

ISSUE III • FALL 2026

Statecraft & Strategy

An American Foreign Policy Council Publication

CHINA'S EXPANDING REACH



Featuring articles by:

PETER MATTIS, AMY MCAULIFFE, and ALEXANDER B. GRAY



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Statecraft & Strategy is a quarterly journal of foreign affairs, focused on bringing cutting-edge analysis and fresh thinking about world events to policymakers and the general public.

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Statecraft & Strategy

A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Good ideas are rare. In today's hyper-partisan political climate, they're even rarer. Yet America's leaders must grapple with complex global challenges that require more than partisan posturing and social media soundbites. They need serious, credible, and actionable foreign policy insights that are rooted in experience and informed by history.

The existing marketplace of ideas is broken. The nation's most prominent think-tanks are increasingly perceived through a partisan lens. Institutions on the Left and Right alike are tethered to domestic policy agendas that alienate half the political spectrum. As a result, their foreign policy ideas often fall on deaf ears.

The consequence is a narrowing of vision, precisely at a time when our country needs clarity and breadth more than ever. There is a growing void where serious, intellectually grounded, and politically credible strategic thinking should be.

Statecraft & Strategy is our answer to this moment. It is designed to advance an internationalist vision rooted in responsible U.S. engagement abroad, and to elevate the national conversation on U.S. foreign policy by showcasing original, constructive, and bipartisan analysis that equips policymakers to make better decisions.

In an age of strategic instability and political dysfunction, such an approach isn't just timely. It is deeply needed.

ILAN BERMAN

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A NEW AXIS IS TAKING SHAPE.

RUSSIA. CHINA. IRAN.
COORDINATED. EXPANSIONIST. DETERMINED.

TODAY, A NEW AXIS OF AUTOCRATS IS TRYING TO RESHAPE THE WORLD ORDER AND SIDELINE THE UNITED STATES IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS. THE NEW IMPERIALISTS DELIVERS EYE-OPENING DETAILS OF HOW THREE MAJOR GLOBAL PLAYERS-RUSSIA, CHINA, AND IRAN-ARE WORKING WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH KEY ALLIES, SUCH AS NORTH KOREA AND VENEZUELA, TO UNSEAT THE U.S. AS A GLOBAL LEADER. THE CHALLENGE IS PROFOUND AND REQUIRES BOTH LEADERSHIP AND ACTION FROM WASHINGTON.

THE NEW IMPERIALISTS IS A REMARKABLY IMPORTANT OUTLINE OF THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE FACING AMERICA. ... THERE ARE DETAILS IN THIS BOOK WHICH WILL BE EYE OPENING EVEN FOR THOSE OF US WHO HAVE BEEN WORKING ON NATIONAL SECURITY FOR A LONG TIME.

– **THE HONORABLE NEWT GINGRICH, FORMER SPEAKER OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE THREATS TO THE U.S. POSED BY RUSSIA, CHINA AND IRAN. PIRCHNER AND BERMAN MAKE A UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION BY CONNECTING THE DOTS AMONG THE THREE, AND BY OFFERING AN INVALUABLE PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR LONG HISTORY AS IMPERIAL POWERS. THEY ARE EQUALLY COMPELLING IN THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW THE U.S. CAN COUNTER THESE THREATS.

– **THE HONORABLE RYAN C. CROCKER, FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR TO AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ, PAKISTAN, SYRIA, KUWAIT, AND LEBANON. BOARD CHAIR, MIDDLE EAST BROADCASTING NETWORKS**

PIRCHNER AND BERMAN ARE LAYING OUT A PIVOTAL HISTORICAL QUESTION: AFTER CENTURIES OF CITIZEN-BASED DEMOCRACIES BECOMING STRONGER AND BUILDING PEACEFUL ALLIANCES WITH EACH OTHER, ARE AUTHORITARIANS WITH VISIONS OF RULING OVER OTHERS MAKING A COMEBACK? THE ANSWER IS "YES" - BUT IT IS NOT GAME OVER. BY DOCUMENTING HOW THE IMPERIALISTS ARE GAINING GROUND, THEY ALSO POINT THE WAY FORWARD.

– **THE HONORABLE KURT VOLKER, FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR TO NATO AND FORMER U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FOR UKRAINE NEGOTIATIONS**

IN THE NEW IMPERIALISTS, PIRCHNER AND BERMAN EXPERTLY DIAGNOSE AND THEN PROSCRIBE SOLUTIONS TO DEAL WITH THE PREMINENT FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGE OF THE 21ST CENTURY - THE RISE OF TOTALITARIAN, EXPANSIONIST DICTATORSHIPS WORKING TOGETHER TO THREATEN OUR SECURITY, PROSPERITY AND FREEDOM... THE NEW IMPERIALISTS IS AN INDISPENSABLE CALL TO ACTION.

– **JOSH ROGIN, LEAD GLOBAL SECURITY ANALYST, WP INTELLIGENCE, AUTHOR, CHAOS UNDER HEAVEN: TRUMP, XI, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (MARINER BOOKS, 2021)**

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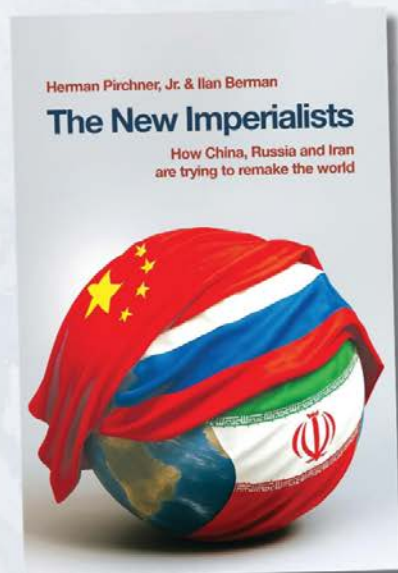


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Latin American Engagement... With Chinese Characteristics

BY R. EVAN ELLIS

Over the past decade, China's advance in the Americas has become the focus of considerable attention, and for good reason. The footprint of the People's Republic of China (PRC) south of the U.S. border is steadily growing, typified by things like control of strategic ports in places such as Panama and Peru, an increasingly dominant role in the digital technology sectors of assorted regional states, and strategic facilities in both Central and South America.

This penetration has teed up a potentially significant clash with Washington. The Trump administration's November 2025 *National Security Strategy* commits the U.S. to resisting the influence of external actors such as the PRC in the Western Hemisphere, and to denying them control over strategic geography.¹ Along those lines, the Administration's recent actions have created a number of setbacks for the PRC in the Americas, including ending the China-friendly tenure of Nicholas Maduro in Venezuela, terminating Panamanian port concessions to Hong Kong-based Hutchison, and halting the development of the China-Argentine Radiotelescope (CART).

Regional states have gotten the message, and there is now growing reluctance on the part of many governments to engage in military and other sensitive activities with China that might provoke Washington. And if U.S. pressure on Cuba ends up fundamentally changing its Communist regime, the PRC could lose access to the island as a base for intelligence collection and other operations in the strategic southeastern maritime approach of its greatest adversary.

Even so, China now has deep roots and extensive influence in the region. It is widely admired by many for its economic and technological achievements. A recent survey by

R. Evan Ellis is Latin America Research Professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute. The opinions expressed herein are strictly his own.

AMLAT Radar, for instance, found that 36 percent of respondents in Latin America saw the PRC as the best model for development.² The U.S., meanwhile, finished in third place, behind Japan. Furthermore, in specific domains, 49 percent of respondents saw the PRC as the best partner for trade, versus 26 percent for the U.S., and 67 percent preferred the PRC for digital technologies, as compared to 19 percent for America. Tellingly, some 40 percent saw China as the best partner for cultural engagement (as compared to just 18 percent for the U.S.) in spite of the longstanding notion that U.S. popular culture is something of a secret soft power weapon for Washington.

Moreover, in the wake of changes in both the style and substance of U.S. foreign policy, the PRC is now in the process of adaptation. Officials in Beijing are simultaneously working to protect their government against risks and looking to exploit the potential opportunities created by the Trump administration's more confrontational approach, its use of tariffs, and cuts in funding for developmental and institution building programs, media outlets, and multilateral institutions, among other changes.

In the context of the Americas, this has meant broader, multi-spectrum engagement. The PRC's third White Paper on its relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean, released just days after the U.S. *National Security Strategy*, details Beijing's continuing commitment to expanding its engagement in the region.³ The initiatives highlighted in the paper, moreover, go far beyond commerce to embrace cooperation in strategic technologies such as artificial intelligence and space, governance in multilateral institutions, coordination among political parties and legislators, and security coordination, including military and police training, cybersecurity, money laundering, and narcotrafficking.

To advance its commercial prospects, China has invested in building infrastructure across the region. Twenty-two Latin American and Caribbean states have joined the Belt & Road Initiative since Panama became the first regional state to sign on to the PRC's flagship foreign policy project in 2018.

ECONOMICS FIRST

Still, PRC activities in Latin America are consistent with its broader global engagement, and have the same defining features—although contacts are naturally shaped by the domestic conditions that prevail in each Latin American country. Thus, China's commercial profile in Latin America has expanded exponentially since it was accepted into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. In 2025, PRC bilateral trade with the region exceeded \$565 billion,⁴ with China principally importing commodities, foodstuffs, and other low-value added items while simultaneously pursuing other markets in strategic goods and services. By the early 2010s, however, the PRC had surpassed the United States to become the major trading partner for most Latin American states south of Costa Rica.⁵

Since the mid-2000s, Chinese firms have built an on-the-ground presence across extractive sectors, construction, telecommunication, manufacturing, and increasingly,



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technology, banking, and logistics as well. And as these firms have become embedded in the region, clear patterns have emerged: coordination between the local government and PRC-based companies, conditioning financing on the use of those companies, leveraging stolen or state-subsidized technologies, and negotiating lopsided contracts that build monopolies in strategic sectors and capture them for Beijing.

To advance its commercial prospects, China has invested in building infrastructure across the region. Twenty-two Latin American and Caribbean states have joined the Belt & Road Initiative since Panama became the first regional state to sign on to the PRC's flagship foreign policy project in 2018.⁶ China has built or controls numerous ports from Mexico and the Bahamas to Chancay, Peru, and multiple sites in Brazil. It controls 57 percent of all electricity distribution in Chile (100 percent in the greater Lima area) and approximately 12 percent in Brazil.⁷ Additionally, China has built or supplied components for an estimated 60 percent of the region's telecommunications infrastructure.⁸

This infrastructure development is part of a broader strategy to establish a dominant presence across the region's most economically and strategically important sectors.

MINING AND RESOURCES

Chinese firms are entrenched in Latin American mining, particularly in Peru and Chile. Important new projects include the Cangrejos gold and copper mine in El Oro, Ecuador and the Los Calatos and La Roya copper mines in Peru. PRC-based companies also operate less transparently in smaller scale projects; in Nicaragua, for instance, little-known

Chinese firms hold concessions amounting to 8.5 percent of the national territory.⁹ Chinese firms have also established multiple lithium projects in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia, and a presence in rare earth mining in Brazil through the CBMM consortium. However, these projects have experienced varying degrees of success. Traditional mining projects have also brought with them challenges, including protests in Chinese-owned Peruvian mines and violence at Zijin's Burtica gold mine in Colombia that forced a temporary halt of operations there.¹⁰

CONSTRUCTION

In the construction sector, Chinese firms have shifted from state-to-state projects, like those in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, to public-private partnerships in more market-oriented countries like Chile and Colombia. Similar to its mining projects, PRC construction sector activities have faced challenges. Corruption tied to Chinese contractors in Peru, dubbed the "China Construction Club," has tainted a succession of presidents there.¹¹ The downfall of interim Peruvian President Jose Jeri was likewise driven by the appearance of improper relations with a Chinese businessman.¹² Peru, moreover, is not alone. For instance, Costa Rica's Route 32 remains incomplete nearly a decade after breaking ground in 2017, while China Railway Construction Corporation was suspended from Chile's Highway 5 project, and Bolivia rejected Sinohydro's work on the Cochabamba-Santa Cruz highway over quality failures.¹³

POWER, VEHICLES, AND TELECOM

In the electricity sector, Chinese firms such as State Grid, China Three Gorges, State Power Investment Corporation, and China Power have captured a significant portion of the region's hydro, solar, and wind generation projects, as well as industrial batteries and long-distance transmission. BYD and other Chinese automakers now control roughly 85 percent of regional EV sales, as well as the market for electric buses.¹⁴ In the telecommunications sector, Huawei and ZTE have operated in Latin America since the late 1990s as vendors of smartphones and other equipment, and as builders of telecommunications infrastructure for governments and private companies. Other PRC-based digital equipment providers (such as Xiaomi, Oppo, and the Huawei spinoff Honor) have recently made notable gains in the region as well.

SURVEILLANCE AND SPACE

Beijing has developed "smart city" projects in Ecuador and Bolivia and is currently working on a nationwide project in Guyana. In the private sector, PRC-based companies such as Hikvision and Dahua have become major suppliers for corporate and home surveillance, raising digital vulnerability concerns due to the images, sound, biometrics, and other data that are uploaded from those systems to remote servers.¹⁵ Beijing is also investing heavily in Latin America's space infrastructure. For example, China built a radar facility in Argentina's Neuquén province staffed by Chinese military-affiliated personnel, with

only sporadic Argentine oversight.¹⁶ The PRC additionally built and launched satellites for Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil (the latter under the Chinese Brazil Earth Research Satellite (CBERS) program) while training their space personnel and gaining access to their ground control facilities. The Brazilian government, meanwhile, has also given the PRC-based company Space Sail access to its Alcantara launch site for a new constellation of microsatellites that will put PRC-controlled data link and other capabilities into the skies over the Western Hemisphere.¹⁷ Furthermore, Beijing cooperates with Peru through the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO) and courts Colombian and Mexican space personnel with the lure of participation in plans to establish a base on the moon by 2035.¹⁸

AI AND ROBOTICS

Artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics is the newest area of PRC engagement in Latin America, albeit one with significant implications. Alibaba opened its first cloud in Mexico City in 2025; meanwhile, Huawei is investing in Brazilian and Mexican cloud services and AI compute capacity and has launched its Xinghe AI Fabric networking architecture in the region.¹⁹ On the robotics side, Huawei mining robots now operate in Chile, Brazil, and Mexico, while State Grid has deployed power-line maintenance robots in Chile to support its electrical transmission infrastructure there.²⁰ China's Solix, meanwhile, is pioneering the use of agricultural robots in Brazil.²¹ Much like they've done with smartphones and EVs, PRC-based companies can deploy new products fusing AI and robotics and use low cost features to rapidly capture market share in Latin America for industrial, transport, and security applications—locking in standards and scale advantages over Western competitors like Tesla.

China's expanding commerce with and investment in Latin America translates into influence among Latin American businesspeople and politicians hoping for country, corporate, or personal benefit from their partnerships with the PRC. Meanwhile, Chinese companies are able to expand their presence across key sectors, locking in market positions through the elimination of competition and the setting of technology and other standards.

THE POLITICS OF PRESENCE

Beijing backs its commercial objectives with political engagement at the national, subnational, and multilateral level.

At the national level, the PRC holds “comprehensive strategic partnerships” with 12 states in the region, with several anchored by standing bilateral working groups to facilitate and deepen cooperation. In the seven countries in the hemisphere where Beijing lacks diplomatic relations, it employs third countries or major state-affiliated Chinese companies to pursue its agenda. In Guatemala, which recognizes Taiwan, China's ambassador to Costa Rica makes periodic visits to recruit Guatemalan legislators for trips to China, using Beijing's observer status at the Guatemala City-based Central American Parliament to gain access to the country.²² In Paraguay, which also recognizes Taiwan, Huawei was caught using two of its employees and a company car to spy on the Taiwanese ambassador in Asunción.²³

At the sub-national level, China has created numerous “sister city” and “sister province” relationships that it uses to invite Latin American officials to China and provide them other benefits in order to advance its objectives. For example, in Argentina, the governor of the Jujuy Province traveled to China three times by 2018.²⁴

Multilaterally, meanwhile, China has held observer status in the Organization of American States (OAS) since 2004 and a seat on the board of the Interamerican Development Bank (IADB) since 2009, where it reportedly uses its participation to influence the organization’s studies and policing.²⁵ The PRC’s preferred instrument for multilateral engagement, however, is the China-CELAC forum, which brings together the sovereign states of Latin America and the Caribbean without the U.S. or Canada present. The PRC uses the organization’s quasi-annual high-level summits to socialize and advance its agenda with regional leaders. It has also formed multiple ancillary forums on defense, space, and disaster relief to work in strategic sectors.

At the heart of PRC influence is the allure of opportunity: regional governments, companies, and individuals are courted by the PRC and enticed with benefits, including access to the Chinese market, partnerships with Chinese firms, and sponsored travel to China.

INFLUENCE AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES

At the heart of PRC influence is the allure of opportunity: regional governments, companies, and individuals are courted by the PRC and enticed with benefits, including access to the Chinese market, partnerships with Chinese firms, and sponsored travel to China. While the problematic record of PRC-based companies in the region is generally well-understood, the calculus of political and commercial leaders is complicated by two factors: a lack of transparency around Chinese entities and their dealings in the region, and a reluctance among those who benefit most from Chinese cooperation to criticize Beijing openly, for fear of jeopardizing their own access.

Much of this courtship happens through people-to-people networks. The PRC is known to bring thousands of regional journalists, think-tank professionals, legislators, judges, and security officials on state-sponsored trips to China annually.²⁶ Indeed, a study by the Atlantic Council found that the number of people brought on such programs increased tenfold in the 2010s.²⁷ Additionally, scholarships for academic and language study in China, made available through assorted “Confucius Institutes,” are a critical gateway for these people-to-people initiatives.²⁸ Given the limited number of people with Chinese language skills or PRC experience in Latin America, those who complete these programs are well positioned to obtain important PRC-facing positions in regional governments and major companies, giving Beijing leverage at the highest level, insofar as those hired effectively owe their education and professional careers to the Chinese government.

Beyond this courtship, the PRC, through its embassies and Ministry of State Security (MSS), maintains a web of relationships within the Latin American countries themselves.

For instance, Chinese officials conduct outreach to PRC-friendly elites such as those in the “China” caucuses of Latin American legislatures, “Business Councils” oriented toward the Chinese market and partnerships there, and the ethnic Chinese diaspora looking for consular services or other help. That diaspora outreach has produced a network of unofficial, non-transparent “police stations” that can be used to monitor and coercively influence the behavior of local ethnic Chinese communities.

LATIN AMERICA AS A STRATEGIC FRONT

Although Beijing has no formal military bases or alliance agreements in the Western Hemisphere, its commercial presence gives the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Ministry of State Security (MSS) options they could exploit in the event of a major conflict with the United States.

Thus, Chinese access to electronics and signals intelligence facilities in Bejucal and other sites in Cuba could enable the collection of information from the electronic emissions and signatures of U.S. ships, planes, and facilities, such as the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) facility that lies just miles north of Cuba, in Key West, Florida. PRC personnel could also operate covertly out of sites in Cuba or Caribbean islands that have a substantial Chinese commercial presence and government relations (for instance, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Grenada, Dominica, or Jamaica) to interdict U.S. naval combatant or military logistics ships through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal to the Pacific.

In the Panama Canal zone, PRC-based entities continue to retain a substantial footprint through China’s maritime logistics company COSCO, its construction company China Harbour, and numerous PRC-based firms with warehousing and distribution areas—a presence that could enable sabotage of the canal, including damage to water management or control systems, mining of the canal, or the sinking a large ship at the narrowest point, known as Culebra Cut, among other options.

In space, PRC facilities in Neuquén and ground control stations in Venezuela and Bolivia could help locate, jam, or intercept U.S. satellite signals, or potentially support Chinese offensive space-based systems.

In the Eastern Pacific, COSCO’s exclusive operation of the port of Chancay could allow covert rearmament and resupply of PLA Navy vessels, extending Chinese naval reach toward the continental United States. Closer to the U.S., China could similarly exploit facilities in PRC-aligned Nicaragua to threaten the U.S. homeland; these include the Port of Corinto and nearby Punta Huete airport, which has a runway long enough to recover and launch Chinese military aircraft.²⁹

At the U.S.-Mexico border, the PLA or MSS could infiltrate personnel onto U.S. soil in order to spy on or attack strategic facilities. The tens of thousands of military-aged Chinese males who are known to have crossed the border already amply illustrate the potential risk.³⁰

WHAT IT ALL MEANS

Although the current U.S. pushback against PRC activities in Latin America has produced tangible results, over the long term, the shift in America's approach may be insufficient to halt that advance and may even end up facilitating it.

Commercially, even strongly U.S.-aligned governments, like that of Jose Kast in Chile and Javier Milei in Argentina, have been reluctant to jeopardize trade and investment ties with Beijing in order to satisfy Washington. At the same time, U.S. trade actions against China have pushed Beijing to buy more from Latin American producers, thereby deepening PRC leverage over those exporters, while higher U.S. tariffs on Latin American imports have created barriers that complicate Washington's own effort to encourage regional investment by U.S. companies.

U.S. tariffs and threats against governments in the region have also spurred diversification away from Washington, with some turning to Europe while others seek stronger ties to China. Reduced U.S. engagement with institutions like the United Nations and the Organization of American States may also allow Beijing to shape institutional norms virtually without meaningful opposition.

Other U.S. policies have accentuated this shift. These include cuts to development aid and educational scholarships, a perceived retreat from democracy and human rights promotion in favor of a more "transactional" approach, and government rhetoric and actions in areas such as immigration that may decrease partner incentives to "stay with" the U.S. and otherwise erode goodwill. Similarly, U.S. defunding of informational programs, including those for broadcasting as well as universities and think-tanks in the region, arguably decreases public knowledge about the risks associated with partnership with China, thereby further enabling its advance.

That should be cause for alarm. No region of the world more directly impacts U.S. security and prosperity than Latin America and the Caribbean. It is therefore imperative that we continually calibrate the effectiveness of our response to China's advance in the hemisphere, in order to ensure that the unintended long-term consequences of our foreign policy do not outweigh its short-term gains.

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A Widening Chinese Challenge In Cyberspace

BY AMY MCAULIFFE &
JAMES MULVENON

When historians look back on the first three decades of the 21st century, they are likely to point to May 2023 as the moment when the U.S. government sounded the alarm that the Chinese cyber threat had well and truly come of age. That was when the U.S. government's Cyberspace and Infrastructure Security Agency issued a formal warning about Volt Typhoon, an extensive web of Chinese state-sponsored penetration of American information technology infrastructure and other sensitive nodes in the utility and transportation sectors in the U.S. and Guam.¹

Volt Typhoon was not an isolated incident, however. In October 2024, the federal government announced that another Chinese-sponsored hacking group, this one dubbed Salt Typhoon, had succeeded in penetrating the networks of major U.S. telecommunications providers, successfully compromising key systems and gaining access to sensitive communications.² The strategic significance of both hacking campaigns was undeniable: China had evolved from a largely cyber-enabled espionage actor to one capable of achieving strategic-level cyber effects.

That was an alarming revelation. For years, experts had debated whether the greatest cyber threat posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) came in the form of intellectual property theft—and for good reason. As Gen. Keith Alexander, who served as President Barack Obama's NSA director, put it in 2018 to *Fox Business* anchor Maria Bartiromo: Chinese theft of US intellectual property represented “the greatest transfer of wealth in

Amy McAuliffe serves as a visiting distinguished professor of the practice at the University of Notre Dame's Keough School, as well as a Notre Dame International Security Center Fellow. She previously served for over two decades at the CIA, holding executive positions including Assistant Director of CIA for Weapons and Counterproliferation, Chair of the National Intelligence Council, and Director of the President's Daily Brief. The views expressed herein are her own, and not those of the U.S. government.

James Mulvenon is Vice-President for Intelligence at Pamir Consulting LLC.

history,” with estimated annual costs of more than \$400 billion.³ The Typhoon hacks of 2023 and 2024, however, hammered home to American policymakers that China sees cyberspace as a decisive domain of conflict and is positioning itself to dominate it in the event of a conflict with the United States.

HOW CHINA THINKS ABOUT THE DIGITAL DOMAIN

This focus is part of a larger orientation toward digital technology and network warfare that has taken hold in the PRC in recent years. In the Chinese lexicon, this trend is termed “informatization”: the strategic integration of information and communication technologies to transform the economy, government, society, and military.⁴ As seen by Beijing, this is not simply computerization, but something significantly broader. It implies the use of information systems to reshape how institutions operate and how modernization is pursued.⁵

The concept got its start in the late 1980s and 1990s, as China began treating information technology as a strategic foundation for modernization. By the year 2000, official documents explicitly framed informatization as a strategic move to drive overall modernization and even to help China “leapfrog” stages of development. For his part, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has framed informatization as one of the “new productive forces” cutting across “political, economic, cultural, social, and military fields.”⁶

“Intelligentization,” a more recent term describing an augmentation, rather than replacement, of informatization, generally refers to the deployment of artificial intelligence, big-data analytics, machine learning, and autonomous or semi-autonomous systems to make processes capable of learning, adapting, and making decisions with minimal human intervention. A 2017 article by Liu Guozhi, a PLA representative to the National People’s Congress, marks one of the first mentions of the term in a specifically military context.⁷ Thereafter, however, the usage proliferated, and it figured prominently in the PLA’s 2019 *National Defense White Paper*.⁸ The idea is often framed as the “next step” beyond informatization: not just connecting and digitizing systems, but giving them “intelligence” so they can optimize themselves in real time.

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Xi Jinping treats “intelligentization” as the next phase of China’s development, where artificial intelligence, data, and automation “drive the digital transformation of... manufacturing, services, and agriculture.”⁹ In his writings and public comments, China’s leader talks about artificial intelligence not as a purely technical trend but as a “paradigm shift... leading a new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation” that must be guided by Party leadership, security imperatives, and long-term planning.¹⁰ And for Xi and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), one of

the most important strategic use cases of informatized and intelligentized technologies is military modernization.

A MARTIAL FOCUS

Since the late 1990s, the Chinese military has fully embraced cybernetics as a conceptual core of its military modernization, blending ideological and philosophical concepts to produce a force which, if necessary, could defeat the “strong enemy” (that is, the United States). Since his ascent to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has been a champion of this push within the PLA. In 2017, in his report to the 19th Party Congress, Xi asserted that the PLA must “accelerate the development of military intelligentization” to enhance all-domain joint operation capabilities.¹¹ The following year, he opined that the integration of information technologies with the military represented the “most dynamic and promising” aspect of informatization.¹²

Not surprisingly, this view quickly began to permeate PLA vernacular—and to evolve. More recently, the PLA has been actively discussing the relationship between mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization, which are to be pursued simultaneously and in parallel.¹³ By the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Xi had fully embraced “intelligentization,” emphasizing it as a strategy to “leapfrog development of the PLA’s military cyber-information system,” which is playing an “unprecedentedly prominent role” in modern warfare.¹⁴ These concepts have manifested in the PLA’s widespread deployment of cybernetic decision-making systems like the Integrated Command Platform, which are treated by the PLA as having superior cognition to their human counterparts.

What does all this mean for the future of PLA command and control, and the military balance between China and the United States? Already a decade ago, a theorist at China’s National Defense University offered an early, maximalist but illustrative take of the Chinese military’s view of the central role of AI and cybernetics:

Whoever can process information faster, understand the operational environment, make decisions, and execute strikes will gain the initiative. Compared to the human brain, artificial intelligence’s greatest advantages lie in its faster reaction speed, greater processing capacity, and freedom from the constraints of time, space, or physical limitations. Therefore, to accelerate their own decision-making cycles and disrupt those of the enemy, militaries around the world will increasingly rely on artificial intelligence to win this battle of decision-making cycles.

On future battlefields, as artificial intelligence and human-machine integration technologies continue to advance, the pace of combat will accelerate until it reaches a “singularity”: the human brain will no longer be able to cope with the rapidly changing battlefield situation and will be forced to cede most decision-making authority to highly intelligent machines. Furthermore, to reduce casualties and mitigate political risks, military and political leaders worldwide are increasingly inclined to replace human soldiers with intelligent machines in combat.¹⁵



Photo source: Shutterstock

This expansive view stands in contrast with the Pentagon’s more restrictive policy on autonomous weapons systems. That directive mandates that “autonomous and semi-autonomous weapon systems will be designed to allow commanders and operators to exercise appropriate levels of human judgment over the use of force.”¹⁶ As such, it reflects a well-founded Western cultural concern about unleashing “Terminator”-style weapons systems that end up escaping human control. Unfortunately for the U.S., the largely semi-autonomous systems of the U.S. military operate at a structural disadvantage to China’s increasingly fully autonomous ones, presaging future military confrontations between the U.S. and China that have the technological potential to tilt in the latter’s favor.

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CYBER AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

The implications of all this are vital for U.S. national security, and for our strategic competition with China. Via espionage, Beijing undermines the U.S. economy and

accelerates its technological advancements at a time when technology has become a key instrument of national power. Meanwhile, the capability to disable or disrupt key parts of the U.S. economy and daily life provide Beijing with a powerful tool to deter Washington, including preventing a resolute American response if it ever decides to invade Taiwan.

China's cyber operations constitute the ultimate preemptive weapon because they can undercut both American military capabilities and our larger political will. In the event of a war with China over Taiwan, for instance, the U.S. power grid and transportation system would be essential in moving personnel and equipment to the Pacific. (During contingencies, the U.S. Army moves approximately 67 percent of Army unit equipment by rail from bases to shipping ports.¹⁷) Credible Chinese threats to the integrity of these systems would do more than simply complicate U.S. logistics; they might undermine the political consensus surrounding action in the first place if the American people face the specter of sustained disruption. China could also fracture domestic cohesion with cyber-attacks against other critical systems that American citizens rely on every day (such as water and power systems), thereby degrading Washington's political resolve to intervene in what, at the end of the day, would be a distant conflict.

In other words, cyber capabilities provide the PRC with an attractive and comparatively low-cost way to shape American behavior according to Chinese preferences. Perhaps more importantly, from a Chinese perspective, they offer Beijing the ability to forestall actions by Washington that would run counter to or complicate its priorities.

MITIGATING RISK

As Beijing increasingly implements intelligentized warfare, the risks facing the United States are very real. Mitigating risks in this domain requires revitalizing U.S.-China discussions on cyber and AI (official bilateral discussions over the latter, which are planned for September as of this writing, represent an important first step in this regard). Such contacts are essential to establishing bilateral "rules of the road" for the use of key military technologies, and pursuing such dedicated discussions is paramount because cyber and AI are key military technologies in their own right, as well as critical underpinning technologies for space and electronic warfare. Even achieving limited goals, such as establishing clear U.S. red lines and a framework for signaling in cyberspace, could lead to a more stable and predictable cyber balance of power between Washington and Beijing.

Such bilateral discussions could be a useful complement to ongoing global discussions about establishing binding norms for the use of cyber and AI. Both sets of discussions have long been challenging, because China and the U.S. have differing views of key concepts such as sovereignty in cyberspace. Beijing views traditional arms control treaties as a U.S. ploy to maintain military superiority, and therefore has been unwilling to engage on the arms control domain.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the technologies in question are advancing at a rapid pace.

Here, there is room for cautious optimism. Although official Chinese views about the threat arms control poses to military modernization have hardened over the last five years,¹⁹ both formal documents and diplomatic positions demonstrate a genuine concern by Chinese leaders regarding the threat posed by the military use of cyber and

AI. For instance, China's July 2026 position paper on global cyber governance details that: "Emerging technologies including AI [have] escalated cybersecurity risks, reducing the threshold for cyberattacks and conflicts between countries, and exposing critical infrastructure to high cybersecurity risks."²⁰ Likewise, in its earlier November 2025 arms control white paper, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted the security risks associated with military use of cyber and AI capabilities.²¹ This suggests that a Washington willing to engage in meaningful discussions on cyber may find a ready interlocutor in Beijing.

Such an evolution is necessary. For over a decade, Washington's primary response to Chinese cyber aggression has been public attribution: detailed threat reports on China's cyber campaigns and unsealed indictments against various Chinese entities. The PRC has remained undeterred by such measures. Its continued cyber presence in U.S. systems strongly suggests that Beijing perceives U.S. infrastructure to be deeply vulnerable and the American will to retaliate to be low.

Even if cyber discussions do not yield agreements on guardrails, they could be considered a success if they prompted Chinese decisionmakers to make more cautious decisions about cyber operations against U.S. critical infrastructure. The goal would not be complete deterrence, given the qualitatively different dynamics of cyberspace. Nevertheless, discussions about communications, risks, acceptable behaviors, and red lines would help both sides understand how to interpret each other's cyber operations.

Here, changing China's perception of American resolve will be paramount. Given the track record so far, the PRC needs to be convinced of U.S. seriousness in this domain. Doing so will require a change in U.S. policy and commensurate responses to Chinese cyber-attacks. One option is to develop a cyber declaratory policy that explicitly defines which U.S. critical infrastructure systems are off limits and emphasizes that any attack will trigger a nonproportional and cross-domain response.

In recent years, the PRC has demonstrated that its cyber capabilities, a key element of its intelligentization strategy, represent a powerful instrument of national power. In response, the U.S. needs a new whole-of-government approach that better integrates cyber operations into our national security strategy.

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A WIDENING CHINESE CHALLENGE IN CYBERSPACE

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Beijing Reaches For The Stars

BY NAMRATA GOSWAMI

For the United States, China's unmistakable rise as a major space power in recent years poses a strategic challenge that extends far beyond competition over capabilities and prestige. China is constructing an integrated space architecture designed to advance economic development as a key space goal and, based on that, to build technological leadership, establish joint military effectiveness, gain political legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and achieve long-term geopolitical influence.¹

In order for the U.S. to formulate a realistic strategic response, it is vital to recognize that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is pursuing what can be described as a shift from symbolic missions to lasting activities: sustained presence, orbital infrastructure, maneuver, communications, navigation, servicing, logistics, resource utilization, and ultimately economic activity across the Earth-Moon system. The strategic objective is to demonstrate that China can acquire the technological, industrial, and operational capacity to support a permanent presence in space, and derive continuing political, economic, and military advantage from it.²

CHINA'S COMPREHENSIVE SPACE POWER

China's civil, commercial, and military programs are best understood as mutually reinforcing components of a single, unified national space architecture. Its Tiangong space station provides a long-duration crewed platform in Low-Earth Orbit (LEO) and demonstrates China's competence in rendezvous and docking maneuvers, on-orbit operations, space resource utilization, and maintaining a sustained human presence in space. China's Chang'e-4 mission, meanwhile, achieved the first ever landing on the lunar far side, with a later mission returning the first samples from the Lunar South Pole in 2024.

Namrata Goswami, Ph.D., is a Professor of Space Security with the Schriever and West Space Scholars Program at Johns Hopkins University. Views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official guidance or position of the United States Government, the Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or the United States Space Force.

These accomplishments, and the PRC's well-publicized plans for an International Lunar Research Station, indicate that lunar exploration is evolving from episodic missions to sustained infrastructure development.³

These Chinese space programs also have clear strategic value because they build capabilities applicable to a much wider range of operations. For instance, Rendezvous and Proximity Operations (RPOs), autonomous navigation, propulsion (especially nuclear-powered), communications, docking, and deep-space tracking (ground- and space-based) are important for in-space servicing, logistics, military operations, and future cislunar infrastructure. China's civil space program, therefore, functions as a national technology base from which additional economic and security applications can emerge.

Chinese commercial space, moreover, differs from the U.S. model in the degree to which state direction, industrial policy, and commercial competition coexist. The creation of the China Satellite Network Group (China SatNet), which manages the Guowang broadband constellation, reveals Beijing's desire to build a large-scale LEO communications architecture capable of competing in an environment that is increasingly shaped by the Starlink satellite network and other proliferated systems.⁴ Chinese commercial firms like LandSpace and Onespace, moreover, are simultaneously pursuing methane propulsion and reusable launch systems, and, increasingly, developing China's high launch cadence.⁵ Their progress signals China's accelerating transition toward reusable launch vehicles, which could lower costs, increase launch cadence, support the rapid deployment and replenishment of mega-constellations such as Guowang, and strengthen space reconstitution during crises or conflicts. Strategically, reusable launch vehicles support China's broader transition from episodic missions to persistent and scalable space activities.

China's military space capabilities, meanwhile, are operated by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Their remit includes communications, navigation, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), missile warning, space domain awareness, and counter-space capabilities. As of early 2026, China's ISR constellation consists of approximately 510 satellites. Integrated with artificial intelligence, communications networks, and long-range precision weapons, that capacity brings the PLA closer to near-real-time situational awareness across the Asia-Pacific.⁶ The strategic consequence is the emergence of a reconnaissance-strike complex capable of detecting, tracking, and supporting the targeting of mobile forces across enormous distances. Geosynchronous surveillance assets add persistence to this architecture and can improve coverage of Taiwan and the broader Indo-Pacific. In practical terms, the geography that once provided U.S. and allied forces with concealment is becoming increasingly transparent to Chinese military planners. The so-called "tyranny of distance" may not disappear, but persistent space-based sensing changes the game.⁷

China's BeiDou navigation system plays a central part in this space architecture. The constellation, which achieved full operational capability in 2020, gives China independent position, navigation, and timing services while supporting communications and command-and-control functions. In a conflict, such independence is essential for long-range precision strike and joint operations. Combined with ISR, communications, and space tracking, BeiDou helps connect sensors, command nodes, and weapons into a more coherent operational system.⁸ The critical policy insight from this is that China is constructing a national



ecosystem in which achievements in one sector improve the capacity of the others—and its broader warfighting capabilities.

Chinese military thought increasingly treats modern war as a confrontation between operational systems rather than isolated platforms... Space is therefore indispensable because it links reconnaissance, communications, navigation, targeting, missile warning, and command and control.

FROM SPACE SUPPORT TO SPACE WARFIGHTING

China's military reforms since 2015 reveal how far its conception of military space has evolved. Chinese military thought increasingly treats modern war as a confrontation between operational systems rather than isolated platforms. Information acquisition, transmission, exploitation, and denial determine whether those systems can function. Space is therefore indispensable because it links reconnaissance, communications, navigation, targeting, missile warning, and command and control.⁹

The establishment of the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) in 2015 represented an early attempt to organize space, cyber, electronic warfare, and information functions around this systems-warfare logic. The PLASSF consolidated capabilities that previously had been distributed across services and departments, seeking to improve support for joint

operations. Yet China's 2024 decision to dissolve the PLASSF and establish distinct organizations, including the PLA Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, and Joint Support and Information Support Forces, indicates that it concluded these functions had become too important and specialized to remain within a single hybrid organization.¹⁰

The newly instituted PLA Aerospace Force institutionalizes space as a warfighting domain that requires dedicated leadership and professional expertise, including the development of space-specific professional military education (PME), doctrine, training, and operational planning. Direct linkage to the Central Military Commission can also reduce bureaucratic friction and accelerate decision-making during a crisis.¹¹

China's military doctrine places space within a broader conception of integrated joint operations. This doctrine conceptualizes China's military strength as a "triad" comprised of force development, operational capability, and professional military education.¹² This triad reflects a comprehensive approach where capabilities, doctrine, and human resources are developed simultaneously to support China's long-term comprehensive power goals. Chinese military thought argues that understanding of the military balance is fundamentally shaped by "systems warfare concepts," and this view is tied to an era of informatization and intelligentization in which battlefield dominance increasingly depends on information acquisition, transmission, and exploitation.¹³

This doctrinal perspective, in turn, is essential to understanding why space is central to Chinese strategy. To degrade an adversary's system of systems, one must be able to see, track, disrupt, and, if necessary, disable the space-based elements that hold it together.

For the United States, China's focus on military space is particularly consequential because U.S. military power is unusually dependent on space-enabled networks that connect its globally distributed forces, support precision targeting, provide missile warning, and enable command across the Indo-Pacific theater. China, therefore, has strong incentives to develop capabilities that can degrade those functions at moments of operational importance.¹⁴

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CHANGING THE CHARACTER OF COMPETITION IN SPACE

China's counterspace architecture illustrates a wider shift in the character of space competition: from a relatively predictable environment dominated by fixed-function satellites toward one characterized by maneuver, proximity operations, cyber effects, electronic warfare, reusability, and ambiguity. China has developed kinetic, non-kinetic, cyber, electronic, and co-orbital options, providing it with a full spectrum of tools.¹⁵ At the destructive end of that spectrum, China demonstrated a direct-ascent anti-satellite

capability in 2007 by destroying one of its own weather satellites. The enormous debris (numbering 3,000 pieces) created by that event illustrated the operational and diplomatic costs of kinetic destruction.¹⁶ Subsequent developments have placed greater emphasis on capabilities that may be reversible, less visible, or harder to attribute. Jamming, for instance, can interfere with communications or navigation. Cyber operations can target ground stations, command networks, and data links. Rendezvous and proximity systems can approach another spacecraft for benign servicing, intelligence collection, signaling, interference, or potentially attack.

These capabilities complicate deterrence and challenge space superiority by blurring the distinction between competition and conflict. A satellite that stops transmitting may have suffered a technical malfunction, cyber intrusion, or deliberate electronic attack. A spacecraft approaching a high-value satellite may be conducting an inspection, demonstrating signaling capability, or preparing for an offensive action. Ambiguity gives an attacker the potential to create operational effects while complicating an adversary's attribution and response calculus.

China's Shenlong reusable spaceplane adds another layer of uncertainty in this regard. Tested on multiple missions since 2020, including one launched in 2026,¹⁷ Shenlong has demonstrated extended orbital operations and the release of unidentified objects. The strategic significance of the platform lies in the flexibility of a reusable, maneuverable spacecraft with a general-purpose payload bay. Such a system can carry sensors, communications equipment, experimental technologies, small satellites, or counterspace payloads and return to Earth for refurbishment and mission changes.¹⁸

Reusability introduces a different operational lethality from traditional satellites. A satellite is generally launched with a defined mission and remains in orbit until it fails or is retired. A spaceplane can return, be modified, and relaunch. That permits faster experimentation, payload adaptation, and potentially greater uncertainty for an adversary. Maneuverable platforms can also conduct proximity operations or less predictable trajectories, complicating warning and space-domain awareness. The underlying strategic effect is deliberate uncertainty. The same platform may be capable of scientific experimentation, reconnaissance, satellite deployment, servicing, or interference. This dual-use quality creates signaling possibilities but also increases the risk of misinterpretation. During a crisis, a maneuver that one side intends as deterrent signaling may be interpreted by the other as preparation for attack.

For U.S. policy, resilience must consequently address more than survivability against kinetic attack. The relevant threat environment includes cyber-attacks, navigation disruption, communications jamming, close approaches, deceptive behavior, and temporary interference. A mega-constellation that survives physically but cannot communicate, navigate, or provide trusted data may be operationally ineffective. Space superiority must therefore be understood as the ability to continue producing military effects despite an adversary's effort to contest the domain.

Once a crisis escalates, say in the Taiwan Strait, China would possess several options for degrading the information environment without immediately resorting to destructive satellite attacks. Electronic warfare could interfere with GPS or satellite communications. Cyber operations could target ground-based control nodes and data networks. Co-orbital

systems could maneuver near high-value satellites. The operational purpose would be consistent with systems warfare: disrupt the U.S. network sufficiently to slow decisions, reduce targeting accuracy, fragment coordination, and create uncertainty during the opening stages of conflict.¹⁹

Such effects would not remain confined to Taiwan, moreover. U.S. forces operating from Japan, Guam, the Philippines, Australia, and other locations depend upon space-enabled connectivity across vast distances. Japan's own military response would rely heavily on resilient space services and integration with U.S. architectures. In the East and South China Seas, Chinese space-based maritime surveillance could support simultaneous monitoring of naval and air activity across multiple theaters. Space thus allows China to connect geographically separate battlespaces into a more coherent operational picture.

This environment exposes a strategic vulnerability in the U.S. way of war. American forces have become extraordinarily effective because space allows them to integrate sensors, decisionmakers, and weapons across domains and distances. That advantage also creates a dependency which China has deliberately studied. If U.S. C4ISR is degraded at the outset of a conflict, the United States may face precisely the conditions its force structure has been optimized to avoid: incomplete situational awareness, reduced precision, slower command cycles, and greater difficulty coordinating dispersed forces.

American forces have become extraordinarily effective because space allows them to integrate sensors, decisionmakers, and weapons across domains and distances. That advantage also creates a dependency which China has deliberately studied.

GUIDEPOSTS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The U.S. response must begin by recognizing that the strategic competition with China in space is about its integrated space architecture. China's model integrates national strategy, industrial policy, civil programs, commercial innovation, military doctrine, and organizational reform. To compete, the United States will require greater strategic coherence among the government, commercial sector, allies, and the Joint Force.

First, the United States must continue moving from small numbers of highly capable yet vulnerable systems toward resilient, distributed architectures. The Space Development Agency's proliferated LEO approach is an important component of this shift. Proliferation increases the number of targets an adversary must affect and reduces the strategic consequences of losing any one node. But proliferation alone is insufficient. Distributed systems require secure networking, resilient ground infrastructure, cyber defense, cross-domain data sharing, and effective command and control.²⁰

Second, the United States must build the capacity to fight through degradation. Operational planning should assume that some satellites will be jammed, communications disrupted, navigation signals denied, ground stations targeted, and spacecraft forced to maneuver defensively. Resilience, therefore, requires alternative navigation methods,

multiple communication pathways, diversified orbits, rapid reconstitution, maneuverable systems, and commanders trained to operate with incomplete or delayed information. The test of space superiority is not whether disruption occurs, but whether the Joint Force can continue to generate military effects when it does.

Third, U.S. commercial space is a strategic advantage China cannot easily reproduce at the same pace U.S. commercial companies can. Commercial communications, launch, remote sensing, data analytics, and manufacturing can add scale and innovation, but wartime integration requires clear contracts, authorities, cybersecurity standards, data-sharing mechanisms, and clarity regarding protection and risk before a crisis begins. U.S. commercial resilience should be built into national space strategy rather than improvised in response to disruption.

Fourth, allies must be treated as integral to this space architecture. Geographic diversity, additional sensors, sovereign launch capabilities, ground stations, communications networks, and shared situational awareness can complicate Chinese targeting while increasing coalition resilience. U.S. agreements with Japan and other allies already point toward deeper space cooperation. This aspect is evident in the launch of the USSF's Space Domain Awareness (SDA) payload hosted on Japan's Quasi-Zenith Satellite 7 (QZS-7) on the H-3 rocket on August 14, 2026.²¹

Fifth, deterrence must account for ambiguity and reversible effects. Traditional deterrence concepts focused heavily on preventing destructive attacks against strategic satellites. The contemporary environment includes cyber intrusions, jamming, dazzling, proximity operations, and other actions whose attribution and severity may be uncertain. The United States, therefore, requires response options across domains and clearer signaling about behaviors that could trigger consequences.

Finally, the United States needs to compete in cislunar space. China's transition from missions to activities means that future advantage may derive from communications, navigation, logistics, resource access, power, servicing, and sustained lunar presence. Falling behind in infrastructure could create strategic dependence even in the absence of military confrontation. U.S. policy should therefore connect exploration, commercial development, allied partnerships, and national security within a coherent long-term strategy for activity in cislunar space.

LOOKING UP

China's rise as a comprehensive space power reflects a coherent national strategy in which leadership, regime legitimacy, economic development, and national security reinforce one another. In all of this, the most strategically consequential shift is conceptual (theoretical) and doctrinal. China is moving from missions to activities, developing the infrastructure and operational capacity required to remain there, maneuver there, derive economic and military value from space, and shape the environment in which others operate. That logic extends from LEO and GEO to cislunar space.

For the United States, understanding that China's space-based ISR and navigation systems strengthen its ability to find and target forces across the Indo-Pacific is critical. China's counterspace architecture creates options for degrading U.S. C4ISR across a

spectrum ranging from electronic and cyber interference to co-orbital and kinetic attack. Maneuverable and reusable spacecraft introduce further uncertainty. However, for U.S. policymakers and military planners, it's important to assess the kind of warfare China is preparing for in light of its space capabilities. Without that understanding, the U.S. risks either mirror imaging or misunderstanding China's buildup and maneuvering in space.

The central U.S. challenge is therefore not simply maintaining a numerical or technological advantage in space but preserving the ability to use space effectively during crisis and conflict despite deliberate adversary efforts to contest access. Ultimately, strategic competition in space is about who can build and sustain the infrastructure, institutions, operational concepts, alliances, industrial capacity, and human expertise necessary to translate access into power. China has clearly recognized that relationship. The United States must respond with equal strategic coherence by mobilizing the distinctive advantages of an open commercial ecosystem, a global alliance network, technological innovation, and professional military education that enable adaptation. The future balance of space power will be determined not by the next mission alone, but by which strategic system is better able to sustain activity, absorb disruption, and convert presence in space into lasting national advantage.

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Rethinking Chinese Soft Power In Africa

BY COBUS VAN STADEN

Over the past few months, three separate polls have confirmed what many observers in the Global South long predicted: that China is emerging as the preferred partner across the developing world, while the United States is losing favor. Although some of these surveys show that respondents would prefer to engage with both powers (and that they reject the zero-sum logic underlying the U.S.-versus-China narrative currently in vogue in both Washington and Beijing), they also clearly demonstrate that China currently enjoys more positive perceptions in capitals around the world.

Of the three, the Pew Research Center's mid-July survey of 36 countries was the only one to poll both developed and developing countries.¹ It showed an improvement of perceptions of China across the board, except for a few countries with strong historical ties to the United States (like Israel) or with specific disputes with China (such as Japan). Notably, the study shows that the gap between perceptions of the U.S. and China is particularly significant among respondents in Asia-Pacific and Middle Eastern states.

The Pew study's broad North-South view is echoed in two recent quantitative polls that focus specifically on Africa. The first is Afrobarometer African Insights 2026, a survey of 38 countries on the continent, which found 62 percent of respondents approving of China's engagement with the continent, compared with 53 percent approval for the United States.² The second is the Ichikowitz Family Foundation's biannual African Youth Survey, which documents 95 percent of respondents across 36 countries viewing China as an ally, as compared with 88 percent feeling the same about the U.S.³

Those findings are worth unpacking because they speak volumes about China's popularity in the developing world, and specifically in Africa. There, China has established itself as ubiquitous to everyday life—a presence that outstrips formal soft power mechanisms. Moreover, Beijing's standing is reinforced by its integration into African development plans

Cobus van Staden is the co-founder and head of research at The China-Global South Project, an independent, non-partisan research organization tracking China's engagement with the developing world. He holds a PhD from Nagoya University in Japan, and has worked at the University of the Witwatersrand and the South African Institute of International Affairs.

and its role in projecting an image of future society. These features underlie Chinese soft power toward the continent and the growing appeal of the PRC to populations there.

CHINESE UBIQUITY IN KENYA

One of the key takeaways from recent focus group research conducted in Kenya by my organization, the China-Global South Project, was that respondents view China as a partner with unique capabilities that make it indispensable. Indeed, as became clear through a series of interviews we conducted, China is now ubiquitous at virtually all levels of Kenyan life.

One of the principal drivers of this sense of ubiquity is infrastructure. China is a key funder of African infrastructure; according to the Boston University Global Development Policy Center, Chinese funders allocated an estimated \$180.87 billion to the continent between 2000 and 2024.⁴ At the peak of this trend, during the 2010s, China was lending at similar levels as the World Bank. Much of this financing, in turn, drove the rapid construction of the infrastructure upon which Kenyan society now depends.

Relatedly, Chinese engineering, procurement, and contracting companies have built significant amounts of crucial infrastructure on the continent. For example, during the same era, Chinese companies erected one fifth of Sub-Saharan Africa's total electricity generation capacity.⁵ This role arguably expands China's sway even farther, because its companies also frequently work on African-financed and World Bank projects. Since populations often find it challenging to differentiate between different project funders, this means a Chinese contractor's logo at a worksite can lead to assumptions that all these different projects are Chinese-led. Moreover, infrastructure occupies a prominent place in the physical landscape and plays an outsized role in visually communicating the attainment of national development goals, thereby compounding perceptions of China as an irreplaceable provider of development.

A second key vector of China's presence is consumer goods. When we began tracking discourse about China in Africa in the 2010s, the dominant view of Chinese-made consumer products in African countries was that they were low-quality or counterfeit, and traces of these attitudes still lingered in our 2026 focus group discussions. Some respondents saw Chinese-made goods as cheap and European products as preferable. However, the conversation has shifted in two key ways. First, while frequently praised, European products are now almost universally framed as inaccessible, either because they are expensive or because they are simply not available in Kenya at all. Second, the perception of Chinese-made consumer goods has improved markedly. Respondents of all ages praised Chinese firms for making a broader range of products available, with mobile phones being mentioned frequently. That represents a significant shift; while perceptions of Chinese products being low quality used to dominate such conversations, their utility to those same consumers has now become the most frequent framing.

This, in turn, helps to explain the success of Chinese firms in key African sectors. For example, the Chinese telecom company Transsion now controls about 50% of the African mobile phone market via brands like Tecno and Infinix.⁶ The market used to be dominated by European brands such as Nokia and Ericsson—albeit as an offset region for older

models that had fallen out of favor in richer markets. By contrast, Transsion worked hard to localize itself and its products, with equipment that is able to respond to local capacity (for instance, phones that can function on 2G networks) and at a much lower price point than its competitors.

SOFT POWER MECHANISMS

The resulting sense of ubiquity, highlighted by focus group respondents, adds to perceptions of China as irreplaceable. It also contrasts with the relatively low uptake of formal Chinese soft power mechanisms.

China has followed the lead of more established powers in using media and educational outreach as a form of soft power. Chinese state media like CGTN and Xinhua rapidly expanded their formal presence in Kenya in the early 2010s, including through the expansion of studio facilities and the hiring of prominent local journalists. Similarly, Chinese government-supported Confucius Institutes have been established at four Kenyan universities. Akin to Western counterparts like the Alliance Française, these facilities combine language teaching and cultural education, strengthening connections to China through global Mandarin language competitions, facilitating local participation in standardized language testing, and study tours to China.

These formal vectors of influence have received considerable attention in discussions of Chinese soft power on the continent.⁷ However, our focus group showed very low uptake and awareness of these services. Almost no respondents reported attending a Confucius Institute course, despite the presence of students in the cohort. Similarly, very few reported regular consumption of Chinese state media (or consuming it at all). This echoes earlier research showing generally low uptake of Chinese state media, despite its presence on satellite TV services readily available on the continent.⁸

This state of affairs, of course, may slowly change due to the expansion of media content sharing agreements with African publications, which are expanding access to Xinhua content at a moment when African newsrooms frequently cannot afford to maintain access to Western news agencies. For the moment, however, the impact is limited; few respondents reported getting their knowledge of China-Kenya relations from such sources.

That, in turn, suggests that the importance of such formal soft power vectors may need to be rethought. Chinese soft power in Africa seems less targeted and formal, and more pervasive and omnidirectional. And while Chinese influence in education and media still lags, in other arenas it is thriving. Indeed, at a moment when aid relationships are coming under stress, the ubiquity of Chinese brands, and the relative absence of Western competitors, has given Beijing a definitive leg up on the continent.

CHINA'S EMERGING ROLE AS AN INDUSTRIALIZATION PARTNER

Another key insight encapsulated in both the Afrobarometer and African Youth surveys is that, for African nations, the popularity of external partners increasingly depends on perceptions of whether they bring tangible development benefits.



Photo source: Pexels

For African nations, the popularity of external partners increasingly depends on perceptions of whether they bring tangible development benefits.

This forms a key axis of Chinese influence, which can most clearly be seen in the wider context of the continent’s growing resource nationalism. That trend has been sparked by global anxieties about access to critical and rare earth minerals. Nevertheless, China’s vast lead in the processing and refining of these minerals has given it unique leverage in its dealings with other global powers.

Chinese companies have used mergers and acquisitions to cement a robust foothold in some African critical mineral economies, for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s cobalt and copper sectors. In response, the European Union, Japan, India, and the United States have all pursued deals with different African countries to try and edge out Chinese influence.

At the same time, African countries have become more determined to avoid the exploitation that characterized earlier commodity super-cycles driven by African minerals. Partly influenced by continent-wide plans for using mineral resources to drive industrialization and economic integration, African countries have become more assertive in compelling external partners to increase local value-addition to raw ores.⁹ This includes locating processing and refining facilities in the minerals’ country of origin and using this refining capacity as a driver of local employment and ancillary industrialization.

Indonesia provides a good precedent. The Southeast Asian state drew heavy Chinese investment in its nickel sector and then used export bans of raw nickel to compel these investors to localize refining in the country, which frequently involved building power generation facilities to power this work.

Zimbabwe similarly has used export bans in the context of heavy Chinese investment to drive increased local lithium refining. While the Zimbabwean government has not yet achieved its goal of getting Chinese companies to produce battery-grade lithium locally, its export bans and related pressure have nonetheless improved the quality of refining there.

Morocco, likewise, has attracted about \$6 billion in Chinese investment into special economic zones focusing on electric vehicles. This not only includes the assembly of such vehicles, but manufacturing across the EV value chain, including the production of tires and windshields. Notably, the country also negotiated stringent local employment stipulations, addressing one of the long-term sticking points in Africa-China relations: the importation of Chinese workers.

This trend is significant in the context of Chinese influence, because Beijing is clearly deriving influence by being responsive to African plans for industrialization. This role dovetails with the Chinese provision of infrastructure and consumer goods outlined above to make Beijing an indispensable partner to industrializing African countries, even if China itself may not be that popular.

China's influence in Africa is significantly increased by the way it has articulated the future for the rest of the world.

VISUALIZING MODERNITY

Finally, China's influence in Africa is significantly increased by the way it has articulated the future for the rest of the world. An underexamined aspect of China's massive domestic buildout of industrial capacity, especially in the sectors of renewable energy, high-speed rail, electric mobilities and robotics, has been the way that global visions of the future are increasingly dominated by Chinese imagery.

This is especially so in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. Images of robot soccer matches and synchronized mass drone displays have been widely disseminated, together with more quotidian examples of Chinese futurism like high-speed rail networks. Such images don't simply portray a far-off future. Rather, they function much like Hollywood did in the past. In the 1920s and 1930s, American cinema helped to disseminate images of everyday modernity throughout the world. Images of automobiles and traffic systems, indoor plumbing, and kitchen appliances not only established the United States as a modern country; it also provided a set of template images for what modernity could look like locally in other countries. These merged with local production capacity to create a series of products, ideas, and designs that signaled modernity in slightly different (but distinctly U.S.-infused) ways.

Today, images of Chinese futurism disseminated via social media inform local thinking in similar ways. Rather than imposing Chinese technologies on local contexts, they offer images of how the local context might evolve. These images, in turn, dovetail with the ubiquity of Chinese infrastructure and consumer goods in powerful ways. In other words, Chinese tech is increasingly revealing a Chinese-inflected view of the future to youth populations across the developing world.

This is particularly true in Africa, which has long been characterized in Western discourse as a “hopeless continent” incapable of development. In this context, the Chinese provision of financing, consumer goods, and infrastructure to the continent creates a powerful argument for the Chinese “model,” especially among the continent’s large population of young people.

MIXED FEELINGS

As outlined above, polling and focus group data show that views of China are strongly shaped by perceptions of China as a unique force boosting African development at a time when the continent’s other external relations have proved lacking. In quantitative polling, these perceptions simply register as approval of China as one of several external partners. However, the focus group survey conducted by The China-Global South Project provided a much more complex view of this presence.

What became clear in our conversations is that the pervasive presence of China in respondents’ everyday lives represents something more complex than simple popularity. Instead, China’s ubiquity, while broadly seen as being crucial to Kenya’s developmental arc, is also a source of anxiety.

This was particularly clear in discussions surrounding two issues. First, while many respondents cited China’s provision of infrastructure as a key example of its developmental impact, they also repeatedly raised worries about the long-term financial impact of the debt related to high-profile projects like the Standard Gauge Railway. (Notably, the respondents also worried about things like undue British influence on their government and the influence created by UK military bases in Kenya, for example.) In this sense, China’s ubiquity as a development partner seems to trigger larger anxieties emerging from a serious lack of trust between elites and populations in Kenya—a trend that can be extrapolated to other African countries as well.

Second, the conversations also revealed the impact of several high-profile instances of worker abuse and discrimination at Chinese worksites and businesses. Many respondents cited these incidents as examples of Chinese racism. Men in older cohorts were particularly critical, raising examples of workplace discrimination and low wages at Chinese worksites. As one respondent put it to us: “China is friendly from far away but unfriendly up close.”¹⁰

RETHINKING SOFT POWER

One of the key assumptions underlying classical formulations of soft power is a close correlation between it and popularity.¹¹ Our findings suggest that a rethink is in order.

A closer look at Chinese influence in Africa raises doubts about the importance of formal soft power vectors such as language instruction, cultural promotion, and state media outreach. China has largely followed the lead of countries like the UK in deploying these institutions. But our findings suggest there has been very little uptake of these mechanisms among ordinary Kenyans (and others). Yet, despite this reality, China's influence has only grown.

In this context, U.S.-Africa relations find themselves at an inflection point. Data from the three polling studies cited above suggest that the sudden dismantlement of U.S. development and health assistance to Africa solidified perceptions that China is a more crucial external partner to Africa. At the same time, the focus group research raised questions as to the long-term effect of aid as a vector for soft power. Unlike the hard infrastructure facilitated by Chinese entities, the "soft infrastructure" of institution-building and democratization championed in the latter days of USAID has proven relatively ephemeral. This is arguably also true for U.S. pop culture influence. While U.S. pop stars and other celebrities remain influential, they are being displaced by Africa's own, in turn boosted by Chinese platforms like Boomplay.

Both the studies and the focus group discussions outlined here suggest that results matter. That is, tangible development outcomes count for more than cultural influence or other metrics of popularity. In turn, boosting America's competitiveness in Africa requires being more responsive to African demands for skills transfer and local industrialization, increasing investment, and a rollback of the travel barriers the Trump administration has imposed on some African countries. For Washington, these are lessons worth heeding.

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China's Bid For The High North

BY ALEXANDER B. GRAY

The United States and its allies today face a growing challenge in the Arctic from its principal geopolitical adversaries, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation. While Moscow has long maintained a substantial presence in the Arctic, Beijing's ambitions are more recent. Nevertheless, they pose a more significant, long-term challenge for the U.S. and its partners.

As the region becomes both more accessible and more geopolitically contentious, Beijing's designs on the Arctic have risen in importance. They will thus require a concerted response from the United States and its allies and partners, one that spans the economic, military, diplomatic, and intelligence domains.

CHINA AS A "NEAR-ARCTIC STATE"

China regularly refers to itself as a "near-Arctic state," a formulation which was mocked by many in the West when it was first articulated in the 2010s by Chinese scholars and later by policymakers in Beijing. Today, however, the PRC is pursuing a comprehensive Arctic strategy across all domains of national power. As the scope of this effort has become increasingly clear, Western policymakers and analysts have reacted with alarm rather than mirth. Indeed, while the "near-Arctic state" slogan may appear ludicrous as a justification for Beijing's designs on the region's natural resources or geopolitical benefits, it reflects the mindset of a Chinese Communist Party that assiduously seeks influence or even dominance across the earth's core geographies.

As such, China has sought to participate in Arctic scientific research for decades, with the ultimate goal of translating regional presence into diplomatic and political clout. After a long campaign, Beijing received observer status at the Arctic Council in 2013, coinciding

Alexander B. Gray, a Senior Fellow in National Security Affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council, served as Deputy Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of the White House National Security Council (2019-21).

with a flurry of official and semi-official statements attesting to the Arctic's importance in Beijing's geopolitical ambitions.

The first well-publicized mention of China as a “near-Arctic state” comes from a March 2010 article in *Economic Information Daily*, which credits it to Zhang Xia, then-head of the Polar Strategy Research Office at the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC).¹ It then migrated out of the Chinese polar research community and into the broader scholarly orbit when Professor Lu Junyuan of the Jiangnan Institute of Social Sciences used the phrase in his December 2010 book, *Geopolitics in the Arctic and China's Response*.²

Shortly thereafter, the phraseology entered official Chinese policy discourse. In 2012, there were multiple reports of Chinese diplomats using the formulation in international fora, including the Chinese Ambassador to Sweden. However, in January 2013, the Chinese government made its first formal and unambiguous statement claiming to be a “near-Arctic state” when Beijing's Ambassador to Norway, Zhao Jun, made the remarks at the Arctic Frontiers conference in Tromsø.³ By 2015, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was incorporating the concept into the statements of its senior leaders, with Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming justifying the assertion by citing the pending changes to the Arctic's climate and the attendant impacts on China's environment, agriculture, and related policy areas.⁴ Finally, in January 2018, China's State Council Information Office released Beijing's first comprehensive Arctic strategy, which not only enshrined the “near-Arctic state” concept as official doctrine but laid out a holistic vision for China's engagement in a region seen as increasingly important for its larger geopolitical and geoeconomic objectives.⁵

Beijing's Arctic strategy begins from the intellectual assertion that climate changes in the Arctic will have significant consequences for China across a range of policy areas, therefore necessitating a serious response from the Chinese government. Significantly, China asserts in the document that while the traditional Arctic states may have sovereign claims over various specific Arctic territories, those rights do not limit the concerns of a “near-Arctic state” like China that is legitimately impacted by various events in the region. This assertion, while relatively benign as promulgated in 2018, has since been used to justify a broad range of Chinese actions that go substantially beyond the limited language of the 2018 document.

As is the case of many such Chinese strategy documents, Beijing's goals are summarized in a short, clever tagline: “understand, protect, develop, and participate in the governance of the Arctic.” This explicit focus on involvement in the governance of a region geographically far removed from China is married to a similarly explicit focus on natural resources, with the document homing in on energy, minerals, fishing, tourism, and shipping routes as of particular concern to Beijing.

Shipping routes, and the possibility of their expansion following changes to the climate in the Arctic, is a recurring theme of the 2018 document and of other Chinese strategic thinking on the region in the years since. Much of the discourse surrounding Beijing's ambitions in the region is related to its use of the Polar Silk Road, first formalized in the 2018 policy document, to project economic power across the Arctic.

Chinese President Xi Jinping first announced an “Ice Silk Road” in 2017 as he inaugurated a Sino-Russian Arctic economic project. This was expanded to the “Polar Silk Road” of the 2018 white paper, which is best understood as the Arctic adjunct of the famous Belt &



Photo source: Pexels

Road Initiative (BRI). The concept, as outlined in the 2018 document, is stunningly ambitious: a Chinese-led economic corridor, primarily built around expanded post-climate change shipping routes, stretching from China to northern Russia through the Bering Strait and North Atlantic and finally concluding at European ports. But even beyond simply tying China and Europe closer through a realized “Northwest Passage” of shipping routes in the Arctic, the 2018 document called for Beijing to take leadership over a staggering series of industries or activities in the new Arctic corridor: port infrastructure, hydrographic surveying, energy and minerals exploration and extraction, telecommunications and digital infrastructure, and more.

Since the enunciation of the Polar Silk Road, Beijing has pursued numerous projects of considerable scale and ambition, with varying degrees of success. The best example of a successful PSR project, though one that slightly predates the 2018 white paper, is Beijing’s investment in the Yamal LNG project in Russian Siberia. Chinese entities now control roughly 30 percent of the project.⁶ Beijing has followed this effort with other flagship PSR investments in Russian Arctic energy, including a combined 20 percent Chinese stake in Novatek’s Arctic LNG 2 in northern Siberia.⁷

Outside of Russia, China has shown particular interest in PSR projects in the Nordic countries. But Beijing’s efforts to pursue significant infrastructure and related efforts in the European Arctic have, so far, mostly failed to come to fruition, largely for economic security reasons in the host countries. Nevertheless, Beijing has pursued railway projects in Finland and Norway⁸, mining and infrastructure developments in Greenland⁹, and telecommunications and port developments across Scandinavia¹⁰. The PSR, in other words,

has served more to demonstrate the scale of Beijing's Arctic ambitions, and to deepen its economic ties with its "no limits partner" in Moscow, than to truly realize the original vision of the 2018 policy document.

CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL AMBITIONS IN THE ARCTIC

While the Polar Silk Road and the 2018 Arctic Policy offer a useful roadmap for Beijing's direction of travel in the region, its geopolitical and security ambitions have come into even clearer focus in recent years. The growth of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been accompanied by a far more aggressive naval presence in key Arctic areas, including in waters abutting core U.S. interests. Beginning in 2015, the PLAN began operating regularly in the Bering Strait near Alaska—operations that have morphed into regular Sino-Russian naval patrols and integrated air assets.¹¹ These operations are also increasingly close to Alaskan waters, and have become a distinct operational pattern. China is now regularly operating, both independently and with Russia, near the Aleutian Islands and gaining practical operating experience in strategically vital seaways near a core U.S. geography.

Additionally, China and Russia marked a major escalatory threshold in July 2024, when a joint patrol comprising Chinese H-6 and Russian Tu-95 bombers flew together into the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).¹² While they remained in international airspace, the incident marked the first time a Chinese bomber patrol had entered the ADIZ. Additionally, and concerning in terms of joint operational art, it has been reported that the Chinese and Russian aircraft on that patrol departed together from the same Russian airbase.

This pattern of significant Arctic cooperation between the two was further enshrined in the April 2023 cooperation agreement signed in Murmansk between the China Coast Guard (CCG) and Russia's Border Guard Service.¹³ And in October 2024, following exercises with Russian forces, two Chinese Coast Guard vessels conducted their first ever transit of the Arctic Ocean.¹⁴ When they were intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard in the Bering Sea, Washington described it as the northernmost location at which China Coast Guard vessels had ever been observed.

This increasing mission presence belies the claims of China's 2018 Arctic policy to merely seek a more inclusive approach to Arctic governance. Beijing, using both the PLAN and CCG, is consistently increasing its day-to-day presence in the Arctic and using its partnership with Russia to operationalize that presence. Significantly, Beijing has increased its polar oceanographic, hydrographic, and acoustic research in ways with potential dual-use significance. Canada has recovered Chinese monitoring buoys in the Arctic, and the Chinese Polar Research Institute has even announced an underwater listening device for Arctic deployment. Given Beijing's demonstrated capacity in the Pacific to harness ostensibly scientific capabilities for anti-submarine warfare purposes, these developments are deeply troubling for Western allies concerned with China's polar ambitions.

In the European Arctic, China has exploited ambiguity regarding the sovereignty of Norwegian-claimed Svalbard to establish the Yellow River Station at Ny-Alesund. While ostensibly scientific in nature, this station is a persistent Chinese presence at roughly 79

degrees north inside a NATO country's territory. China is known to conduct Arctic GPS tracking research and upper-atmosphere observational readings at the station, both of which have uses outside traditional scientific inquiry. While Norway disputes China's interpretation of the international treaty governing the establishment of a scientific station on Svalbard, one point is clear: Beijing itself sees the station as a permanent, nationally controlled base from which to operate in the Arctic.

A similar dynamic is at play in Iceland, where the PRIC has established the China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory (CIAO). While the Icelandic partner owns the property, the PRIC has a 99-year lease to conduct scientific operations. China is conducting space-weather atmospheric research and remote sensing work at the Karholl site, further representing an institutionalized Chinese presence within an Arctic NATO member. Both Svalbard and Karholl build upon China's first overseas satellite ground station, established above the Arctic Circle in 2016 near Kiruna, Sweden. Stockholm later became concerned enough with the potential dual-use nature of Beijing's presence that, in 2020, it decided not to renew the agreement.

These examples are buttressed by Beijing's steady increase in Arctic hard power capacity, epitomized by the rapid strides in its icebreaker fleet. Over the last 25 years, China has reached parity with the United States in icebreaking capacity, now fielding three operational vessels that can operate in the Arctic for sustained periods. This is a significant increase in capacity, and will likely serve to further Beijing's ability for dual-use research and presence missions in both the North American and European Arctic in the years ahead.

As the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) look for a revamped mission and focus for the venerable alliance, addressing Chinese (and Russian) ambitions in the Arctic can serve as a core rallying point.

THE U.S. AND NATO POLICY RESPONSE

As the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) look for a revamped mission and focus for the venerable alliance, addressing Chinese (and Russian) ambitions in the Arctic can serve as a core rallying point. The U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland are all directly impacted by Beijing and Moscow's predations in the High North and can serve as both an *ad hoc* and institutional "coalition of the willing" within NATO on Arctic matters. Many of these countries are also well-versed in specific aspects of Arctic military and intelligence operations, including Finland's renown in icebreaker building and the Norwegian military's prowess in Arctic land operations. Given the geographic and functional breadth of deterring Russian and Chinese aggression in the region, harnessing the unique strengths and capacity of this combined subset of NATO Arctic powers will be essential to preventing adversary advantage in the region.

The Trump administration has created an important intellectual framework for responding to Beijing's ambitions in the North American Arctic. The 2025 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), as well as the 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, offer useful framing devices for a U.S. approach to adversary activities in the region.¹⁵ By emphasizing a return to the traditional U.S. concept of "hemispheric defense," and broadly interpreting the Western Hemisphere to include longstanding U.S. strategic interests like Greenland, Washington has created a useful roadmap for prioritizing the Arctic as a core interest, one tied both to homeland defense and to larger Great Power competition with Eurasian-based adversaries.

Under that strategic rubric, the United States has substantial individual steps it needs to take to ensure its readiness for the future of Great Power competition in the Arctic. From a military perspective, the U.S. Department of War must improve Arctic domain awareness, to include better sensors, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, data sharing, and early warning detection in both the air and maritime domains across the region, with a particular focus on the U.S. and Canadian Arctic. Improving joint U.S.-Canadian readiness through the traditional architecture of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) is likewise critical, particularly given chronic Canadian underinvestment in its air and maritime contributions to the combined defense of North America.

After decades of concentrating on U.S. Central Command's "Area of Responsibility," the U.S. military must return to its Cold War-era focus on operating successfully in cold weather environments.

After decades of concentrating on U.S. Central Command's "Area of Responsibility," the U.S. military must return to its Cold War-era focus on operating successfully in cold weather environments. As the Biden administration's 2024 Department of Defense *Arctic Strategy* points out, this will require an improved focus on cold-weather equipment, communications, logistics, infrastructure, and related competencies, as well as a robust tempo of realistic Arctic training exercises.¹⁶ Much of this will require a more sustained and modernized U.S. presence in Alaska, Washington's own foothold in the North American Arctic. But, as U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK) has repeatedly argued, Alaska's defense infrastructure needs expansion and modernization to meet the challenge of an Arctic-focused Beijing and Moscow.

For example, the U.S. Army's Arctic warfare training footprint in Alaska can be broadened substantially and centered upon a full buildout of the 11th Airborne Division, with both its brigades serving as integrated, Arctic-focused units. Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson can serve as the joint hub of Arctic warfare readiness, with expanded cold-weather aviation and long-range fires capabilities resident there. The U.S. can also expand its prepositioning of cold-weather focused equipment into an Arctic Prepositioned Stock, better preparing the Joint Force and Canadian allies for potential contingencies in the region without relying on time-consuming resupply from farther afield in adverse weather conditions. The current Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center in Alaska

could also be significantly expanded to fulfill a multinational Arctic military training function analogous to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin.

Given the increased naval activity in the region by both China and Russia, often operating together, an expansion of the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy presence in Alaska is needed as well. While a Navy presence in Alaska should become more routine to address the rapidly escalating nature of Sino-Russian maritime capabilities in the Bering Strait, the chronically under-resourced Coast Guard will continue to be the principal U.S. maritime force in Alaskan waters. While the Coast Guard requires a much larger top-line operating budget, given the enormous and varied missions assigned to it, there are practical steps available to improve the service's posture in the North American Arctic.

In addition to the announced assignment of Polar Security Cutters (PSCs) to Kodiak and Seward, the establishment of a permanent Coast Guard Arctic base at Nome would provide the appropriate level of presence. Moving the already-announced Fast Response Cutters (FRCs) that will be homeported in Alaska farther north, homeporting some of them closer to the Arctic, would also be useful. Finally, during the navigable season, the Coast Guard's most capable vessels, the National Security Cutter (NSC), should increase its deployment tempo in the Bering Sea to serve as a direct deterrent response to Beijing and Moscow's growing presence.

Finally, in order to manage both the increasing demands of a changing Arctic and growing needs in the freshly competitive Antarctic, the U.S. must change the paradigm through which it views the critical strategic assets known as icebreakers. PSCs, with utility in both polar regions, are scarce strategic assets, and, given existing constraints on the U.S. shipbuilding industrial base, will likely remain so in the future. They should be reserved for the most challenging environments and missions, with regular icebreaking functions increasingly delegated to medium icebreakers of the Arctic Security Cutter (ASC) class, of which eleven are currently planned for production. Moreover, while the original ASCs were built in Finland and the follow-on vessels are scheduled for U.S. construction, it is critical that an indigenous American capacity for ASC construction consolidate over the coming years. Without a stable icebreaker industrial base capacity resident in the United States, it will be difficult to maintain a long-term U.S. presence in the changing Arctic.

Washington has attempted to intervene in Greenland since at least the 1860s for precisely this purpose: to deny a potential foreign adversary access to a strategically vital geography proximate to the United States.

THE GREENLAND PUZZLE

The aforementioned policy responses primarily address Chinese and Russian ambitions in the North American Arctic. However, given the public interest and geopolitical competition in Greenland, it is worth considering the dynamic nature of the world's largest island and its impact on both Chinese and American thinking on the High North.

China has made several, largely unsuccessful forays into developing Greenland's infrastructure. Given the island's strategic location along the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap, the potential dual-use nature of such investment sparked concerns in both Washington and Copenhagen, and led to Danish action to prevent such investments. While this satisfied immediate American concerns regarding Western capacity to prevent Beijing's Greenlandic ambitions in the immediate term, it did not resolve either long-term fears of China's potential interest in Greenland or Washington's longstanding interest in preserving the island from malign foreign presence.

Indeed, Washington has attempted to intervene in Greenland since at least the 1860s for precisely this purpose: to deny a potential foreign adversary access to a strategically vital geography proximate to the United States. In addition to American purchase attempts under Presidents as varied as Andrew Johnson, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower, the U.S. occupied Greenland during World War II to prevent Nazi Germany from acquiring U-Boat stations there following the occupation of Denmark. The 1951 treaty between Denmark and the U.S. that ensures American military access to Greenland stems from Cold War-era concerns about Soviet nuclear submarines transiting the GIUK Gap to threaten the U.S. East Coast. These concerns, updated to include ballistic missile threats to North America, continue to broadly animate America's focus on Greenland in the 21st century and in the context of China's Arctic ambitions.

From a U.S. perspective, the most pressing Greenlandic security concern remains a medium- to long-term challenge: what happens to the Greenlandic security architecture if Nuuk eventually gains independence from Denmark? This is not simply a theoretical problem. Prior to the United States expressing interest in acquiring Greenland during the second Trump administration, Greenland's own 2024 national security and defense strategy called for independence by the 2030s.¹⁷ While Washington's rhetoric may have curtailed an immediate Greenlandic desire for independence, further strides toward autonomy reflect a fifty-year trend and will likely continue in the years ahead. Therefore, it is essential that Washington develop a long-term approach to maintain Greenlandic sovereignty from China's demonstrated desire to subvert the island for its strategic and economic purposes.

To that end, Washington enjoys a strong policy lever to productively influence events in Greenland. In the event of an independent Greenland, which may not honor the 1951 treaty that was negotiated with its former colonial master, the U.S. can propose an agreement similar to the Compacts of Free Association (COFAs) with Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. These would allow Greenland to operate as an independent state but with significant defense guarantees from the United States, in exchange for unrestricted American military access to the island. It would also likely include U.S. economic and trade support to incentivize such a positive relationship with Greenland. This architecture would prevent the nightmare of a developing, sparsely populated state proximate to the United States that is ripe for subversion by the PRC.

LOOKING NORTH

China is engaged in a multi-decade, multi-domain, dual-use effort to become a major economic, military, and diplomatic power in the Arctic. This effort, moreover, stretches

across both the European and North American Arctic, posing real challenges to NATO. In recent years, while the United States allowed many of its Cold War-era Arctic capabilities to atrophy, Beijing invested heavily in the architecture required to manifest its pretensions to being a “near-Arctic state.” As in other peripheral regions, from the Pacific Islands to the Antarctic, China is using the distraction of other powers and its own ability to funnel significant resources into narrow projects to rapidly catch up to entrenched stakeholders.

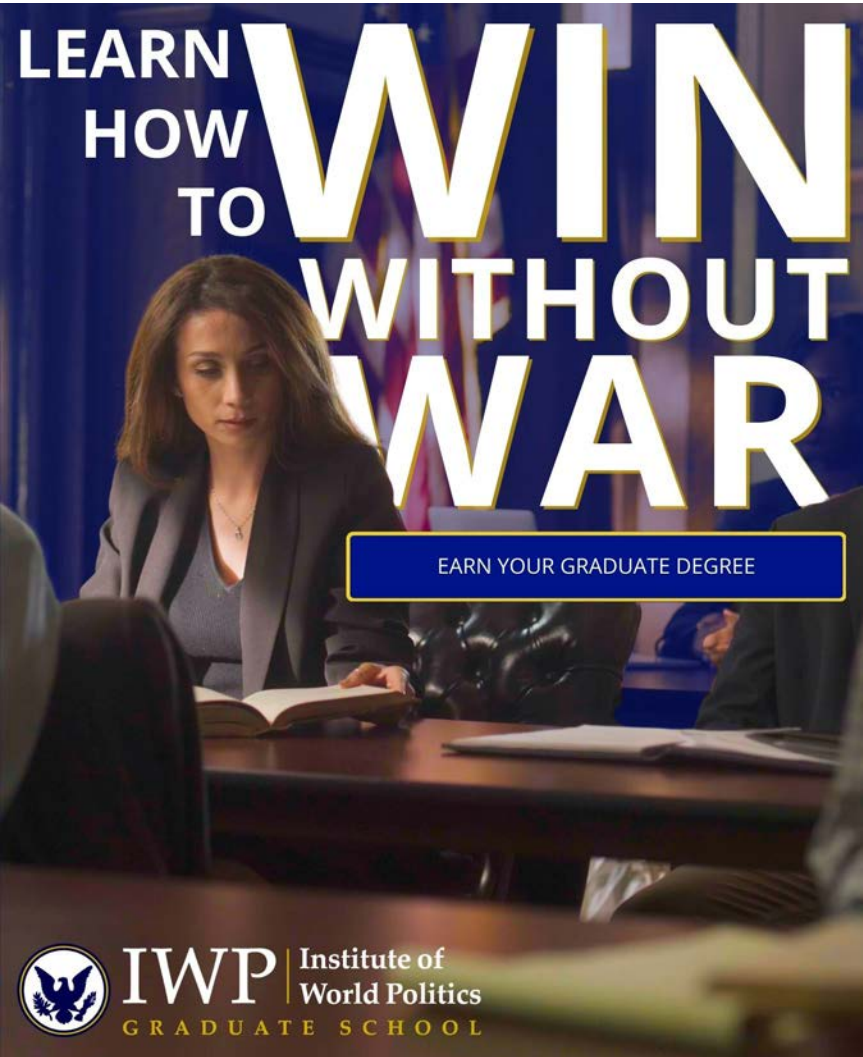
As China increases both its capacity and willingness to challenge U.S. and NATO interests in the Arctic, it is imperative for Washington and its partners to develop individual and joint responses. As Beijing often acts in concert with Russia, particularly in the North American Arctic, these responses cannot be separated from the larger dynamic of the Sino-Russian “no limits partnership.” Developing adequate force structure, including icebreakers and aviation assets, and prioritizing Arctic issues in national strategic planning documents are necessary correctives to nearly two decades of Chinese expansion in this critical domain.

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The CCP's Pursuit Of Global Power

BY PETER MATTIS &
JONAH REISBOARD

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always operated on a global stage and with global ambitions. At the core of Mao Zedong's dispute with Joseph Stalin in the late 1940s and early 1950s was which nation, China or the Soviet Union, should lead the international communist movement.

Mao, after all, did not order the Great Leap Forward and ultimately starved millions of his people so that China could become Asia's largest steel producer. He wanted China to become the world's largest—a goal the CCP achieved in the 1990s. The Party also fought at the Vienna Convention of 1994 to embed relativism and regionalism in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and thereby to deny all humans the recognized right to basic freedoms.

Even under the relatively lethargic leadership of Hu Jintao, Beijing still outlined a global role for itself under the rubric of "New Historic Missions" for the People's Liberation Army, despite its capabilities still being regionally constrained. Hu also invested in expanding China's propaganda reach with a \$6.5 billion infusion in 2008.¹

Indeed, all of the CCP's leaders have left their mark on Beijing's international reach. The Party's current leader, Xi Jinping, has only made these ambitions more explicit, and has been more forthright about employing the PRC's newfound power and status.

He has done so to great effect. Today, the CCP poses a powerful challenge to the United States, its allies and partners, and all other states that want to decide their own futures, because there is no clear boundary or limits to the CCP's objectives or its appetite.

Peter Mattis is President of The Jamestown Foundation.

Jonah Reisboard is an Editorial Assistant for China at The Jamestown Foundation.

AVOIDING THE POWER PRIORITIZATION TRAP

Saying that the Party's highest priority is to remain in power is too simplistic. If the CCP cared only for power, it would not have survived the tumultuous years of Mao's rule or been able to retrench after years of reform and opening up. Ruling a country is composed of two parts, after all. The first is politics, which is maneuvering to stay in power. The second is policy, which are the measures taken to govern. Analytically, focusing too much on the former distracts from the Party's existing policy program and its progress.

All political parties must practice politics and cultivate power, regardless of whether they run a one-party totalitarian state or exist as one of several factions in a parliamentary system. The CCP and its individual leaders do this by controlling the security apparatus, propaganda, and central bureaucracy, and by ensuring the loyalty of the relevant organs to the party-state. The Party also continues to adapt its security and propaganda systems to cultivate public loyalty, target dissent before it cascades, and guide public narratives.

Even if the Party's primary goal was power, it is not one Xi and the other leaders think about all the time. The Party does not confront an existential threat each day from the Chinese people. Most incidents of unrest are relatively small, and they only rarely extend across geographic areas.

Indeed, Freedom House's *China Dissent Monitor* identified only a few hundred protests in China over the last year, and few involving the political legitimacy of the CCP itself. Instead, most were related to home ownership problems, animal cruelty, and other general social issues.² The last major eruption of politically threatening sentiment was the White Paper Protests that took place against the PRC's draconian COVID lockdown in November 2022. Those began at a university in Nanjing after a fire in a locked-down apartment building in Urumqi killed 10 people. The demonstrations cascaded across 39 cities in 21 provinces, aided by a social media campaign that bridged domestic and international platforms.³ Other individual protests or demonstrations may have attracted more participants, but none drew as many people across as many geographic areas.

The White Paper Protests represent an anomaly in terms of regime support—or at least the absence of willingness to oppose it. Surveys have shown that the CCP enjoys approval ratings of around 80 percent, with some results claiming a 95 percent approval rating for Xi himself.⁴ Such surveys should not be understood as reflecting genuine backing, however. The Chinese people understand well the dangers that such surveys present, even when anonymity is assured, and are unlikely to trust the process. However, the high number that support the Party suggests that most people do not want to actively oppose it and will not even take a neutral position that might suggest dissatisfaction or disloyalty. The overall point is simple: one cannot see a sign today that the Party faces an imminent threat from Chinese society that the CCP's control apparatus cannot handle as a routine matter.

But the CCP has a positive policy program that aims at much more than simply protecting the interests of its leadership. In their profiles of Chinese leaders since the Qing Dynasty reformers, historians John Delury and Orville Schell showed how both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping fit clearly into a Chinese tradition of trying to strengthen the country and restore China to its perceived place in the world. Critics can dispute whether

Mao and Deng should be viewed as normal leaders, but they should not dismiss the fact that both leaders had a clear vision.

Signs of such vision also are present in the CCP's five-year plans and the PRC's rapid movement into emerging technologies. Party planners have looked to steadily move the country up the value chain, to build manufacturing capacity and then invest in the key industries that are likely to define future economic growth: artificial intelligence, biotechnology, advanced manufacturing and robotics, and aerospace.⁵ Beijing also made steady investments in electricity production over the last two decades as a way of underpinning continuing industrial growth. According to the International Energy Agency, the PRC has long been the world's largest electricity producer, generating more than double the output of the United States. In 2023, it generated 9.55 million Gigawatt hours of electricity, and there is unused capacity to generate even more if necessary.⁶

These tangible measures of progress should encourage observers to take CCP leaders at their word when they talk about the great project of national rejuvenation. The Party leadership does not need to worry every day about an existential threat from Chinese society. Therefore, they have the time to invest in the knowledge and decision-making that can support the country's development.

THE PARTY'S AMBITIONS

The Party's ambitions, at least those most relevant to outsiders, can be explained through three major lines of effort. The first is comprehensive modernity. The formal phrase for this is now "a great modern socialist country" that is "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful." The second is national unification. Most obviously, this means taking control of Taiwan—just as Beijing was able to regain Hong Kong and Macao in 1997 and 1999, respectively. More broadly, however, it means reincorporating any lost territory that Beijing claims as its own. The third is becoming the global leader in comprehensive national power and gaining sufficient international heft to remake global governance.

The most important feature of these ambitions is that they pit the PRC against the world. The qualifiers "prosperous" and "strong" only make sense relative to other countries. Regaining lost territory, clarifying borders, and asserting political control necessarily involve the countries that now control that territory, whether that is Taiwan or parts of the Russian Far East. Comprehensive national power is a measurement system first explored by the CCP in the 1980s as a way of understanding the PRC's relative power. These ambitions show that CCP leaders think of themselves on a global stage and have the ambitions to match.

Achieving comprehensive modernity should be understood as becoming economically rich and militarily strong without sacrificing the Party's political values or control. Each one of the words in the long phrase "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful" is shorthand for a larger set of policy objectives. The reason such phrases fail to resonate with foreign readers is that those observers do not see them as the start of deeper policy discussions about what it means to be prosperous or strong in today's context.



Photo source: Shutterstock

National unification or “reunification” is the second central feature of national rejuvenation. Taking control of Taiwan is the most obvious manifestation of that ambition. In a 2019 speech commemorating the “Letter to Taiwan Compatriots,” Xi stated that “the historical and legal fact that Taiwan is part of China and the two sides belong to one and the same China ... can never be changed by any force or anyone.” In that and other speeches, he also pressed home the linkage between national rejuvenation and reunification, describing it as an opportunity that Taiwanese compatriots should not want to forego. Such language is repeated throughout the Party Congress Work Reports delivered by successive CCP general secretaries stretching back to Zhao Ziyang (who was put under house arrest after opposing the Tiananmen massacre in 1989).

National unification refers as much to regaining political control as it does to the economic, social, and cultural unification of areas that the PRC already controls. The CCP uses the same word for unification whether it is unification of the nation or of thought and ideology. But this is not a semantic game. The United Kingdom turned Hong Kong over to PRC control in 1997, completing a political transition. The CCP, however, did not relent in Party publications from referring to implementing “One Country, Two Systems” and the continuing need for united front work to impose the Party’s vision in Hong Kong. Beijing also launched the Greater Bay Area Initiative in 2017 to integrate Hong Kong and Macao into the economic system of the Guangdong cities closest to the two special administrative regions. The initiative also includes an element of promoting young Hong Kongers to work in the surrounding PRC cities rather than pursuing careers in Hong Kong. This is softer than the aggressive assimilation policies pursued in minority areas, like Tibet and East

Turkestan (officially the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or XUAR), but the ultimate intent is the same.

The national unification program should be seen as encompassing the entire country and territory yet to be reclaimed. It is most visible in minority areas, because those are the most different from the CCP's definition of a model Chinese citizen. Just as the Party has squeezed minority language education out of curriculum and public life, so too have Chinese dialects been squeezed out of routine usage in official settings. People in Guangdong protested such language policies in 2010, with thousands taking to the streets, just as Mongolian parents in Inner Mongolia protested curriculum changes in 2020 that phased out indigenous language education.⁷

Earlier this year, national unification was given its most explicit framework yet: the Promotion of Ethnic Unity and Progress Law. The law explicitly states its purpose as “forging the sense of the Chinese national community.” The law also includes provisions, seemingly based on the systematic repression of Uyghur identity in the XUAR, for Mandarin-only education, the cultivation of Chinese consciousness, and the criminalization of unapproved expressions of ethnic identity for which organizations, officials, and others on the social fringes of such expressions can be prosecuted.⁸

The third element of national rejuvenation is becoming the global leader in comprehensive national power. First conceived of in the 1980s, comprehensive national power evolved over two decades to become a central framing device in speeches, policy documents, and national strategies for how the Party understands the PRC's strengths and competitive position vis-a-vis other countries.⁹ In 1991, then-CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin described international rivalry as “a competition for comprehensive national power,” and such framing has continued to the present. Indeed, whether a policy enhances the PRC's comprehensive national power has been used for three decades as one of the main questions in assessing the correctness of a potential course of action.

Comprehensive national power includes the following elements: economic strength, science and technology strength, national defense strength, natural resource strength, political strength, cultural and educational strength, and foreign policy strength.¹⁰ Underlying these areas are at least thirty variables identified by Chinese researchers that form the composite score. This seemingly formal modeling of national power might appear academic, but approximately a decade ago, the official scoring was moved under the National Bureau of Statistics. Moreover, even before the adoption of comprehensive national power as a national statistical measurement, the Party already had begun acting on the insights it thought it had gained.

Beginning in the early 1990s, it created the first three of seven national strategies to mobilize society and address different aspects of the PRC's comprehensive national power. Beijing first introduced the “Rejuvenation through Science and Education Development Strategy” in 1995 to address weaknesses in the PRC's scientific power and human resources, because the Party had determined scientific and technological progress to be the key determinant for economic progress. The following year, the “Sustainable Development Strategy” was introduced to balance economic development, social development (human resources), natural resources, and ecological stability. The discussions around the strategy explicitly mention the need to balance the costs and unevenness of rapid economic growth. In 2003,

the Party doubled down on the human resources problem by introducing the “Talent Strong Country Development Strategy.”

Following the 2008 Financial Crisis, PRC analysts realized that Beijing and Washington led countries much more powerful than the rest of the world. To catch up with the United States, however, the CCP would need to improve its ability to harness science and technology and to facilitate the spread of that technology across different domains of comprehensive national power. In response, four additional national strategies would be introduced: the “Innovation-Driven Development Strategy” (2012), the “Regional Coordinated Development Strategy” (2014), the “Military-Civil Fusion Development Strategy” (2015), and the “Rural Revitalization Strategy” (2017). All seven strategies would be added to the Party’s Charter (sometimes called its constitution), thereby formalizing the approaches to building comprehensive national power.¹¹

The CCP sees comprehensive national power as defining the structure of the international system. As PRC power grew, Beijing started to see itself as “moving toward the center” of international affairs and introduced new ideas and structures to subtly subvert the existing order. The Party’s “New Type of International Relations” and “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind” envisioned Beijing’s united front governing international relations in which countries resolve their interests through Beijing. The Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative all attacked aspects of the U.S. alliance system and universal values and human rights. They also reinforced the idea that sovereignty included culture and ideas that justified pushing back against Western hegemony.

Taken together, the idea of national rejuvenation represents a powerful urge not just to develop China for its own sake, but for the Party to assert itself globally.

Since Chinese socialism is seen as the only force capable of achieving what are presented as national goals, threats to the ideological system are seen as impediments to national development.

SOCIALISM AND SYSTEMS CONFRONTATION

Marxist theory sees socialism as inevitable in part because “scientific socialism” views social and political outcomes as the result of measurable inputs. The CCP holds to the same view: that national rejuvenation is inevitable should it achieve its prerequisites.¹² These goals, some of which are antithetical to U.S. interests, lead socialism and its underlying logic to shape the PRC’s approach to competition with the United States and the West. The CCP’s belief in socialist ideology and historical inevitability emboldens its ambitions and determines how it seeks to achieve its goals.

As such, Western values pose a challenge to the Party’s ambitions, and it has responded accordingly both at home and abroad. Domestically, this has meant a crackdown on “subversive” views, an effort most clearly delineated in a 2013 communique known as “Document 9.” That edict, which was approved by the Party’s central leadership, named

Western democracy, universal values, and other related ideals as threats to both the CCP leadership and the ideological system of Chinese socialism as a whole.¹³ Since Chinese socialism is seen as the only force capable of achieving what are presented as national goals, threats to the ideological system are seen as impediments to national development.

Ideological confrontation also influences the PRC's engagement with the world. The PRC's promotion of "indigenous innovation," particularly in science and technology, predates the 14th and 15th five-year plans, having been formally introduced as early as 2006.¹⁴ Followed by the Xi-era industrial policy that promotes "autonomous and controllable" supply chains, the CCP leadership had created the economic conditions for global preeminence in technology and trade. The policy of dual circulation took this a step further, promoting self-reliance domestically while facilitating the world's increasing dependency on the PRC, effectively centralizing it in the global economy.¹⁵ Indeed, the economic policy pursued by the PRC since 2006 reflects a clear decision by the Party to engage in a systems confrontation with the United States and the West.

Confrontation with the West also involves the Party presenting an independent form of global leadership. A June 2026 white paper on global governance made this clear, promoting Xi's Global Governance Initiative (GGI) and claiming that the PRC is already a global leader in many respects.¹⁶ As Chinese scholars have indicated, the GGI, a central aspect of the PRC's proposed mode of leadership, is intended to "transcend the Western-centric governance paradigm."¹⁷

Beyond high-level proposals for Chinese leadership like the GGI, PRC diplomats also embed aspects of systems confrontation in existing international forums and bilateral relations. For instance, at the UN Human Rights Council, the CCP promotes concepts such as the "community of common destiny for mankind," "win-win cooperation," and "people-centered approaches."¹⁸ Resolutions that adopt these Party terms normalize the CCP's approach to governance and embed its perspectives in influential human rights bodies.

Simultaneously, the Party has returned to the concept of "Asian values" to bolster the appeal of Chinese leadership in Asia. This concept inherently makes the PRC the leader of its Asian counterparts, and places a Chinese-led Asia in opposition to the West.¹⁹ Like PRC activities in the United Nations, this effort goes beyond advancing regime security. By escalating competition with the United States within the ASEAN countries, the PRC has established another battleground in its ideological confrontation with the West.

The PRC's alignment with Russia follows the same logic. The relationship is widely regarded as a pragmatic one, with the two countries continuing to compete in Central Asia and having a history of mutual suspicion.²⁰ However, it provides yet another venue for the PRC to challenge U.S. leadership and Western values. PRC-Russia ties have been characterized as "geopolitical socialism," an informal alliance that strengthens their ability to compete with the West, reinforces regime strength, and secures the state during this period of heightened tensions.²¹

BUREAUCRACY IN ACTION: HOW WE KNOW

Seminal documents like the CCP general secretary's report to the Party Congress and five-year plans represent the outcomes of long political processes involving many elements

of the party-state. Preparations for the Party Congress every five years consume months of effort in the run up to the event. While external observers are aware of political horse-trading for personnel appointments, the bureaucracies are also heavily involved in the formation of the ultimate consensus.

Americans and other outsiders frequently dismiss CCP speeches and documents, because they misunderstand what these represent. The mirror-image in the West, like the U.S. *National Security Strategy* or foreign policy documents of the European Council, tend to be aspirational or analytical. They frame future policy directions, priorities, and options. Moreover, they are the product of small writing teams that then coordinate the documents across the system. Bureaucratic engagement is more *ad hoc* than the sustained, directed, and daily process it is in the Chinese party-state.

As such, CCP documents and speeches also should be taken seriously, because they are part of a large, growing, and consistent canon that evolves with the PRC's domestic and international situation. Each leader from Mao to Xi has contributed to the ideas and specificity of PRC development and what it means. There are few, if any, clear breaks in the Party's history about what the overall objectives should be. Disputes are largely centered around who wields power and how to divide the spoils of economic development, rather than what should be accomplished.

Finally, all of these ambitions have supporting actions to move them forward. Analysis of comprehensive national power added new dimensions to how the CCP understood global competition. That analysis in turn led to new strategies. From those, we see new actions, programs, and policies. The direction and execution are not always perfect, but the Party is prepared to review, recalibrate, and adapt. China's party-state is not a monolith, in other words. But it is also not so fragmented that it lacks strategic direction.

GAME PLAN

The future of China may still be uncertain and there will doubtless be opportunities to influence how it unfolds. The CCP, however, has chosen a course for the country that has progressed unequivocally in one direction: toward confrontation. Since the end of the reform period, CCP leaders have consolidated their competitive edge, focusing on producing what the world needs in order to increase the centrality of their country. Each new policy planning document has taken further steps to create dependency on the PRC—a dynamic that reinforces the Party's confrontational stance vis-à-vis the West.

Failing to acknowledge and respect the choices CCP leaders have made about their country's future can only lead to disappointment and surprise. Conceivably, after Xi Jinping leaves the political scene, the Party could make another set of choices, and may even loosen its grip on power and the systems of control that maintain it. However, China under Xi needs to be understood as the latest embodiment of the Party's ambitions, its choices, and the future that the CCP wants to create. That, in turn, should be the starting point for any serious analysis of how to compete or engage effectively to protect U.S. interests.

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How China Is Reshaping The Greater Middle East

BY MIN MITCHELL

In the summer of 2026, as the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran progressively choked off the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbors turned to Beijing rather than to Washington. They asked China, the largest destination for oil moving through the Strait, to use its influence on Tehran to reopen the waterway.¹ Beijing, however, did little; it sent envoys and made calls, but it did not publicly lean on Tehran. It ruled out any use of force, and, in April, joined Russia in vetoing a Security Council resolution authorizing coordinated escorts for regional shipping.² In the end, the job of safeguarding the world's most important oil chokepoint remained where it has been for decades: with the U.S. Navy.

Beijing's restraint was deliberate. China has never sought to replace the United States as the region's security guarantor. Instead, it is doing something quieter and, over time, harder to counter: increasing its influence as the region looks to diversify its economic, defense, and cultural relationships.

That approach is paying dividends. A generation ago, regional leaders had few options but to look to Washington. Today, they are actively courting other suitors. And by playing the great powers off against one another, they are extracting what they can from each. When the focus shifts to capital, infrastructure, and telecoms, however, the regional gaze is increasingly turning eastward.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

To measure the scale of that shift, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks recently launched the Great Powers Index, a model that scores each of the region's 23 states across five metrics of influence: military, economy, diplomacy, soft power, and technology. It also tracks which way each country leans between Washington and Beijing.³ The data is striking; between 2020 and 2025, China boasted closer ties with 12 of 23 Middle East/

Min Mitchell leads the China Desk at the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, which produces the *Great Powers Index* and the *China Tracker*.

North African (MENA) states than did the United States. That figure was up from nine a decade earlier. Over that period, three states crossed from the American column to the Chinese one: Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt.⁴

What matters most, though, is not the number but the larger trend it embodies. The Index reflects a gradual tilt toward Beijing, one built state by state and contract by contract, and without the alliances, bases and security guarantees on which much of American influence rests. Even so, the Index does not show China overtaking the United States; in the arena of hard power, America still leads decisively. However, Beijing has been the region's leading trading partner since 2010, and it has converted that trade into a sustained presence. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) total trade volume with the region hit \$510.2 billion in 2025, more than two-and-a-half times the American figure and roughly 80 percent more than it had been in 2020.⁵ By the end of 2025, the Index counted 468 China-led projects across the region under the rubric of the Belt & Road Initiative, with 158 of them in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia alone.⁶ The reasons for this growth aren't difficult to discern; Chinese financing, after all, comes without the political conditions Western lenders attach, and Chinese firms bring experience on large-scale projects that regional states seek.⁷

The Index also shows that this engagement is concentrated. A handful of large economies account for most of the activity, and those are the countries whose larger geopolitical direction is now being genuinely contested. The UAE and Saudi Arabia lead the region by a wide margin, and over the past six years, both have moved out of the U.S.-leaning quadrant into the center, where they can now be classified as active hedgers: states that rely on the U.S. for security while expanding ties with China on trade, technology, and energy. Egypt and Iraq have gone even further, drifting decisively into China's orbit as a result of Belt & Road infrastructure and energy investment.⁸

By contrast, Israel remains tethered to Washington, while America's security relationships with Bahrain, Jordan, and Qatar continue to be robust. Still, the trajectories of other nations are increasingly in play, as China builds real regional influence.⁹

WHERE CHINA LEADS

In economic terms, China's regional engagement has been multifaceted. The largest single class of Chinese projects is renewable energy: 72 of them in total, including a 500-megawatt solar field in Egypt, a 200-megawatt wind farm in Oman, and a 700-megawatt solar array in Dubai.¹⁰ In 2025, China sold more than 628,000 electric and hybrid vehicles in the region, roughly 37 times as many as it did in just four years earlier in 2021.

Technology has followed the same trajectory. From 2020 to 2025, commerce in tech goods between China and the region rose about 65 percent to \$21.1 billion. During the same period, Chinese investment in regional technology doubled to \$4.8 billion, with the sharpest gains in Turkey, Egypt, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.¹¹ America's share of the regional tech trade, by contrast, was more modest; it reached just \$7.8 billion in 2025, or roughly a third of China's volume. The difference, moreover, is not just in volume, but in the kind of Chinese tech that is proliferating. For instance, China's state-controlled telecom giant Huawei, which has progressively been shut out of American and most European networks



Photo source: Shutterstock

on security grounds, has found a welcoming market in the Middle East and North Africa and now builds the core networks that carry the region's telecommunications traffic.

China is the leading supplier of video-surveillance systems to the region... Significantly, through such purchases, governments buy not only a consumer product but also the machinery to control their populations.

When it comes to the sophistication of the technology itself, however, the situation is reversed. China competes on price in telecoms and consumer hardware, while the United States does so on artificial intelligence, where its lead is both real and attractive to regional consumers. Washington has backed that advantage with money, including the Stargate project in the UAE and Microsoft's \$15 billion investment in the Emirati group G42, as well as with pressure. The latter has yielded results; G42, for instance, severed its ties to Chinese firms and turned to Microsoft and OpenAI. Iraq, too, pulled back from some technology cooperation with Beijing following warnings from Washington. Overall, however, Gulf governments are increasingly the ones choosing, and they are picking Chinese systems for immediate infrastructure and American firms for high-end AI.¹²

Surveillance technology, meanwhile, is its own market, and it is one dominated by the PRC. According to MBN's *China Tracker*, a companion project that maps Chinese activity across the region sector by sector, China is the leading supplier of video-surveillance systems to the region. The UAE ranks as the largest destination in this regard, with

more than \$3 billion in purchases since 2007, followed by Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Iran ranks among the top buyers as well, and Chinese equipment has been linked to Tehran's repeated crackdowns on protesters, including the one that preceded Operation Epic Fury.¹³ Significantly, through such purchases, governments buy not only a consumer product but also the machinery to control their populations.

THE LONG GAME IN SOFT POWER

The same expansion runs through the region's classrooms and newsrooms. American soft power has traditionally grown organically, buoyed by culture and brands that people seek out. By contrast, China's attempt at soft power is built deliberately. The goal is to make Chinese language, institutions, and perspectives understood, and ideally accepted, by the region's present and future generations. As one China scholar puts it, understanding and acceptance come first; admiration, if it comes at all, comes later.¹⁴

Accordingly, China's institutional soft power footprint has been expanding over the past several decades. The first Confucius Institute in the region opened in Beirut in 2006. There are now 29 such Institutes across the Middle East and North Africa, with the most recent opening in Algeria in September 2025.¹⁵ Criticized in the West for a curriculum that avoids the history of Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen, these programs have been largely welcomed in the region. Beijing likewise has incorporated Chinese language courses into primary school curricula across eight countries in the region. That push is anchored in the UAE, where language instruction occurs for more than 73,000 students in 181 public schools. Beijing has also opened six cultural centers and the vocational Luban Workshops, which tie technical training directly to Belt & Road contracts.¹⁶ In Egypt, two Luban Workshops launched in 2020 and have now trained more than 3,000 students in renewable energy, automotive repair, and smart manufacturing.¹⁷

Travel between the region and China has followed suit. Direct flights rose from 161 a week in 2015 to 314 weekly a decade later, and Beijing has begun waiving visas for Gulf travelers altogether.¹⁸

But the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda and influence work is on clearest display in the realm of news media. China's expanding media footprint follows Xi Jinping's 2013 directive to "tell China's story well," which made strategic narrative into a pillar of national statecraft. That line of effort was broadened in 2021 into a call to cultivate a "trustworthy, loveable and respectable" image and to "expand China's circle of friends."¹⁹ With this in mind, Chinese state media outlets have signed 31 content-sharing partnerships across the region, concentrated in the media hubs of the UAE and Egypt.²⁰ The mechanism is straightforward. Xinhua, Beijing's state wire service, offers global coverage to regional outlets for free or at low cost, while the Associated Press, Reuters, and Bloomberg charge subscription fees that many newsrooms cannot or will not pay. The result, as one analyst of Chinese media strategy has argued, is an effective channel for a slanted account of world events—one carried, moreover, by trusted local outlets.²¹ On the whole, however, these tools have not necessarily translated into affection, and scholars describe Beijing's cultural push as tentative despite its ambitions.²²

WHERE AMERICAN DOMINANCE STILL HOLDS

In terms of security, by contrast, China has shown no appetite to alter the Middle Eastern military balance. Washington maintains more than a dozen military facilities across the region. China, meanwhile, operates exactly one overseas base, in Djibouti, and that facility is set up largely to support anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. Similarly American forces held military exercises with regional partners 41 times between 2020 and 2025; China held only 19.²³ And when attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels throttled shipping in the Red Sea, it was the United States, not China, that had the reach to strike back and defend local sea-lanes.

That said, Chinese military activity in the region is not exactly static. The Tracker records that Chinese military exercises with MENA states, of which there was just one throughout the entirety of the 2010s, have experienced a sharp rise since 2020, including the first China-Egypt air force drill, "Eagles of Civilization," which took place in May 2025. Senior Chinese military delegations visited the region 26 times between 2015 and 2024, up from 16 in the previous decade.²⁴ China's share of the region's arms market likewise tripled over the decade, from under one percent in 2020 to 3.1 percent in 2024, enough to overtake Russia as a supplier (though still lagging far behind the United States, which accounts for roughly half of all major arms imported by regional states).²⁵

Here, the customers differ, and so does the logic. American arms go to longstanding partners embedded in U.S. security networks. Chinese sales concentrate on a narrower set of buyers that are looking for cheaper platforms, fewer political conditions, or alternatives when Western suppliers are lacking or limited. They also cluster in categories that Washington is generally reluctant to sell, above all armed drones. Notably, what Beijing withholds is the security commitment itself. It may sell and train, but it does not promise to fight, and analysts consistently identify that reluctance as the ceiling on its regional influence.

American arms go to longstanding partners embedded in U.S. security networks. Chinese sales concentrate on a narrower set of buyers that are looking for cheaper platforms, fewer political conditions, or alternatives when Western suppliers are lacking or limited.

HOW BEIJING READS THE REGION

Chinese writing helps to explain the comparative restraint. Strategists in Beijing have long viewed friction in the Middle East opportunistically, on the assumption that American entanglement there would limit Washington's bandwidth to contest events or trends elsewhere.²⁶ The 2026 war has complicated that calculus at least somewhat. Beijing's relationship with Tehran did indeed protect Chinese cargoes: Iran allowed oil to continue to flow to China, India, and Russia while barring vessels linked to its adversaries, and Chinese-linked ships accounted for the largest single share of the traffic that got through.²⁷

What Beijing could not do, and did not even attempt to do, was reopen the waterway for everyone else. In other words, China secured its own supply through a political relationship. The burden of restoring freedom of navigation, meanwhile, stayed with the U.S. Navy.

Even Chinese military commentary focuses on using regional turmoil to fortify domestic technological and economic resilience, rather than to play a larger security role abroad.²⁸ The practical effect is that the United States bears the external military costs while China concentrates on internal matters. Beijing, in other words, assumes that capital and infrastructure can help it avoid the region's rivalries and fractious politics.

Against the backdrop of the Iran War, that assumption is bound to be tested. The United States still offers security guarantees, naval power, and financial leverage, while it supplies capital without conditions, rapid infrastructure, and 21st century technology at a discount. Increasingly, however, Beijing is also giving the region something it lacked a generation ago: a real alternative to Washington. The consequences for the long-term evolution of the region could turn out to be monumental.

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THE HOT SEAT

A Region Recalculating

INTERVIEW WITH DENNIS ROSS

Ambassador Dennis Ross is counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Throughout his career, Amb. Ross has played a leading role in shaping U.S. involvement in the Middle East: as the point person on the peace process for both the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations, special assistant to President Obama and National Security Council senior director for the Central region, and special advisor on Iran to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

In August, Amb. Ross sat down with *Statecraft & Strategy* Associate Editor Calla O’Neil to discuss the conflict in Iran, how U.S. objectives have changed during the course of the war, and its impact on other regional players, including the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Israel, and Lebanon.

Q: Let’s start with the Iran war. You’ve spent decades negotiating in the Middle East. What makes this a unique conflict to resolve, and how have those differences shaped both the fighting and diplomacy that we’ve witnessed over the past few months?

What makes any negotiation with Iran difficult is that the Iranians take a very long view toward negotiations. They will never be rushed and have a clear threshold below which they won’t go. They exploit the differences or factions within the leadership—which, by the way, are real—but are also convenient in terms of the negotiators saying their hands are tied and ours are not. Now, with Ali Khamenei gone and the absence of an authoritative Supreme Leader who could simply make decisions, these negotiations are even more prone to be frustrating. Indeed, what seems to be agreed to is often not.

With the Revolutionary Guard clearly the dominant faction now, the basic problem is that they are convinced they have a higher pain threshold than President Trump and can simply outlast him. They see his concern with high oil prices and their control of the Strait as giving them massive leverage. Our blockade does indeed put pressure on them, and their economy is in terrible shape. But the IRGC has no qualms about imposing costs on their

public. That does not mean it is indifferent, but letting those costs lead them to concede to President Trump would be seen as a strategic defeat, and presently they think they are winning strategically.

Q: When this war began in February, the Trump administration's stated goal was Iran's "unconditional surrender." Five months on, how do you assess what the U.S. campaign has actually achieved?

The campaign has succeeded in weakening the Iranians militarily and doing great damage to much of Iran's defense industrial base. It has also further damaged some of their civilian infrastructure. And, make no mistake, even if the Iranians have proven more resilient than anticipated, it will take time and a lot of money to rebuild their infrastructure.

While that is meaningful, Iran and countries in the region don't see the Islamic Republic as being weak now. A muddled set of objectives—as in, was this about regime change or weakening the regime's military capacity to threaten others?—has helped produce this reality. These unclear objectives undermined the campaign and what it could achieve. Had the focus been only on weakening Iran's military capabilities and the capability to reconstitute its forces and infrastructure, the Iranians would probably not have taken control of the Strait.

Ali Khamenei understood that doing so would trigger a war with the U.S. and that such a war would be a threat to the regime's survival. Consider the fact that he did not try to shut down or control the Strait from 1988 onward. But once we went for decapitation, killing Ali Khamenei, the Iranians had nothing to lose and effectively took control of the waterway. Now opening it has become the Trump administration's prime objective. How ironic it is that the Strait was not closed or controlled by the Iranians on the day before the war, February 27, and now that is our most important objective.

Q: When you picture an eventual end to this war, what does success look like from the American side? What would Tehran consider a successful outcome? Is there a resolution where both sides could claim they got what they needed, or is ending the war inherently zero-sum?

Relations with the Islamic Republic are largely zero-sum in nature. Can we still achieve a good outcome? Maybe, but it will take real patience and a willingness at this point for us to keep the blockade going for months. Iran could try to escalate if it becomes desperate enough economically, but that will take time and I suspect that the regime would be prepared to negotiate a deal before reaching that point, especially if we retain the threat to take out much of its missile and launcher inventory and the underground tunnels that protect them.

The best case for the Trump administration is to get a deal based on not lifting the blockade until Iran agrees to open the Strait, to dispense with their highly enriched uranium (HEU) via destruction or shipping it out of the country, and to accept unfettered IAEA access to Fordow, Natanz, Isfahan, and other highly damaged nuclear-related sites. The same should apply to Pickaxe Mountain, where allegedly some of the HEU has been moved. Ballistic missiles and support for proxy groups were never really important to



Photo source: Shutterstock

President Trump, so I doubt he would push for concessions on those things if he thinks he can get a deal.

My fear is that the president will lose patience and accept a limited deal over the Strait that effectively leaves Iran in control and provides it with some sanctions relief in addition. The reality is that the Iranians are in a position to determine whether the Strait is open, and I don't see them being willing to give up that control. But they want more than just control of the Strait: they want far-reaching sanctions relief and an ongoing economic lifeline.

The irony now is that the best available outcome for us may be no deal but instead a tacit understanding in which the Strait gets reopened and we lift the blockade but don't lift sanctions. In that case, economic pressures will build and, with an Iranian leadership that has no capability to deal with the regime's inner contradictions, we are likely at some point to see an Iranian Gorbachev emerge and produce a regime that decides ending confrontation with the outside and liberalizing on the inside is the only way to preserve the Islamic Republic, thereby fulfilling Ali Khamenei's great fear.

Q: Gulf states have increasingly found themselves in the crosshairs of Iranian retaliation. How is that reshaping U.S. relations with its Middle East partners, and what do we need to do to maintain our engagement, and our leverage, in the region?

There can be little doubt that American credibility with our Gulf partners has been damaged. They were not in favor of our going to war, and warned that if we did so we needed to finish the job so the Iranian regime did not survive and become more

threatening. The Gulf countries also assumed that our bases would be a deterrent to being struck by Iran (they were not) and expected that if that deterrence failed, we could basically stop any effective Iranian attacks against their high value targets. None of that has happened, and instead they are now watching President Trump threaten and then back off.

These countries still don't see a substitute to the U.S. when it comes to providing at least some semblance of security, and will still look to American weaponry. But they will also increasingly hedge their bets. When it comes to counter-drone technology, Ukraine is attractive because what it offers is cheaper, more quickly available, and effective. When it comes to finding potential leverage vis-à-vis Iran, one can see the Saudis hedging bets via their new defense pact with Turkey and Pakistan.

The bottom line is that no one will depend exclusively on the U.S. now. Don't expect the Saudis or the UAE to run away from us, but they will look to be less reliant. Will that affect our leverage in the region? Yes. We are not looking so effective right now, and if the war ends with Iran being in control of the Strait, their leverage will go up and ours will go down. That said, if we work effectively with the Gulf states to develop the infrastructure to work around the Strait, including with underground pipelines and with protection for that infrastructure, we will still matter very much to these states.

Q: Then there is Israel. Voters there head to the polls in October to determine the future of the country's leadership. Domestically, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is facing mounting pressure domestically over unresolved military conflicts and a failure to deliver the "total victory" he promised. Here in the U.S., the "special relationship" between Washington and Jerusalem is under growing strain. How might a change of leadership in Israel alter things?

Public attitudes in the U.S. toward Israel have undergone a sea-change. Much has contributed to this: Democrats have largely been alienated from Netanyahu ever since he went to Congress to oppose President Obama before the JCPOA was finalized in 2015. Republicans continued to support Israel, but now that is also lapsing with the MAGA right and those under the age of 40. The image of suffering in Gaza, the repeated claims that Israel committed genocide, and the narrative that Israel pushed Trump into an unpopular war with Iran have all taken their toll. The latter two are remarkable: first because it is not clear that anyone talks Trump into doing what he doesn't want to do, and second because the definition of genocide is the "intent" to eradicate a people or a group, and while civilian Palestinians have paid a terrible price in Gaza, Israel was clearly not trying to eradicate the Palestinians as a people.

Regardless, the perception of Israel in the country has changed. Historically, Israel always won the approval of a majority of Americans. Not today. The image of Israel sharing values with the U.S., which was always a pillar of the relationship, has clearly weakened. Prime Minister Netanyahu, in particular, is perceived very negatively across the American political spectrum now, with the main pockets of support among Republicans being limited to those over 40.

A new Israeli government will not be a panacea. Negative perceptions and accompanying narratives will not disappear overnight. But should the Israeli elections produce a

new government with a different prime minister, it would help stop the hemorrhaging of support for Israel in America. Moreover, it would remind people here that Israel is a democracy and its own people held its extreme government accountable. The ability to frame what has happened in Israel as the result of an election would get those ready to support Israel off the defensive and create a sentiment that the new Israeli government deserves to be given a chance.

Q: How do you assess the current diplomatic contacts between Israel and Lebanon, and the overall willingness of the Lebanese government to tackle the challenge to its sovereignty that Hezbollah poses? Are we finally on the cusp of a real change in the *status quo* in southern Lebanon?

I take the direct talks between Israel and Lebanon as one of opportunities that has emerged from the weakening of Hezbollah and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. The Lebanese now have a chance to reassert sovereignty throughout all of their country and to break the hold that Hezbollah has had on it. President Aoun and Prime Minister Salem clearly are trying to reestablish Lebanon as a country that controls all of its territory with a military that holds a monopoly on weaponry and responsibility for security. Their objective is the right one, but the question remains one of will and capability. The Lebanese Army needs material support, to include money to pay its soldiers. Too often, Hezbollah is still able to pay their forces more than the Lebanese can pay their soldiers, and that state of affairs has to be corrected. Here, we ought to be able to get allies like the Saudis and Emiratis to help pay the Lebanese military so Hezbollah does not retain this advantage.

Training and equipping the Lebanese Army has taken place, but more could be done to build the capability of its most elite units. However, the will must also be there, and there still seems to be hesitancy to take on Hezbollah directly. Ultimately, there is no substitute for that.

The current plan is to have the Lebanese Army prove itself in the first two pilot areas the Israelis are withdrawing from. No doubt, Hezbollah will try to provoke the Israelis, hoping for overreactions that will discredit the initiative. Still, at least there is a plan and that creates a possibility that previously did not exist. Much depends on the Trump administration overseeing the negotiations and doing what it can to ensure a credible monitoring mechanism that shows the Lebanese Army is really fulfilling its responsibilities.

Q: Finally, how do events in the Middle East fit into the broader frame of “great power competition”? We know that Russia and China have both backed Iran diplomatically and materially over the course of the current conflict. As you see it, is this part of a broader “axis” or are Moscow and Beijing’s actions merely opportunistic? And how should Washington respond?

I see the Russians and Chinese as more opportunistic than acting as an axis with the Iranians. That the Iran war is weakening us in other global theaters and clearly drawing down our munitions and defense interceptors is a fact and that serves Russian and Chinese interests. That our reliability may be more doubted by U.S. partners going forward is also a positive, from their standpoint. Each may help the Iranians in different ways, but there are limits, especially for the Chinese who have a stake in good relations with the Saudis and

A REGION RECALCULATING

Emiratis in particular. And no one in the region believes that the Russians or Chinese can or would ever provide security to them. The war may be costing us in other theaters, but the best answer is to look forward and be successful in how we bring this conflict to an end. That will help to restore faith in us.

THE BIG QUESTION

Should Defending Taiwan be an American Priority?

PRO: The Strategic Logic Of Defending Taiwan

MICHAEL SOBOLIK

Preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in strategic regions has been a vital American interest since the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Initially, the impetus for the Doctrine was keeping powerful European states out of the Western Hemisphere. As Washington grew more powerful and America's global presence expanded, however, the formulation shifted into a broader imperative: preventing the ability of foreign nations to dominate their own hemispheres. As the twentieth century strategist Nicholas Spykman put it, "The United States is obliged to safeguard her position by making certain that no overwhelming power is allowed to build itself up" in Eurasia.¹ By 1947, American diplomats were emphasizing the need to not only prevent Soviet expansion but also to block the emergence of any single hegemon.²

This objective remains a vital U.S. interest today. The Trump administration said as much in the 2026 *National Security Strategy* when it posited that: "The United States cannot allow any nation to become so dominant that it could threaten our interests... We must prevent the global, and in some cases even regional, domination of others" (emphasis in the original).³ That framing rests on sound logic; the United States is best defended by forward-deploying military force and cultivating alliances to maintain favorable power balances around the world, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

Michael Sobolik is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute and author of *Countering China's Great Game: A Strategy for American Dominance* (Naval Institute Press, 2024). He is also a contributing writer at *The Dispatch* and a contributing editor at *Providence*.

As the People's Republic of China (PRC) grows increasingly stronger and more assertive, U.S. officials will need to decide how Taiwan fits into this strategic imperative. Is Taipei's political future inseparable from America's longstanding effort to blunt the emergence of regional hegemons?

Nations wage war in defense of vital interests, not secondary priorities. Relatedly, governments fight when the perceived benefit of victory outweighs the cost of war. If the U.S. could realize its strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific without Taiwan's *de facto* independence, then it would be inadvisable for Washington to defend Taipei. The opposite is also true. If Taiwan is a hinge on which America's position in East Asia rises or falls, then the United States should be ready to fight the People's Liberation Army (PLA), deny its objectives, and, if necessary, roll its forces back across the Taiwan Strait.

Those who argue against defending Taiwan commit two errors: understating the follow-on impacts of Beijing's victory, and overstating America's ability to prevent Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific with the island under PRC sovereignty. The fall of Taipei would presage an economic, technological, and strategic catastrophe from which Washington would struggle to recover. It would also compromise America's ability to constrain Beijing's power projection capabilities and tilt the balancing/bandwagoning calculations of Indo-Pacific nations in Beijing's favor.

UNDERSTATED COSTS

The United States is overleveraged in East Asia economically, technologically, and strategically. The fall of Taiwan risks triggering crises in all three categories that Washington would struggle mightily to contain.

ECONOMIC COSTS

The United States, for instance, would face a severe economic crisis if Beijing were to initiate hostilities against Taiwan. By some estimates, the projected impact on U.S. GDP would be between a 3 percent to 11 percent contraction.⁴ Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent has warned industrial leaders of "an economic apocalypse" in this regard.⁵ Opponents of defending Taiwan generally agree that America would suffer significantly from a blockade or invasion of the island, but some argue that the costs would be bearable. In their telling, China's leadership would refrain from completely blocking maritime commerce in East Asia for fear of domestic economic blowback. Even if the PRC wanted to lock down the Taiwan Strait, the argument holds, alternative routes at the southern tip of the South China Sea and through the South Pacific would blunt the impact.⁶

These assumptions project American sensibilities onto China's leadership, however. Xi Jinping has routinely prepared the Chinese people to "eat bitterness" in an effort to steel domestic resolve for dire economic scenarios.⁷ More concretely, Xi has pursued a "dual circulation" policy since the COVID-19 pandemic aimed at reducing China's economic exposure to the West and standing up vertically integrated industries at home.⁸ He is, in a word, insulating the PRC to withstand economic catastrophe. But American policymakers, who are democratically accountable to voters, face fundamentally different risk

calculations than do dictators. They also have fewer credible mitigating policies available in the short-term. Mirror-imaging these American realities onto China represents a fundamental analytical failure.

Moreover, America cannot assume that alternative shipping routes will conveniently appear. China could use military threats to pressure the Philippines and Indonesia to deny shipping through their archipelagos. In the South Pacific, Beijing has already invested in a robust Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partnership with the Solomon Islands, including law enforcement and security.⁹ More recently, the PLA has fired nuclear-capable ballistic missiles into the South Pacific.¹⁰ Xi understands the strategic landscape of his own neighborhood well, and American strategists should expect him to contest any efforts to mitigate the immediate fallout over Taiwan.

TECHNOLOGICAL COSTS

The United States would also face severe technological challenges. Washington cannot wish away the reality that 97 percent of high-end semiconductors are manufactured in Taiwan.¹¹ Opponents of defending Taiwan see a rosy future where creative export controls effectively eliminate China's ability to benefit from the seizure of the manufacturing capabilities of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), and in which boosted domestic production of advanced chips in America makes the pain bearable.¹² Such optimism ignores China's already proven trump card against America: export controls on refined rare earth elements. With the stroke of a pen, Xi could restrict the requisite inputs for companies to produce chips in the United States. Even if it could evade these challenges, the chip industry has yet to shift its fabrication operations away from Taiwan. If current projections hold, U.S. production may only account for 10 percent of global output in 2030—the same as it did in 2020.¹³ In other words, Washington has few credible defenses if China strips Taiwan of its "silicon shield."

American policymakers should expect a Taiwan war to quickly change the regional status quo in ways that threaten Washington's vital interests.

STRATEGIC COSTS

Finally, American policymakers should expect a Taiwan war to quickly change the regional status quo in ways that threaten Washington's vital interests. In the wake of deterrence failure, nations that lack the resources to develop indigenous nuclear programs will face increased pressure to bandwagon with the PRC. Those who can go nuclear, like Japan and South Korea, will be highly incentivized to do so quickly. For its part, China would face incentives to lock in additional gains before that window closes—a scenario too many analysts in Washington overlook. At a minimum, proliferation in East Asia could pressure India to boost its stockpile, which would likely trigger a similar response from Pakistan.



Photo source: Pexels

Nonproliferation, another vital U.S. national security interest, could be imperiled in the wake of a conflict over Taiwan.

Opponents of defending Taiwan may argue that these costs, while high, are preferable to entering World War III because America can still secure its vital interests with PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. Those who make this argument, however, both misjudge America's adversaries and misunderstand its allies.

MISJUDGING ADVERSARIES

Political debates often take the form of competing analogies. While imperfect, analogies can help make sense of the present using the lessons of the past. One historical reference that opponents of defending Taiwan have invoked is the Vietnam War. Scholars like Jennifer Kavanagh and Stephen Wertheim reference a historically unpopular war from America's past to highlight a stark dichotomy: with Taiwan, American presidents must either enter World War III, surrender the island to Beijing, or, as they recommend, arm America's regional allies to the teeth. As they argue, "The balance of power in Asia does not hinge on control of Taiwan."¹⁴

Implicit in this belief is the assumption that China's ambitions would be satisfied after taking Taiwan. But unifying the island with China is more likely to presage the beginning of Beijing's geographic expansion, not its culmination. A better analogy would be that of Imperial Japan. In 1950, General Douglas MacArthur warned President Truman that empires had historically used Taiwan as:

...a springboard for military aggression directed against areas to the south. The most notable and recent example was the utilization of [Taiwan] by the Japanese in World War II. At the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941, [Taiwan] played an important part as a staging area and supporting base for the various Japanese invasion convoys.¹⁵

An even better analogy is China's often overlooked imperial past. In 110 BC, the Han dynasty attacked Korea and established a puppet government. The Han also opened up a new front against the Xiongnu tribes to the west (in modern-day Xinjiang) and set up colonial protectorates in Central Asia. The quest for hegemony pervaded successive dynasties. The Sui invaded Korea four times. The Tang solidified Chinese colonies in Xinjiang, expanded its presence to the border of the Persian Empire, and attacked Tibet. The Yuan, a Mongol dynasty, invaded Japan twice, southern Vietnam, and Burma, and made Thailand a vassal state. The Ming punished numerous rulers of island kingdoms in the South China Sea and Bay of Bengal who bucked the tribute system. The Qing, a Manchu dynasty, committed genocide in Central Asia and formally annexed Xinjiang. According to the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, the in-house think-tank of the PLA, from 1100 BC to AD 1912, China waged 3,790 wars. On average, dynastic China never knew a year without war.¹⁶

Despite the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to whitewash its territorial ambitions for American and European audiences, its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project is the clearest evidence that Beijing still harbors imperial designs.

This history lives on in Xi Jinping's mind. Recall Xi's ominous comment to President Trump in 2017 that Korea "actually used to be a part of China,"¹⁷ and Beijing's penchant for advancing its claim to Japan's Ryukyu's archipelago.¹⁸ Despite the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to whitewash its territorial ambitions for American and European audiences, its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project is the clearest evidence that Beijing still harbors imperial designs.¹⁹

By ignoring these risks, opponents of defending Taiwan commit the same mistake Secretary of State Dean Acheson made during his infamous 1950 remarks at the National Press Club, the same year as MacArthur's Taiwan memorandum. Historians remember Acheson's speech for his notable exclusion of South Korea and Taiwan in his definition of America's defensive perimeter in Asia. Largely forgotten is his misguided assessment of China. Acheson proposed a simple rule to guide U.S. policy in Asia: "anyone who violates the integrity of China is the enemy of China and is acting contrary to our own interest."²⁰

To be sure, the Secretary saw evidence that Moscow was making this mistake at the time. In his telling, the Soviet Union's designs on Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang would put Moscow and Beijing at loggerheads, and America should reap the benefits. Acheson's observations were misguided because he confused *realpolitik* with first principles.²¹ The first rule of American grand strategy is the protection of vital interests, not

deference to the interests of others. America's chief objective in Asia has always been to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon there.

MISUNDERSTANDING ALLIES

Some who advise against supporting Taiwan in the event of war respond that America's vital interests are not at stake with Taiwan, even if the costs of losing it to the PRC are high.²² Central to their argument is the belief that U.S. allies have the capacity to balance against China with sufficient American support and robust defense investments. Geography complicates these assumptions, however. Consider this analysis of Japan's security environment from Gabriel Collins, Andrew Erickson, and Matt Pottinger:

Japan's defensive concept relies on its ability to hold at-risk PRC naval vessels and warplanes that venture near, through, and beyond what is informally known as the First Island Chain. For Japan's defensive posture to work, the full island chain, which includes the Japanese and Philippine archipelagos as well as Taiwan at the center, must remain in the hands of friendly powers.²³

Beijing is aware of the acute vulnerability Tokyo would suffer if Taiwan were to fall. Indeed, PLA military textbooks openly discuss this scenario:

As soon as Taiwan is reunified with mainland China, Japan's maritime lines of communication will fall completely within the striking ranges of China's fighters and bombers... Our analysis shows that, by using blockades... Japan's economic activity and war-making potential will be basically destroyed... Blockades can cause sea shipments to decrease and can even create a famine within the Japanese islands.²⁴

By ignoring these realities, analysts today repeat yet another mistake of Acheson and his contemporaries: failing to recognize that geography imposes constraints upon allies and shapes their security situation, even if those conditions themselves are not tied directly to America's vital interests.²⁵ It was not without reason that Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi warned in November 2025 that a war over Taiwan would be "a survival-threatening situation" for Tokyo.²⁶

THE IRONY OF RETRENCHMENT

Opponents of defending Taiwan include experts who advocate for shifting America's strategic focus away from priority theaters in Europe and the Middle East toward the Indo-Pacific. Colloquially, proponents of these views are often called "prioritizers" or "retrenchers." Both names reflect the belief that America's commitments exceed its resources, and that policymakers should concentrate scarce capabilities in the theater where the nation's most vital interests lie.

Washington had a similar debate 75 years ago, largely forgotten today. We are rehashing an old conversation that unfolded contemporaneously with the Korean War.

Because too many in Washington are unfamiliar with this history, policymakers are expending unnecessary energy on re-learning the lessons of prior generations. Bringing this history back into Taiwan debates today is desperately needed.

When Acheson proposed non-aggression against China as the lodestar of America's Asia policy in 1950, many in the U.S. national security community agreed. In 1949, the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that Taiwan was "strategically important" to the United States, but that military force to defend the island was inadvisable "so long as the present disparity between our military strength and our global obligations exist."²⁷ According to the Joint Chiefs, two factors contributed to this disparity: budgetary limitations, and the prioritization of the European theater. They noted, however, that "future circumstances" could change their assessment.

Within a year, those circumstances had arrived in the form of the Korean War. By 1952, the Joint Chiefs termed the denial of Taiwan to Communism of "vital importance to the long-term United States position in the Far East."²⁸ The following year, a top-secret National Security Council document recommended "taking all necessary measures to prevent hostile forces from gaining control" of Taiwan, "even at grave risk of general war."²⁹

Seventy-five years ago, the conventional wisdom in Washington was that Europe, not the Indo-Pacific, was America's priority theater. It took the Korean War to alter that perception.

Today, the retrenchers have learned half of this lesson: they correctly identify the Indo-Pacific as the region most vital for U.S. interests. Unlike post-World War II leaders, however, many of them remain unwilling to fight for America's interests there.

America's abiding interests in Taiwan remain unchanged, however. The island is the same "unsinkable aircraft carrier" it was in 1950.³⁰ Japan cannot defend itself without Taiwan ruled by a friendly government. And because Japan is central to America's presence in the first island chain, Taiwan's future is inseparable from Washington's interests there.

Retrenchers are right that the costs of war are high. They are wrong that cheaper options exist to prevent China from achieving regional hegemony. For better or worse, securing America's vital interests runs straight through an island nearly 8,000 miles away, roughly the size of Maryland, with a population comparable to that of Florida, and which sits about a hundred miles off China's coast.

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THE BIG QUESTION

Should Defending Taiwan be an American Priority?

CON: America's Commitment To Taiwan Is A Liability

JENNIFER KAVANAGH

Over the past decade, concerns about a Chinese campaign to take Taiwan by force have risen rapidly among U.S. policymakers and military planners alike, especially as China's military power and assertive activities around the island have increased.¹ For Taiwan's strongest supporters in the U.S., any change in the cross-strait *status quo* poses an unacceptable threat to American interests. They see Taiwan as a "critical node" that must be protected at all costs, whether that means higher defense spending or a deeper U.S. military commitment.²

This is a mistake. The greatest threat to U.S. interests is not a successful Chinese campaign to seize Taiwan, but rather a U.S.-China war fought over the island. With the right investments, the United States can manage the consequences of unification between China and Taiwan without compromising its core interests. Washington cannot, however, manage the likely fallout of a war with China, a conflict that would be fought against a peer military 90 miles from that country's own coastline.

Jennifer Kavanagh is the director of military analysis at the Washington-based Defense Priorities think-tank, and a contributor to Brown University's Costs of War project. She previously worked at the RAND Corporation, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and Public Policy from the University of Michigan.

The United States, therefore, needs a policy toward Taiwan that definitively closes the door on the risk of such a war, and rules out the direct intervention of U.S. military forces to defend the island in case of a confrontation with China.

COULD THE UNITED STATES SAVE TAIWAN?

Before considering whether the United States should defend Taiwan, we need to ask if it actually could. The answer to that question is increasingly in doubt, because the military balance in the region has shifted decisively in Beijing's favor.

China's military development over the past decade has been rapid and comprehensive, surpassing the expectations of U.S. military planners. The PRC has expanded its nuclear arsenal, the size and sophistication of its naval fleet, and its missile capabilities. It is slowly eliminating whatever battlefield advantages the United States continues to enjoy, namely undersea and in space. And it has demonstrated its ability to encircle Taiwan and project naval power far from its shores.³

Trends on the U.S. side are less favorable. U.S. weapons stockpiles, including high-end precision munitions and expensive air defense, have been depleted by large outflows of military aid and by U.S. military operations against Iran. At the same time, the U.S. ability to reconstitute them is constrained by insufficient industrial capacity—the same problem that creates barriers to its ability to build more ships, submarines, and aircraft.⁴

U.S. failures in Iran also have highlighted gaps in U.S. military planning. In the weeks after the start of Operation Epic Fury, Iran was able to severely degrade U.S. air defense networks across the region and impose significant costs on U.S. bases and assets. This should ring a cautionary note. U.S. military installations in Asia will be as or more vulnerable in the face of Chinese missiles. Furthermore, U.S. stand-off air and naval strikes could not suppress Iran's missile or drone fire sufficiently to keep the Strait of Hormuz open. China would fare at least as well.

A U.S. military that cannot defeat Iran certainly cannot defeat China. To be sure, the United States could complicate a Chinese effort to seize Taiwan and might be able to deny China a quick victory if it received sufficient allied support. After all, a Chinese campaign against Taiwan would be one of the most difficult ever attempted, and any U.S. intervention would only add to the challenges Beijing would face.⁵

Win or lose, however, the costs of a war over Taiwan would be catastrophic for the United States (and the world), including tens of trillions of dollars in damage to the global economy, at least as much in destroyed military equipment and munitions, and more U.S. casualties than any war since Vietnam.

However, even in the case of a successful initial denial, the United States would likely run out of munitions more quickly than China, especially if the conflict took place in the near term. At that point, China could blockade Taiwan, relying on its massive fleet of civilian and military ships, and bleed the island into capitulating.⁶ In other words, China's



Photo source: Pexels

military advantages may give it an edge, even if the United States can force China's invasion attempt to a stalemate. Beijing's understanding of this reality, meanwhile, may erode the U.S. ability to deter such an invasion as well.

Win or lose, however, the costs of a war over Taiwan would be catastrophic for the United States (and the world), including tens of trillions of dollars in damage to the global economy, at least as much in destroyed military equipment and munitions, and more U.S. casualties than any war since Vietnam.⁷ The U.S. military would lose dozens of warships and hundreds of aircraft. It would be less able to protect U.S. interests elsewhere and even the homeland might be vulnerable to infiltration and threats. The consequences of such a war, in other words, would be large and enduring no matter the result.

SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DEFEND TAIWAN?

The high price tag and uncertain prospects for success associated with a U.S. defense of Taiwan should give policymakers pause. Clearly, avoiding such a war should be a top national security priority, but a more important question remains: if China were to attack Taiwan, could the United States afford to stay on the sidelines, or would the stakes simply be too high?

Clearly, a successful Chinese campaign to take Taiwan would have implications for the United States, both economic and military. But these implications can be mitigated without compromising core U.S. national interests—namely the physical security of the

U.S. homeland and U.S. economic prosperity. As a result, a U.S. defense of Taiwan cannot be justified, and should be ruled out explicitly.

Any link between China's seizure of Taiwan and the security of the U.S. homeland is indirect at best. China poses a missile, nuclear, and cyber threat to the United States, but its capabilities in these areas would not be meaningfully changed by its control of Taiwan.

The more reasonable concern is that if China were to successfully hold Taiwan, it would be able to tilt the regional balance of power in its favor, dictating the terms of U.S. economic engagement in Asia. However, while Taiwan's advocates use this argument to justify continuing U.S. support to Taiwan, there is little evidence to back up their case.

For starters, China's military gains from seizing Taiwan would be modest at best, and would neither swing the balance of power in China's favor nor give it an easy pathway to regional hegemony. With control of Taiwan, China would be able to base submarines on the east coast of Taiwan, where they would be able to evade some underwater sensors used by the United States, making them harder to track. It might also be able to base radars or launch missiles from Taiwan, improving its ability to hold at risk U.S. military forces along the second island chain.⁸

However, these gains would affect the regional military balance only on the margins. The United States still has many ways to identify and track Chinese submarines, and local, underwater sensors are only one. In any case, as Chinese subs become more advanced, they are also getting quieter, which means that it is only a matter of time before China's underwater vessels can escape U.S. underwater sensor detection regardless of Taiwan's status.⁹ Fighting a war over an advantage that the United States is likely to lose in a short period of time hardly makes sense.

As far as missile capabilities, it would take years for China to build the logistics, radar, and launch systems on Taiwan needed to use it as a base for operations, giving the rest of the region plenty of time to improve their defenses. And given China's growing satellite capabilities, being able to operate from Taiwan might not improve China's targeting precision or range all that much.¹⁰

Beyond these limited military gains, China would face serious challenges on its path to regional hegemony. To achieve this goal, China would need to have at least Japan (the true lynchpin of the region's balance of power due to its geographic location, industrial capacity, and economic strength) and probably also South Korea within its direct sphere of influence—if not fully conquered, then at least as vassal states.

But this is a remote prospect. Not only are Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines well protected by water, they are also fiercely nationalistic. If China were to invade and seize Taiwan, the most likely response would be for these countries to increase investments in their defenses to fortify their security. As they are already, countries in the region are more likely to band together in the face of perceived Chinese aggression (or fear of U.S. abandonment) than to accommodate Chinese demands.¹¹ In fact, the region's efforts to balance against China and the United States over the past 18 months, both by increasing defense spending and forming new self-reliant cooperative security mechanisms, should serve as evidence against arguments that the consequence of a U.S. decision not to defend Taiwan would be the collapse of U.S. alliances or the region's wholesale bandwagoning with China.¹²

The same might not be true of Taiwan itself, of course. Without U.S. backing, it is plausible that Taiwan would decide that political accommodation with China is preferable to the risk of war. This outcome would be acceptable for the United States and consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act, which takes a stance against unilateral changes achieved by coercion, but not those occurring through peaceful means.¹³

Even if it cannot gain regional hegemony, however, some U.S. foreign policy analysts are concerned that control of Taiwan might be sufficient to give China the ability to cut off U.S. access to the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait, thereby complicating access to key regional markets.¹⁴ This is a reasonable fear but misunderstands both the *status quo* and the region's geography.

China can already shut the United States out of the South China Sea if it wanted to, even without direct control of Taiwan. It has, however, shown no intention of doing so, largely because China depends heavily on trade and would damage its own interests with such interdictions. Even so, if such a contingency did arise, the United States has alternative trade routes it could use and the naval capacity to protect its access to them, including the use of sea lanes running through the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagic waters and through the Philippine Sea, to the east of Japan.

The most direct threat to U.S. interests in Asia that might result from a change to the cross-strait *status quo* comes not from Chinese military power but from the economic implications of Taiwan's semiconductor production, which is required to power U.S. military systems, artificial intelligence, and consumer electronics. If China were to successfully take control of the island, U.S. access to these chips would certainly be disrupted.¹⁵

A war over the island would likely destroy semiconductor fabs in Taiwan. If this didn't wipe out Taiwan's semiconductor capacity or if China took the island through political accommodation, the United States would likely withhold access to intellectual property needed to produce the thinnest chips, which is U.S.-owned, cutting off U.S. supplies all the same.

A loss of access to needed semiconductors would be a blow to the U.S. economy, but the best solution is not a war over Taiwan or a military buildup that doubles down on deterrence (which would be difficult at present, as the United States remains bogged down in the Middle East). It would make much more sense for the United States to reduce its dependence on Taiwan by reshoring semiconductor capacity, including the relevant manufacturing and supply chains, to the United States as quickly as possible. Washington is already moving in this direction, and industry estimates suggest that about 30 percent of the thinnest chips will be able to be produced domestically by 2032.¹⁶ Made a higher priority, this transition could occur even more quickly.

At the same time, the United States might start stockpiling older chips that are in less high demand but could serve as "almost as good" substitutes in case of a crisis. Since China is reliant on Taiwan for semiconductors too, for now this dependence may act as a deterrent on any intention it might have to attack the island.¹⁷ That would buy the United States time to make the transition now. And with control of the necessary technology, Washington has an advantage.

The bottom line is that even if it can, the United States does not need to defend Taiwan to safeguard core U.S. interests. It can manage or prevent any challenges posed by

unification by adjusting its economic and security policy toward Taiwan now and modifying its posture across the region to ensure that U.S. interests are safeguarded no matter Taiwan's final status.

AN UNACCEPTABLE RISK

A policy that explicitly closes the door on a U.S. defense of the island, then, represents the best move for U.S. national security. To support this policy, however, Washington would have to make some policy changes. It would need to reposition U.S. forces away from vulnerable locations closest to Taiwan, such as Okinawa and Luzon, where they might get dragged unintentionally into a war, and ensure sufficient air and naval capacity in the region to protect U.S. trade routes. It would also need to invest in domestic semiconductor production capacity on an accelerated timeline. Finally, Washington would want to open a dialogue with China and with allies, to reinforce its intentions to remain a presence in Asia.¹⁸

Far from leaving the United States less secure, these moves would leave the country better off, by reducing the U.S. security burden and eliminating the biggest U.S. strategic liability: its continuing commitment to Taiwan and the risk this brings of a war with China.

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CON: AMERICA'S COMMITMENT TO TAIWAN IS A LIABILITY

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GLOBAL VIEW: HARGEISA

America's Somaliland Opportunity

ABDIRAHMAN ADAM BAKAAL

The Horn of Africa has emerged as a defining arena of geopolitical competition. China is expanding its military footprint there. The conflict with Iran has turned the Red Sea into one of the world's most contested waterways. Great power competition has returned to a region through which close to 20 percent of global maritime trade passes every day, including a quarter of all oil tanker traffic.

At a moment when the United States is seeking reliable partners to advance its security and economic interests, Somaliland offers something increasingly scarce: security cooperation in a strategic geographical location, economic partnership, democratic governance, and diplomatic reliability.

For more than three decades, Somaliland has built a democratic, stable, and pro-Western state on the southern shore of the Gulf of Aden. We have held competitive elections, transferred political power peacefully, maintained free and open markets, secured our territory, protected our coastline, and built functioning state institutions all without international recognition.

Until last December, when Israel became the first United Nations member state to recognize us as a sovereign and independent nation. That decision reflected the reality on the ground in Somaliland, as well as our country's growing strategic importance. Six months later, I traveled with President Dr. Abdirahman Mohamede Abdillahi to Jerusalem for the first state visit anywhere by a President of Somaliland.

There, President Abdillahi was received by Israeli President Isaac Herzog with full state honors in a moment that, to many, would have seemed unimaginable only a few years ago.

Abdirahman Adam Bakaal is the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Somaliland.

As Somaliland's flag flew in Jerusalem, we met with Israel's political, security, and business leaders to discuss how two small democracies at opposite ends of the Red Sea could work together to advance stability, prosperity, and regional security.

Our partnership with Israel reflects a broader strategic reality. Somaliland sits just 70 miles from the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the world's most consequential maritime chokepoints. Stretching along the Gulf of Aden, our coastline and the Port of Berbera overlook a vital artery for global trade and energy flows.

Our foreign policy reflects the same principles that have sustained our democracy. In 2020, Somaliland formalized a bilateral agreement with Taiwan establishing reciprocal offices and cooperation across agriculture, energy, health, trade, and technology despite Chinese pressure. When China failed to sway us from this partnership, Beijing turned to coercion, pressuring Somalia to weaponize its airspace and visa systems to limit international access to our capital.

We have not been deterred, however, and Somaliland's willingness to stand firm has strengthened the confidence of other partners who share our interests. As a result, while formal recognition may still be debated in diplomatic circles, engagement is already happening with Taiwan and a number of other international partners.

For instance, DP World, a UAE global logistics operator that moves 10 percent of world trade daily, has deployed \$442 million to modernize the port at Berbera. Their investment demonstrates growing international confidence in Somaliland as both a commercial gateway and a strategic hub.

Likewise, in July, I welcomed British Ambassador Charles King to discuss the future of the longstanding Somaliland–UK partnership. Somaliland's ties to Great Britain date back to the colonial era, when Britain administered the territory as a separate protectorate while Italy governed Somalia to the south. That distinction has defined the region's political identity ever since.

The United Kingdom, Denmark, and UAE now all maintain diplomatic offices in Hargeisa, as do our neighbors Kenya and Ethiopia.

For the U.S., the strategic implications should be difficult to ignore. America's only permanent military base in Africa sits at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. China opened its own facility there in 2017, and has been expanding its regional presence ever since. Beijing is also deepening its political and security ties with Mogadishu.

Recognizing Somaliland would give Washington direct access to a critical maritime corridor, a stronger hand in countering Chinese and other foreign influences in the Horn region, and the freedom to engage in ways that its relationship with Mogadishu currently prevents.

Turkey recently extended its troop deployment in Somalia for another two years. Across the Strait, the current conflict with Iran threatens to turn the Red Sea into one of the world's most significant maritime security challenges, disrupting freedom of navigation and putting global shipping lanes at risk.



Berbera offers the U.S. a stable, democratic hub with no competing foreign military presence and a deepwater port. Recognizing Somaliland would give Washington direct access to a critical maritime corridor, a stronger hand in countering Chinese and other foreign influences in the Horn region, and the freedom to engage in ways that its relationship with Mogadishu currently prevents.

Congress, moreover, has increasingly signaled its support for deeper U.S. engagement with Somaliland. Senator Ted Cruz, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa, is one of Somaliland’s strongest advocates, calling us “a geo-strategic U.S. maritime security partner in Africa” and urging the Trump administration to recognize Somaliland as an independent state. More recently, he wrote Secretary of State Marco Rubio to establish a separate U.S. travel advisory for Somaliland, arguing that Washington’s current approach fails to reflect the reality on the ground and unnecessarily constrains engagement with a dependable partner.

He is not alone. In 2022, the bipartisan Somaliland Partnership Act championed by Senator Jim Risch and others cleared the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Its core provisions were subsequently signed into law in the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, marking the first time Somaliland had ever appeared in U.S. legislation. The bipartisan effort was led by Rep. Marc Veasey and Rep. Chris Smith.

The list goes on. Representative John Moolenaar, Chairman of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, has pressed the State Department to establish a U.S. representative office in Hargeisa. Congressman Scott Perry has introduced legislation authorizing the President to recognize

Somaliland's independence. Representative John Rose has introduced the Somaliland Economic Access and Opportunity Act, recognizing that greater economic engagement with Somaliland advances American security and commercial interests.

This congressional momentum has been matched by engagement on the ground. Late last year, for example, General Dagvin Anderson, Commander of U.S. Africa Command, visited us to discuss shared security priorities as the region grows in importance.

In other words, the foundation for a deeper partnership reflecting the realities of today's strategic environment already exists. Formal recognition is an important step, but it should be seen as the beginning of a broader agenda: deeper security cooperation, expanded trade and investment, and sustained engagement that advances both American and Somaliland interests.

The strategic case for closer engagement has never been stronger: a democracy that has endured for more than three decades, a coastline that safeguards one of the world's most critical waterways, and a partner that has consistently aligned itself with the West—even when doing so came at a cost. As America's strategic competitors deepen their influence across the Horn of Africa, the U.S. has an opportunity to strengthen a partnership that already exists in practice.

My country is not asking Washington to take a leap of faith by recognizing Somaliland's sovereignty. We are asking it to build on a partnership that has already demonstrated its value—to regional security, to freedom of navigation, and to America's long-term strategic interests.

GLOBAL VIEW: SKOPJE

Bringing the Western Balkans In From The Cold

ZORAN JOLEVSKI

In his day, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously noted that “change is the only constant.” That axiom has held true for centuries. Even so, today’s geopolitical changes stand out for their speed, depth, and reach. Recent shifts in the structure of the world order have profoundly affected the international economy, contributed to global insecurity, and touched virtually every segment of individual societies. And they have done so more profoundly than at any time in living memory.

Europe is clearly struggling to adapt to this new reality. In Brussels and other European capitals, there are now heated conversations about “strategic autonomy,” future threats to the Western order, and how best to preserve stability in Europe’s immediate neighborhood. To successfully navigate all of these debates, Europe will need to simultaneously pass two important tests.

The first test, institutional transformation, requires Europe to change how it operates. At present, European politics are too often defined by a search for consensus that makes decisive action difficult. That approach is increasingly out of step with current geopolitical realities. Member states simply cannot remain tied to procedures that prevent Europe from responding quickly and resolutely to new challenges.

Instead, the EU should make greater use of “coalitions of the willing,” in which blocs of like-minded states advance projects and objectives that affect them directly. Europe has done this before; initiatives like Schengen and the Eurozone show that groups of countries can move ahead with common priorities without undermining the larger European project. In fact, such arrangements can strengthen the EU by giving it greater flexibility and allowing it to respond more quickly to changing global conditions.

The second test concerns the EU’s ability to integrate new members. The last two major waves of EU enlargement took place during a very different international era, in

The Honorable Zoran Jolevski previously served as Minister of Defense, Ambassador to the United States, and Chief of Staff to the President of North Macedonia.



Photo source: Pexels

which democracy, human rights, and free markets were dominant priorities. Back then, the goal was clear: anchoring the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe in the Western liberal order.

By contrast, today's enlargement is unfolding in a multipolar world that is still taking shape. In this environment, integrating the Western Balkans into Europe represents a strategic necessity. The alternative, a power vacuum in parts of Europe, would be destabilizing both for the continent's periphery and for the European Union itself. It would also create greater opportunities for outside powers to expand their political, economic and strategic influence in regions that should naturally be part of a wider European community.

Integrating the Western Balkans into Europe represents a strategic necessity. The alternative, a power vacuum in parts of Europe, would be destabilizing both for the continent's periphery and for the European Union itself.

MAKING INTEGRATION A REALITY

Such a process should begin with economics. Full integration of all Western Balkan countries into the EU should remain the ultimate objective, with "gradual integration" (near-term benefits ahead of full membership) serving as an essential step toward this

goal. Bringing the countries of my region, the Western Balkans, into the European Single Market via a strategy of gradual integration represents the most practical way to move them closer to the EU. The goal should be to ensure that all, and not just some, have a clear path toward participation in the Single Market, provided they undertake the structural reforms necessary to accept its *acquis*, the body of laws and regulations governing trade, energy, transport, and other policies.

To make this possible, European bodies, particularly the European Commission, need to clearly define how gradual integration will work and establish transparent ways to measure progress. Doing so would send a powerful message to the Western Balkans that the region has a future inside Europe. It would also give regional governments a practical reason to undertake reforms that are often difficult and politically unpopular.

Integrating Western Balkan nations more closely into EU institutions would send a strong signal to their citizens—that the idea of European enlargement is alive and well, and that membership is a realistic goal.

Similarly, integrating Western Balkan nations more closely into EU institutions would send a strong signal to their citizens—that the idea of European enlargement is alive and well, and that membership is a realistic goal. Equally important are structured consultations with Balkan stakeholders regarding EU economic policies, which would better prepare governments, businesses, and consumers for deeper integration while giving them a greater stake in the reforms needed to make it possible. Of course, policymakers in Brussels will need to recognize the economic limitations of the region and ensure that the costs of integration do not price nascent partners out of meaningful participation.

Transportation is one area where faster progress is particularly vital. At its 2024 Summit in Washington, NATO highlighted the importance of such corridors as part of its planning for a robust defense against possible future Russian aggression. The Western Balkans, by dint of their geography, has a large role to play in this conversation, because the region sits astride critical routes connecting Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and south-eastern Europe. That makes its infrastructure important not simply for commerce but also for European security. The EU should, therefore, naturally make Western Balkan nations a bigger part of its plans for infrastructure projects and transport corridors.

Impact-oriented investment is equally important. Greater private sector involvement in the Western Balkans would serve as a much-needed sign of sustained attention on the part of European stakeholders. If properly managed, such investments could benefit local economies while also generating returns for European companies and private investors. Meanwhile, the accompanying reforms needed to ensure such a sustained European stake (ranging from legislative changes to labor requirements to infrastructure priorities) would help bring Western Balkan nations that much closer to European standards.

There is also a broader strategic logic at play here. Greater European investment and integration would reduce the space available for external actors to exploit economic weaknesses or political divisions in the region. The Western Balkans have long been a crossroads where the interests of Europe and outside powers intersect. Ensuring that the

BRINGING THE WESTERN BALKANS IN FROM THE COLD

region is economically connected to, and politically invested in, the European project is essential to the continent's long-term security.

The result would be a wider Europe, characterized by greater stability and cohesion. It would also demonstrate that enlargement remains one of the European Union's most powerful strategic instruments. At a time when the international order is becoming more fragmented and competitive, bringing the Western Balkans firmly into the European fold would highlight to the world that the EU still has the capacity to unite the continent, address complex challenges, and seize the strategic moment.

GLOBAL VIEW: YEREVAN

Armenia's Election Opens A New Chapter

AREG KOCHINYAN

Although it passed mostly unnoticed in the West, Armenia's June election was a seminal moment, the importance of which extends well beyond Armenian domestic politics. It demonstrated that the country's strategic reorientation has survived its first serious electoral test. It has also created an opening for the United States to turn its growing involvement in Armenia into a durable regional strategy.

In the election, incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's "Civil Contract" party won 64 of 105 parliamentary seats, securing a ruling majority. The outcome was a clear disappointment for his opponents and for Moscow. Russian-aligned political forces had entered the election with significant financial, political and informational resources behind them, yet failed to produce the change of government they desired.

That outcome matters because Armenia's foreign-policy transformation can no longer be billed as simply the product of decisions by one government. It now has a clear electoral constituency. The question for Washington now should be: "what comes next?"

For decades, Armenia occupied an awkward position in the South Caucasus. It was deeply integrated into Russia's economic and security structures, while maintaining increasingly close relations with the West. That model became unsustainable after Russia's failure to provide Armenia with the security it expected during the attacks on its sovereign territories in 2021 and 2022, and in the collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.

Ever since, Armenia has been seeking a different strategic environment. What is different now, however, is that the United States is no longer simply encouraging this process from the outside. Washington is becoming directly invested in the outcome.

The clearest example is the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, or TRIPP. The project emerged from the August 2025 Washington agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and represents something much larger than a transportation

Areg Kochinyan is the President of the Armenian Council in Yerevan.

project. It gives the United States a direct economic and strategic stake in the connectivity of the South Caucasus.

Under the Armenia-U.S. framework, the planned TRIPP development company is to be controlled by the U.S. side, with Armenia holding 26 percent. At the same time, Armenian sovereignty over its territory, border management, customs, security, and other state functions remains intact.

For Armenia, TRIPP offers a path out of its geographic isolation and toward becoming a transit and logistics hub between Europe, the Black Sea, the Caspian, and Central Asia. For the United States, it creates a physical and commercial presence in a region that has traditionally been treated as Russia's sphere of influence.

That combination is strategically important. For Armenia, TRIPP offers a path out of its geographic isolation and toward becoming a transit and logistics hub between Europe, the Black Sea, the Caspian, and Central Asia. For the United States, it creates a physical and commercial presence in a region that has traditionally been treated as Russia's sphere of influence.

It is also potentially one of the most consequential U.S.-backed investment initiatives ever undertaken in the South Caucasus. The U.S. government itself has described TRIPP as an opportunity to expand American business, open new markets, and strengthen the connectivity of supply chains across the region.

In other words, Washington now has a concrete stake in the success of Armenia's peace and connectivity agenda. The country has become increasingly connected to American commercial interests, infrastructure, and regional economic strategy.

This is precisely why the outcome of the Armenian election matters. Russia has not disappeared from Armenia. It retains substantial economic influence and has demonstrated that it is willing to use that leverage politically. But Moscow's ability to shape Armenian political outcomes has clearly weakened, as the results of the June election show.

The inevitable Russian response will be to focus on disrupting the political and economic environment in which Armenia's new orientation is developing. Here, Washington should pay close attention. The objective should not be to help Armenia "defeat Russia." That would misunderstand both Armenia and the region. Rather, the goal should be to make Armenia's sovereign choices economically and politically sustainable.

The distinction is important. If Armenia remains dependent on a single market, a single energy system, or a single external security provider, its foreign-policy choices will always be vulnerable to pressure. On the other hand, if Armenia becomes connected to multiple markets, multiple infrastructure networks, and multiple sources of investment, Moscow's ability to reverse Armenian policy becomes much more limited.

TRIPP can serve as the centerpiece of that transformation. Moreover, its importance is not limited to the Armenia-Azerbaijan connection; the route has the potential to become part of a wider network linking Central Asian trade with European markets and creating new opportunities for American companies. Washington should therefore resist the



temptation to treat Armenia primarily as a small country that needs assistance. Armenia should increasingly be viewed as a platform through which the United States can pursue larger objectives: regional connectivity, supply-chain diversification, private investment, energy cooperation, and a stable corridor between Europe and Asia.

The geopolitical stakes are hard to overstate. For decades, Russia benefited from the fragmentation of the South Caucasus. Closed borders, unresolved conflicts and competing regional interests made the countries of the region dependent on external powers to manage their security and connectivity. Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, combined with new transportation links, fundamentally threatens that model, which is why the Kremlin can be expected to oppose it with all its might.

True, the failure of Russian-aligned forces to meaningfully sway the recent election results is evidence that Armenia's political center of gravity has changed. Still, the challenge for the Armenian government is now to convert that nascent political mandate into durable institutions and tangible economic results. The challenge for Washington, meanwhile, is to ensure that the alternatives being created in Yerevan are real enough for Armenia to survive the inevitable political pressure headed its way.





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GLOBAL VIEW: DHAKA

America's China Strategy Needs A Western Flank

BY ABU RUSHD &
SALMAN CHOWDHURY

In late August, two developments in Asia offered a useful warning for Washington. On August 25th, India's national security adviser, Ajit Doval, met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing as part of the growing thaw between the two countries. The same day, Bangladesh confirmed that it was moving toward formal negotiations with China for J-10CE fighter aircraft and attack helicopters.

These events deserve attention as indicators of broader change. They matter because they expose a weakness in the way the United States to date has organized its Indo-Pacific strategy. So far, Washington has concentrated deterrence along China's eastern maritime approaches and invested heavily in India as its principal strategic partner in South Asia. China, meanwhile, is improving access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar, while India continues to preserve its room for maneuver among Washington, Moscow, and Beijing.

The Pentagon's 2026 *National Defense Strategy* calls for a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain, and for greater contributions from regional partners.¹ That logic should extend westward, too.

Bangladesh is central to such an approach. It borders India, faces Myanmar's Rakhine state, occupies the northern Bay of Bengal, and hosts roughly 1.2 million Rohingya refugees. But deteriorating ties between Dhaka and Delhi in the wake of Sheikh Hasina's 2024

Abu Rushd is the President of the Institute of Strategy and Tactics Research (ISTR). A former military officer turned investigative journalist, he brings over three decades of expertise in national security, international relations, and defense intelligence.

Salman Chowdhury is Director of National Security & External Affairs at the Institute of Strategy and Tactics Research (ISTR). He is a recognized expert in irregular warfare, counterterrorism, intelligence analysis, and foreign military funding and assistance.



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ouster have created an opening for Beijing, and China is now seeking to expand its political and economic footprint in the country.

Washington has begun to respond. U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh Brent Christensen has indicated that the United States wants to offer the country American and allied defense alternatives, as well as to strengthen commercial ties.² In August, U.S. Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Steve Koehler visited Dhaka, where he discussed expanded maritime cooperation and invited the Bangladesh Navy to participate in the 2028 RIMPAC exercises.³

These are useful signals, to be sure, but they fall short of a comprehensive strategy. The countries of South Asia are now following different paths. Under Mohammed Muizzu, the Maldives has rolled back its previous “India First” posture, secured the withdrawal of Indian military personnel, and expanded defense ties with China. (More recently, Male has managed to repair a measure of its relations with New Delhi.) Sri Lanka maintains substantial cooperation with India while accepting large-scale Chinese investment. Nepal is courting Chinese investment and technology, even as its relations with India are roiled by a series of diplomatic and territorial disputes.

The underlying problem, however, is the same. India’s regional position has eroded while China’s advance has been enabled by a “first mover” advantage, allowing the Chinese to be the first to answer regional demands for finance, infrastructure, political attention, and security cooperation.

That is a position the United States should compete for. Stronger direct relationships with India’s neighbors, conducted in parallel with Washington’s ongoing partnership with New Delhi, would provide the United States with greater freedom of action in the region.

This is particularly necessary because India's government continues to exhibit clear signs of triangulation, balancing its relationship with Washington with warmer ties to Beijing as well as Moscow.

Stronger direct relationships with India's neighbors, conducted in parallel with Washington's ongoing partnership with New Delhi, would provide the United States with greater freedom of action in the region.

Bangladesh is the natural place to begin, because two strategic spaces meet there. To the east lie Myanmar, Rakhine, and Southeast Asian states with direct interests in issues such as maritime security, trafficking, disaster response, and instability in the Bay of Bengal. To the west lie smaller South Asian nations seeking wider economic and security choices. American assistance on issues such as maritime awareness, port security, secure communications, defense diversification, infrastructure investment, and political access would create useful capacity without forcing regional governments to declare themselves part of an anti-China coalition.

Such an approach fits the current mood in Washington well. The Trump administration's *National Defense Strategy* emphasizes denial and greater contributions from partner nations. The America First Arms Transfer Strategy directs the United States to prioritize partners whose geography matters to U.S. plans and to use defense sales to strengthen both partner capability and American industrial capacity.⁴

Today, the Bay of Bengal is still an arena in which the regional balance can be actively shaped. Washington has already built an India policy and a Pacific denial strategy. It now needs to construct the connective tissue between them: an approach to the western Indo-Pacific that gives it more regional options, provides smaller states with credible alternatives to partnership with Beijing, and contests China's southwestern access.

ENDNOTES

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