policy regarding the "one China" policy. This communication should emphasize the U.S. stance on not supporting Taiwan's independence, opposing unilateral changes to the status quo from either side of the strait, and not seeking to use Taiwan as a tool to contain China.²⁵

Moreover, the United States should advocate for and support dialogue between Taiwan and China. By promoting transparency about the parameters of its unofficial relationship with Taipei and refraining from actions that could be misconstrued as a shift towards formal recognition of Taiwan's independence, the United States can reduce the likelihood of Beijing concluding that unification can only be achieved through force.

Sovereignty at the Forefront: Asian States' Response to Regional Security Challenges

In Asia, states are actively stepping up their defense capabilities in response to Chinese assertiveness. Nations such as Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines are undertaking significant military modernization and strategic shifts. Japan is revising its national security strategy, increasing defense spending and developing counterstrike capabilities. Taiwan is focusing on asymmetric warfare and enhancing its missile defense systems to counter potential Chinese aggression. The Philippines is transitioning its military focus from internal security to territorial defense, investing in missile systems, and naval assets. These actions, among others in the region, suggest a concerted effort by Asian states to bolster their defenses and assert their sovereignty, reflecting a region-wide resolve to counterbalance China's growing influence and maintain stability in the region.

Japan

In the East China Sea, Japan is undergoing a pivotal transformation in its defense strategy, especially in relation to the Senkaku Islands (which China claims). Facing rising Chinese military assertiveness, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has taken bold steps to enhance Japan's security measures. These steps include a pronounced shift in diplomatic and economic strategies, coupled with a firm stance against Beijing's territorial ambitions.

Central to this strategic realignment is the significant acquisition of Tomahawk cruise missiles, a move that stresses Japan's commitment to developing a robust counterstrike capability.²⁶ These developments, partly influenced by the global security environment shaped by events like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, signal a dramatic change in Japanese public sentiment towards a more assertive defense policy. Collectively, these actions demonstrate Japan's determination to reinforce its sovereignty and territorial integrity in a changing and challenging regional context.

Taiwan

Taiwan, grappling with heightened military pressure from China, is strategically channeling its defense spending to prepare for a potential comprehensive blockade. This preparation involves enhancing artillery and rocket capabilities and maintaining the

operational readiness of its F-16 fleet. In response to the widening military disparity with China, Taiwan is reshaping its forces into a combined arms structure, as well as developing a more asymmetric strategy of defense.²⁷

A key component of this strategy is the exploitation of the Taiwan Strait as a strategic advantage and the extension of weapon ranges to target pivotal Chinese military installations. The acquisition of Harpoon missiles from the United States and the development of a suite of standoff and anti-ship missiles support Taiwan's determined posture to safeguard its sovereignty and deter potential Chinese aggression.

The Philippines

In the Philippines, the ambitious Horizon 3 military modernization plan is a clear indication of the country's transition from internal security concerns to a focus on territorial defense operations. This wide-ranging modernization includes acquiring advanced multirole fighter jets, frigates, missile systems, helicopters, and the initiation of a submarine fleet. The prioritization of BrahMos missiles and HIMARS shows the Philippines' commitment to increasing its coastal defense capabilities. Aligned with the Philippines' overarching national security aims, this modernization initiative is the backbone of the Philippines' overall goal of military modernization.²⁸

Collective Defense Efforts: Shifting the Power Balance Against China

The paradigm of regional defense cooperation in East Asia is increasingly shaped by initiatives like Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) program. The provision of Japan's coastal surveillance radar system to the Philippines under this program is a landmark development, marking Japan's growing role in regional defense cooperation. The evolving dialogue between Japan and the Philippines, particularly their agreement to expand bilateral defense cooperation and negotiate a Reciprocal Access Agreement, demonstrates a trend toward a shared commitment to addressing common security challenges.²⁹ This agreement will facilitate joint military training and operations, significantly enhancing interoperability and collective defense capabilities.

South Korea's role as a key arms exporter complements these efforts, diversifying the sources of military hardware for regional nations and reinforcing

the collective defense posture. These collaborative efforts, including ongoing defense dialogues and joint exercises, are reshaping the security dynamics of East Asia, presenting a loose but united front against external threats and redefining the power balance in favor of regional states opposed to Chinese hegemony. This trend towards greater defense collaboration and autonomy is pivotal for the maintenance of sovereignty and stability in a region undergoing rapid and profound security transformations.

Washington should offer strategic support beyond arms sales. This support should encompass sharing intelligence and expertise in modern defense tactics to empower these nations to independently uphold their sovereignty and territorial integrity. For example, aiding Taiwan in its focus on asymmetric warfare necessitates support in developing capabilities that can effectively deter potential aggressors, while Japan and the Philippines require assistance to enhance their counterstrike and territorial defense capabilities.

The United States should also play a proactive role in promoting defense cooperation among its regional allies, supporting initiatives like joint military exercises, defense dialogues, and collaborative defense technology projects. The recent trilateral summit between Japan, South Korea, and the United States is a perfect example. Improving relations among allies and partner nations strengthens their collective defense capabilities and fosters a unified stance against common threats.

Conclusions

The situation in East Asia is not as precarious as some might claim. The region is not on the brink of a major conflict, and there is no immediate threat that justifies a significant increase in the U.S. military presence. Although the United States must remain vigilant against potential threats, the immediate scenario does not involve any imminent large-scale military aggression against it from across the Pacific. Currently, East Asia remains largely peaceful. The primary strategic objective is to uphold a stable power equilibrium and to ensure the continuity of an open economic framework in the region.

In this environment, it is both unnecessary and potentially harmful for the United States to seek military dominance in East Asia. American interests are better served by a balanced regional power

dynamic, rather than by attempting to impose a U.S.-centric order via military primacy. Efforts to regain American primacy could inadvertently escalate tensions with China, strain relations with regional allies, and potentially lay the groundwork for a self-perpetuating cycle of conflict with China.

The United States should adopt a strategy of supporting the specific defense needs of its allies through asymmetric modernization. The United States can assist Taiwan in preparing for potential blockades by providing essential munitions and spare parts, while simultaneously bolstering the maritime defense of the Philippines with anti-ship missiles and UAVs. This approach is not only economical but also less likely to draw a forceful response from China. In general, the focus should be on developing mines, mobile air defense systems, UAVs, and other asymmetric capabilities in order to equip allies to effectively counter any aggressive moves by imposing unsustainable costs on any aggressor. This strategy serves multiple objectives. It enhances the defensive capabilities of U.S. allies while also reducing the likelihood of conflicts and the need for direct U.S. military intervention.

The United States should also prioritize diplomatic engagement over military confrontation. Recent high-level meetings, like the APEC summit, demonstrate the potential of diplomatic channels in managing U.S.-China relations. Clear, consistent, and credible communication with Beijing is essential. The U.S. government must oppose unilateral actions by either China or Taiwan that alter the status quo and maintain strategic ambiguity in its relationship with Taiwan. High-level U.S. officials should consistently articulate the “one China” policy and encourage dialogue between Taiwan and China.

Finally, the U.S. government should extend its strategic support beyond arms sales. This includes sharing intelligence and expertise in defense strategies and encouraging defense cooperation among regional allies through joint military exercises, defense dialogues, and collaborative defense projects. Initiatives like the recent trilateral summit between Japan, South Korea, and the United States exemplify the benefits of enhancing relations among allies, which in turn bolsters their collective defense capabilities and presents a united front against common threats.

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