

# **Strategic Competition: How is the rise of China challenging American influence?**

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## **Abstract**

As the great power rivalry and quest for geopolitical competition becomes more apparent in Asia, the rise of China has increasingly taken a center stage. With the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the efforts to “Make China Great Again”, the Chinese government has consistently advanced itself to shape their engagements in Asia and around the world today. It is with such developments that many have started to question the revisionist nature of Chinese foreign policies. The rise of China therefore has become a challenge to the American influence and power in the Indo-Pacific region of Asia today. China’s Belt and Road Initiative as a part of its pioneer infrastructure and development program has casted extensive questions and concerns. I will argue for the thesis that the revisionist nature of China’s foreign policy and its behaviors have tendencies to affect the conduct of American foreign policies in the region. Xi’s efforts to promote a greater realization of the “Chinese Dream” and the Belt and Road Initiative are a clear extension of the Chinese brand of revisionism. With such revisionist foreign policies, China is skillfully advancing Belt and Road projects in parts of the Indo-Pacific to directly or indirectly challenge American power and influence.

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## Introduction

China's alarming rise to global leadership has become a challenge to the international power and influence of the United States of America. This research seeks to assess the ways in which China is building its global presence and how such advancements shape the scope of American influence in Asia and beyond. Often, scholars and practitioners have defined this conflicting relation between the United States and China as "strategic competition". This narrative has evolved at a time when the relation between the two countries has risen to a point of adversarial escalation. In Asia itself, the growing Chinese influence has questioned the allegiance and continuance of long-established relations of Asian countries with the United States. A shift to reliance on Chinese leadership also seems to be gradually evident from Africa to the Latin Americas. The escalating brinkmanship between the two countries has forced nations to pick sides and build alliances and partnerships that shut out the other power. A geopolitical competition can be witnessed in Asia and more particularly the Indo-Pacific region, and the likelihood of the crumbling of the U.S.-led order becomes vaguely apparent. Following this trend, the rise of Chinese domination in this region could mean "a less free, less open, and less inclusive" order that defies many American foreign policy achievements in the region.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, these developments could mean that it will take a generation to revive the key and central components of the liberal international order which are in question today. Hence, a careful assessment of the engagement of China in the region will be conducted to analyze how China's emergence affects the influence and power of the United States.

One of the major driving forces of Chinese foreign policy today is the promotion of economic corridors to expand the Chinese version of Eurasian cooperation through the Belt and

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<sup>1</sup> Ely Ratner. "Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative", Council on Foreign Relations, January 2018,

Road Initiative. According to Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims at “embracing the trend toward a multipolar world, economic globalization, cultural diversity and greater IT application, is designed to uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation”.<sup>2</sup> However, the geostrategic economic and security implications of BRI could point to a growing dominance of Chinese influence in the region and beyond. A greater presence of China in the region, for instance, could result in restrictions on the laws and regulations of the seas where thousands of American goods pass by on a daily basis in Asia. A rising China in the region with expansive maritime claims could also pose an adverse security threat to a region filled with American allies and security partners. At a time when the United States has taken a less engaging stand on global involvements, China has advanced itself into the vacuum left by the United States. China’s ascent has also challenged traditional Western financial institutions like the Bretton Woods system with the creation of their own banks to fund global projects. As China continues to increase its investments through the Belt and Road projects across Asia, China is more likely to use its economic leverage to shift domestic and foreign policies of these states in various manifestations such as Debt Trap Diplomacy. While China’s rise becomes more prominent globally, its brand of revisionism becomes ever more pronounced. This study will firstly assess, on the broader spectrum, the ascent of revisionist foreign policies conducted by the Chinese government in the last decades. It will explore how Chinese foreign policies are not an entirely genuine effort to promote greater cooperation and “win-win” outcomes but have clear signs of revisionist tendencies that challenge American power and influence. Secondly, it will focus on the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and how this project represents an

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<sup>2</sup> “Xi Attends Opening of Conference on dialogue of Asian civilizations”. Belt and Road Portal, May 2019. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/90752.htm>

extension of the revisionist brand of Chinese foreign policies. It will explore different narratives of the BRI projects and analyze how these projects directly or indirectly harm and challenge American interests and influence in Asia. In order to situate the current uncertain relation between the United States and China, Kevin Rudd has offered an understanding in a recent op-ed:

*“Throughout 2018, much of Asia has been shaken by the new and increasingly unpredictable dynamics in Sino-American relations. One year ago, US President Donald Trump returned from Beijing after his “state-plus” visit, which China hoped had finally laid his anti-Chinese campaign rhetoric to rest. Twelve months later, China and the United States are caught in an unresolved trade war, and Trump’s administration has replaced US “strategic engagement” with China with “strategic competition”.”*<sup>3</sup>

This thesis comprises five different sections: the introductory part, followed by three chapters and a concluding section. The introduction presents the research questions that are critical to the construction of this paper and a hypothetical assumption that will guide us through this research work. The problem statement will be followed by a methodological section that will frame the research study in a qualitative design with an emphasis on document analysis. The first chapter will focus primarily on setting the tone for the research work with a historical understanding of the ways in which United States has built its presence and influence as the dominant power in the Asia Pacific region. It will then introduce the emerging challenges that the rise of China has posed to American influence in the region. Along with an examination of the literature on the subject, three competing theories will be brought to bear in the assessment of these developments. As we transition into the second chapter, its first section will explain the foreign policies that China has

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<sup>3</sup> Rudd, Kevin. “Prospects for US-China Relations in 2019”, Project Syndicate, 2018 <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/united-states-china-relations-in-2019-by-kevin-rudd-2018-12?barrier=accesspaylog>

implemented over the years within the context of the historical shift that led to China's reassertion of its strength and power in the region. It is imperative to note that the evolution of Chinese foreign policies have increasingly shown revisionist tendencies that have instilled fear and insecurity in many of the countries in Asia that align more closely to the U.S. This chapter will emphasize how these foreign policies indicate greater assertion of Chinese control and dominance in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. Overall, this chapter aims to answer the first proposed research question on whether the Rise of China serve as a clear indication of a revisionist China that aims to challenge American interests. The third chapter focuses on the second research question: how the revisionist Belt and Road Initiative of China poses as a challenge to American influence in the region. It will introduce the official narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative and its proposed plans. This will then be pitted against an assessment of the projected threat of the economic and security risks that come with the BRI. Whether the threat that we foresee is real or perceived, a careful assessment is required to study how it affects American influence in the region. As we come to the end of this paper, I will offer conclusive remarks on what these developments mean for long-term US-China relations, and the growing impact of China on the American-established liberal international order. It will explore the prospects for further research that is necessary in this field of study.

#### Problem Statement and Research Questions:

##### Two Research Questions:

Ultimately, the broad question remains whether China's global advancement is affecting the pre-existing order of influence and power established by the United States. However, more specifically in the Indo-Pacific region of Asia where the United States has established itself as a hegemonic



power, the primary question is how the rise of China is affecting American influence in this region. Therefore, the two key questions that this paper will aim to answer are as follows:

- 1. Does the Rise of China serve as a clear indication of a revisionist China that aims to challenge American interests?*
- 2. How does the BRI as an extension of Chinese revisionism challenge American influence in the Indo-Pacific?*

In fulfilling the entirety of these questions, we will assess how the relationship between the two countries has evolved over the period of the last two decades. It is imperative to track the political, economic and security developments of China and its foreign policies in the region and beyond. Additionally, this study aims to address what “strategic competition” between these two states means for their long-term relations. Therefore, these are relevant questions that will allow us to better assess the emerging developments between these two states and the projection of the path forward. Can the US and China still maintain their relationship and continue to maintain a version of the world order without conflict in the long term? Is the American retreat an indication of a long-term policy to reduce its engagements globally? The relationship between the two countries are often strained and even more so recently. Can this defining trend of the century handled peacefully? Is war a likely outcome of this strained relation, and, if so, can it be avoided?

I will argue for the thesis that Chinese foreign policies have become increasingly more revisionist in nature, most especially after President Xi took over power in China. My hypothesis is primarily influenced by a combination of arguments proposed by scholars who have pointed to the revisionist nature of China’s foreign policy and how such behaviors have tendencies to affect the conduct of American foreign policies in the region. Xi’s efforts to promote a greater realization of the “Chinese Dream” and the Belt and Road Initiative are a clear extension of the Chinese brand

of revisionism. With such revisionist foreign policies, China is skillfully advancing Belt and Road projects in parts of the Indo-Pacific to directly or indirectly challenge American presence and influence there.

#### Research Methodology:

This research study adopts a deductive approach to further advance the understanding of how China is expanding its power and influence with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and how this emerging phenomenon challenges the existing American sphere of influence. This research is an explanatory study, which seeks to explain and assess Chinese global engagements and how these challenges the existing American influence and scope of U.S. power in the region. It follows a qualitative research design and incorporates a document analysis approach. With the combination of both primary and secondary data, the research will test the aforementioned hypothesis. Government reports, publications from government websites, along with peer-reviewed journal articles, books, news articles, expert panel sources, publication reports of international institutions and governments will be used to advance this study.

The qualitative research design is an important part of this research because it helps us better answer the “how and why” questions when the quantitative approach to research design fails to offer the necessary information.<sup>4</sup> Most specifically, by applying document analysis we are able to analyze the information about the position of the Chinese government that is important for this research. Annual reports, speech briefs, and publications on the government website are important to establish the official narrative of the Chinese government on their foreign policies and most importantly on the Belt and Road Initiative. This information will then be used alongside the

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<sup>4</sup> Namey and Mitchell, Marilyn L., “Chapter 1: Qualitative Research: Defining and Designing”. 2013, SAGE.

secondary sources of data that will help shape a different narrative from that of the government resources. An analysis of these sources will help formulate the hypotheses into stronger arguments.

The theoretical assumptions used in understanding the advancement of Chinese global engagements, most especially in the case of the BRI, are driven primarily by the realist school of thought. As such, within the realist school, offensive realism through the lens of Mearsheimer will be employed to test the applicability of such theories in defining this trend from China. The idea of great power rivalry will also be used through the employment of hegemonic stability theory. To counterbalance the biases in this research, there will be an incorporation of assumptions made by authors about how China is genuinely a benign leader. However, numerous authors and practitioners have claimed that the promotion of greater Eurasian cooperation through the BRI is an attempt to build more ports, railways and infrastructure in order to impose greater Chinese political and economic influence in the recipient countries. In Europe, for example, BRI agreements were signed by countries like Poland and Greece, but the projects have created considerable anxiety that it masks an attempted Beijing power grab. Some authors have even highlighted that if there were any lingering beliefs that China's integration into the global order would be benign, these appear to have been written off by the Belt and Road Initiative.

In order to better understand the Chinese government's official standpoint on the Belt and Road Initiative, official government websites will be utilized to gather such information. Chinese government websites and publications that highlight the aims and objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative will be used to explain how the government envisions the advancement of this project in the region and beyond. Works of authors such as Parag Khanna and Kevin Rudd will shed light on the Chinese narrative of the developments as benign and as a genuine rise to global engagement which will help balance the biases of the research. Publications on the Belt and Road Initiative

from the Council on Foreign Relations and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, among others, will be applied to assess the development of the project from the standpoint of an outsider's view on the projects. This approach will also allow us to evaluate the possible oppositions and contradictions between practical implementation of government policy and its theoretical presentation. Peer-reviewed journal articles authored by Robert Jervis, John Ikenberry and Colin Campbell will offer a more in-depth understanding of the geostrategic and security implications of the project as well as an overall view of this phenomenon as whole.

Several publications from think tanks have pointed to the retreat of American engagement from key international forums as a delegitimizing factor for American influence and power around the world. Such disengagements have left a void in international diplomacy and global engagements that China is taking advantage of. China's massive contributions to United Nations Peacekeeping Missions and renewed leadership in the Trans Pacific Partnership are some of the indications of this. Publications, reports and journal articles detailing such developments from think tanks, news agencies, political consulting firms (e.g. The Diplomat, Foreign Affairs Magazine, Asia Society: Asia Policy Institute, Brookings) will be used to assess how China is expanding its global influence through these platforms internationally.

## Chapter One: Understanding American Influence and its Challenges

*We will continue to deepen our engagement using every element of American power - diplomacy, military, economic development, the power of our values and our ideals.*

*-Barack Obama, 2014*

This chapter will present three theoretical frameworks as candidates for allowing us to better understand the developments of power and influence by great powers. It will offer a chronological understanding of how the United States has established itself as the dominant power in the Asia Pacific while applying the hegemonic stability theory. It will then introduce the emerging challenges that the rise of China poses for American influence in the region, setting the stage for how the rise of China could be revisionist in nature.

### **Competing Theories:**

The rise of China has remained a critical concern for the promotion of American foreign policies due to its growing influence in the region. Despite Americans' effort to open China's door to the world and engage them with the liberal international order, increasingly, China has asserted to promote its own version of order with Chinese characteristics. The United States has actively engaged its allies and partners in the region with its sustained commitment to the Asian Development Bank and security partnerships. A series of important American policies in the region has contributed to continued American friendship in the region. Obama's Pivot to Asia was a significant step towards expanding American relations with countries in Asia through economic and security partnerships, while the Trans-Pacific Partnership with members beyond the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum has envisioned a region with economic prosperity

under the leadership of the U.S. government. Simultaneously, the ascendancy of China in the region has posed serious questions and cast doubts on the promotion of American foreign policies in the region. As a country which has enjoyed its status as the largest trading partner of many Asian countries for the last few decades, China is slowly replacing the United States in this sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Competing visions of American policies in the region and the ascendant Chinese leadership point to the great power rivalries and their struggle for influence and power. Three important theoretical frameworks offer a clearer picture of the competing engagements of these two powers in the region. First, I will discuss the ways in which the United States has established itself as the unipolar hegemonic power in the region through the employment of hegemonic stability theory and the competing ascending nature of China as the rival hegemon.

I will also explore the possibilities posited by neo-realist theorists like John Mearsheimer who has argued, through the lens of offensive realism, that the rising growth of China in Asia will put China in direct security competition with the United States and increase the probability of war between the two great powers.<sup>6</sup> Alongside these frameworks, the theories envisioning China as a genuinely benign leader will also be used to test the validity of these arguments.

#### *Maintaining American Power and Hegemony:*

As the United States has promoted its interests through the Pivot to Asia, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and trade sanctions, China has gained recognition as a rising power through advancements of the Belt and Road Initiative and their increased involvement in key international institutions. The hegemonic stability theory helps us understand the ways in which the United

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<sup>5</sup> Mahapatra, Chintamani. "One Belt, One Road: China, US and the Emerging Hegemonic Struggle in Asia", 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 182.

<sup>6</sup> Mearsheimer, J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. New York: W.W. Norton. 2014.

States has established itself as the hegemonic power in the Asia Pacific region. This theory defines the core elements of a dominant hegemonic power that engages in creating international rules, treaties, and institutions through military, diplomatic and economic coercion.<sup>7</sup> It also highlights the importance of the dominant hegemon having the economic, political and military capability that meets crucial technological advancements to conduct their engagements. According to Krasner and Pascual, the hegemonic power will instead work towards defending the greater concept of an international system than to selfishly work to benefit their own self-interest.<sup>8</sup>

The United States has continuously worked in establishing a status-quo as the hegemonic power against the Soviets during the Cold War and against China today. The Americans have strategically engaged with Asian countries through economic and security cooperation that offered spaces for strengthening the relations between countries in the Asia Pacific region and the United States. The bilateral alliances with countries like the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Australia; granting non-NATO ally status to the Philippines and Thailand; and renewed strategic partnerships with Vietnam and India, have all now given a greater geopolitical significance to American influence and power in the Indo-Pacific region today. Through the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, the U.S. has committed itself to further engaging members of ASEAN into their sphere of influence. One of the other important elements of hegemonic stability theory is the responsibility of the hegemon to offer public goods which are shared by the countries in a group of states. The American Marshal Plan for war-ravaged Europe surely did help build an image of America as a benign hegemonic power.<sup>9</sup> As the United States has introduced the Pivot to Asia,

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<sup>7</sup> Kindleberger, Charles. *The World in Depression 1929-1939*. University of California Press: California, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Krasner, Stephen. and Carlos, Pascual. "Addressing State Failure", 2005, *Foreign Affairs* 84(4), 153.

<sup>9</sup> Prabhakar L.S. Williams, "The Clash of Interests: Issues of the US Pivot to Asia and China's Maritime Silk Road", 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 169.

China has announced the Belt and Road Initiative as an ascendant hegemon aiming to replicate and replace the United States.

*Revisionism and Chinese Foreign policies:*

Mearsheimer emphasizes that ultimately the “basic structure of the international system forces states concerned about their security to compete with each other for power.”<sup>10</sup> This means that the most powerful state will attempt to secure its own hegemony in the world while making sure that there is no rival great power that challenges its domination. There are two assumptions that are imperative in understanding this theory, which deal with capabilities and intentions. Mearsheimer posits that all states have some level of offensive military capability and such capabilities are measurable because they are comprised of material objects. However, intentions are essentially neither detectable nor measurable, unless spoken. These intentions lie in the heads of the leaders and one can never know if the others have guns pointed at them. In essence, Mearsheimer argues that if China continues to grow economically, it will attempt to dominate Asia, as the United States dominated Western Europe. He has mentioned that the United States will also go to great lengths to contain China and prevent it from dominating the region, which will cause a heightened security competition as China’s reaction to attempt to contain its rise is not likely to be tranquil. He envisions that this could happen at a time when the balance of power has shifted against the United States and China has greater power than it does today. At a time when China is no longer constrained by the global balance of power, the competition for power in the region will be ever more apparent.

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<sup>10</sup> Mearsheimer, J. “Can China Rise Peacefully?”, The National Interest, October, 2014.  
<https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>



Mearsheimer views this phenomenon through a securitized lens and argues that the increased presence of China in the region will put China in direct security competition with the United States in the Asia Pacific region and that would contribute to the increased probability of war as an outcome. Scholars in the neo-realist camp often view the ascending nature of China in the region as an inevitable path towards war with the United States, however the regional allies and partners of the U.S. will engage to help balance the rise of China. As Mearsheimer employs the perspective of offensive realism he argues that the global order of anarchy pushes states into aggressive competition with each other to preserve their own security.<sup>11</sup> In the long term, China will attempt to further its power and influence through Asia as the United States has with the West, thereby causing a stand-off in their attempts to contain one another.<sup>12</sup> Some realist thinkers have often pointed to the escalating Chinese military confrontations in the East and South China Seas that indicates offensive tendencies and poses direct threats to American allies and security partners in the region. Its unilateral military modernization initiatives have contributed towards establishing itself as a rising power and a rival to the U.S. in the region.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars have claimed that the introduction of the Maritime Silk Road with an ambition to further advance China's interest in the Asia Pacific region is also a geoeconomic strategy to coerce the countries into being silenced on the matters of disputed territories in the South China sea.<sup>14</sup>

China's increased claims on the South China Sea contributes to the complication of the security dilemma in the region. For once, Beijing's blatant rejection of the United Nations-backed tribunal decision over their claims on the Spratly islands and its growing military encroachments

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<sup>11</sup> Mearsheimer, J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. New York: W.W. Norton. 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 361.

<sup>13</sup> Shambaugh, D. "Return of Middle Kingdom? China and Asia in the Early Twenty-first Century" in Shambaugh, D. *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Mahapatra, Chintamani. "One Belt, One Road: China, US and the Emerging Hegemonic Struggle in Asia", 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 181-190.

into these disputed seas shows the offensive tenor of its posture towards regional security.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the U.S. military has continued to maintain its presence in these waters through the exercise of Freedom of Navigation permitted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of Seas to reject China's claims and to assure their allies and security partners of its commitment to protect their seas. China's geoeconomics efforts in Southeast Asia, in addition to policing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, are also aimed at the broader goal of disrupting and supplanting U.S. influence.<sup>16</sup> Scholars like Glaser have emphasized that even if China has benign intentions, it will be pushed into competition with the United States as the U.S. will actively react assertively to the growing economic influence of China, thus causing a cycle of suspicion between each other.<sup>17</sup> These episodes of escalation in the region have pointed to the growing sense of competition between the United States and China which has raised concerns about the likelihood of war as proposed by Mearsheimer.

*Can China be a Benign and a Genuine Leader:*

The rise of China might be revisionist in nature, but the assertion that war is a probable outcome could be an overstatement. Mearsheimer, like many realist thinkers, harbors a rather pessimistic view of the advancement of Chinese foreign policies in the region. However, there are several items in the literature that emphasize the rise of China as one that is peaceful with a genuine intention to advance cooperation with other countries through trade and initiatives that goes beyond the traditional economic partners. The idea of the 'new security concept' relies solely on

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<sup>15</sup> Phillips, T, Holmes, and Bowcott, Owen. "Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling in South china Sea Case", The Guardian, July, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>

<sup>16</sup> Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris Jennifer M. *War by Other Means*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2016, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Glaser, C. "Will China's Rise lead to War?" *Foreign Affairs*, 2011, 90(2).

a principle that the promotion of regional stability and cooperation among neighbors will only become a possibility when there are mutually beneficial interactions economically.<sup>18</sup> This was a vision widely shared by the Chinese government under the leadership of President Jiang Zemin which strived to make itself into a booming market for the states in its region and a hub for investment opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the pessimism shared by various Western scholars on the intentions of China on its ascent, scholars like Parag Khanna point to the century of humiliation that China had suffered under the imperial rule of the Japanese, and how this serves as an impetus to rise up to take their place shoulder to shoulder with these countries. For a long time, the Chinese ruled various parts of Asia through the centuries of their imperial dynasties, and had been victorious in wars throughout their history. The rise of China today is not a new phenomenon: they had previously been a regional hegemon, and this is a re-awakening of that great power.<sup>20</sup> As such, these scholars contend that the rise of China today will not lead China to assert its own supremacist order but rather one that promotes its peaceful nature with a focus on “mutual benefit and common development”.<sup>21</sup> As we see China embracing more of a neoliberal value system, it has increasingly engaged itself with various regional and international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Scholars like Ikenberry have highlighted that the greater involvement of China in these regional institutions could reduce the likelihood of an escalation to

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<sup>18</sup> Sutter, R. “China’s Regional Strategy and Why it Amy Not Be Good for America” in Shambaugh, D. *Power Shift: China and Asia’s New Dynamics*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Zhang, Y. and Tang, S. “China’s Regional Strategy” in Shambaugh, D. *Power Shift: China and Asia’s New Dynamics*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Allison, G., *Destined for War: Can the US and China escape Thucydides’s Trap*, Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, New York, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Callahan and William A. “China’s Strategic futures: Debating the Post American World Order”. 2012, *Asian Survey*, 52 (4).

military conflict in the region and promote a more peaceful integration of China into the status quo. However, this brand of neo-liberalism is not traditional in its foundation; its unique characters with the combination of “market mechanism and strong state control” has pushed China to mobilize itself in global engagements.<sup>22</sup>

Alongside these developments, the Belt and Road Initiative has emerged under President Xi Jinping which was hailed by the Chinese government as a project that aims to promote infrastructure development and economic cooperation for the mutual benefit of China and its partners. China as a rising power sees the shared Asian geography as a far more “permanent reality than the unreliable promises of the U.S.”, and its ascent as a reaffirmation to the world’s multipolarity; it does not replace it with a vision of Chinese dominance or supremacy.<sup>23</sup> However, the new security concept is also seen by many scholars as a mechanism to counter American hegemony in the region while China seeks to create “common security” as a multilateral approach to tackling issues on energy security, food security, financial security and economic security.<sup>24</sup> This can also be viewed as forming an alliance within its regional neighbors to challenge American influence in the region. With the Belt and Road as its newest and most ambitious plan to forward Chinese influence in the region, mounting questions over its intentions and its effects on the American presence in the region have been raised. Though the above-mentioned school of thought promotes the view of a genuine and peaceful ascent of China, the implications of initiatives like the BRI have raised a growing suspicion that has led to numerous countries re-negotiating their terms of engagement with China. Episodes of so called “debt trap diplomacy” that have led to

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<sup>22</sup> Wu, F. “How Neoliberal is China’s Reform? The Origins of Change during Transition”. 2010, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 51(5). 619-631.

<sup>23</sup> Khanna, Parag. *The Future is Asian*. Simon & Schuster: New York, 2019, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Chan Gerald, Lee, Pak K. and Chan L., H. “China Engages Global Governance: A New World Order in the Making?”, *China Policy Series*: Routledge, 2012.

outcomes such as Sri Lanka leasing its commercial port of Hobantoda to China for 99 years have alarmed various countries in the region. Could this development from BRI challenge the narrative of China's peaceful rise and will that define the growing influence of China in the years to come?

### **American Power and Influence: Is the United States a Benign Hegemon?**

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American political and military engagements had introduced the United States to new areas of power and influence across the globe. This is when the United States embarked on its path towards becoming a hegemonic power in different parts of the world. Some of the most notable acquisitions were the results of the Spanish American War and World War II, that allowed the U.S. to expand its presence in the wider Asia-Pacific region. The Spanish American War of 1898 led to American control of lands that previously belonged to the Spanish empire. Territories in the Pacific such as Guam and the Philippines were then controlled by the American government for its strategic naval and military purposes. While Guam still remains an overseas territory of the American government with important air force and naval bases, the Philippines gained its independence in 1946 after the Treaty of Manila was signed. However, the Philippines has always remained a key non-NATO ally of the United States and public polls still favor America as the most reliable ally, rather than China or any other nation in the region.<sup>25</sup> This special relationship has allowed the United States to strategically advance its political, economic and military interests in the country through trade investments and security protection. Likewise, the outcome of World War II significantly contributed to the promotion of American leadership and influence through the Marshall Plan that helped rebuild Europe while re-asserting U.S. power and influence in the post-war Asia Pacific. These episodes of American

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<sup>25</sup>Jervis, Joshua. "The Philippines' Coming 'Duterte Referendum' The Diplomat, March, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/the-philippines-coming-duterte-referendum/>

power projection not only helped the region stabilize politically and economically, but also contributed to the development of a positive image of the United States.

After the Japanese surrender to the Americans at the end of World War II and the introduction of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security in 1960, the countries have engaged in a strong bilateral relationship. “While the alliance is a bilateral arrangement, it has had a significant impact on Asia as a whole and is regarded by other nations as a key part of the regional security structure”.<sup>26</sup> This relationship has led to the United States recognizing Japan as one of its most important allies in the Asia, where the U.S.-Japan alliance serves as the cornerstone of American security interests in the Asia Pacific which helps bring prosperity and stability to the region. Today, Japanese security is heavily reliant on American protection, and the country hosts one of the largest U.S. military bases in the region. The United States has assisted Japan in expanding its military capabilities while also engaging with them as their largest economic partner. While respecting the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States has also continued to assist Taiwan on its security related matters and the protection and security of Taiwan Strait.

The strategic American reorientation of the Obama era in the Indo-Pacific has meant that the United States will be more engaged with its allies and partners in the region through greater cooperation in economic and security matters. As a regional hegemonic power, the United States has brought its economic and military assistance to the region through its continued commitment to the Asian Development Bank and its bi-lateral security commitments with countries like Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, and Japan.<sup>27</sup> With its unparalleled economic and political strength, the United States has managed to maintain its power and influence in the region. The

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<sup>26</sup> Breer, William. “U.S. Alliances in East Asia: Internal Challenges and External Threats”, Brookings Institution, May, 2010. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/u-s-alliances-in-east-asia-internal-challenges-and-external-threats/>

<sup>27</sup> Prabhakar L.S. Williams, “The Clash of Interests: Issues of the US Pivot to Asia and China’s Maritime Silk Road”, 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China’s Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018.

Americans' presence in the Asia Pacific and most importantly in the Indo-Pacific has been "reassuring to their allies, and their naval and air deployments beyond the region have played a major role in protecting key energy trade routes through the Malacca Strait and Indian Ocean".<sup>28</sup> These initiatives and cooperation with the countries of the East Asia has significantly shaped American power and influence in the region and beyond. In this vein, the United States positioned itself to become the dominant unipolar power in the region throughout the period of the Cold War and to this day. It is often argued that the withdrawal of American military presence in the Asia Pacific will intensify prevailing instability and tension in the region. This is often credited to the unique role of the United States in the region as a hegemonic power that grew its power and influence there from 1945.<sup>29</sup>

### **China and the Added Complication to American Influence in the Region:**

Many scholars and practitioners have carefully assessed the emerging influence of China, which has engendered different debates on the ambitions of China with the promotion of various initiatives such as the BRI. As China aims to connect the Eurasian continent by an integrated trade network through land and sea routes across the continents, growing concerns about these developments have become more evident. Several authors have argued that the steady rise of China alongside the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative are the clearest indication of China's revisionist tendencies and that it will look to challenge the United States' influence.<sup>30</sup> This trend has prompted fierce debates on the aspiration of China in the region. Contributing to such

<sup>28</sup> Prabhakar L.S. Williams, "The Clash of Interests: Issues of the US Pivot to Asia and China's Maritime Silk Road", 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Castro, D. "U.S. Grand Strategy in Post-Cold War Asia—Pacific" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 16(3), December 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Chi, L. "China Silk Road Strategy", *The International economy*, September 2015.

revisionist claims, authors like Campbell have vehemently asserted that China is using the Belt and Road Initiative to compete with the Americans over the oil and energy resource-rich states of the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> Almost 80% of Chinese oil imports passes through the Malacca Straits; a strategic economic passage chokepoint that is currently monitored by the United States. Such a geostrategic channel is susceptible to blockade if a conflict erupts between the two powers.<sup>32</sup> Pollack (2015) implies that the Belt and Road Initiative can also be seen as a security collaboration that is strategically positioned to deflect opposition against the expanding military power and unilateral military engagements in the region. Such practices are evident in China's security strategy in the region which were characterized by three overarching objectives: 1) deflect US attention towards its political-military ambitions; 2) curtail countervailing strategies that could affect its long-term military rise; and 3) prevent any attempt to halt its economic, military, and political development.

Harvard's prominent scholar Graham Allison (2017) has pointed to the growing assertion of Xi's Presidency to "Make China Great Again" by regaining its historic sphere of influence along its frontiers and to the seas while commanding the respect of other great powers in the councils of the world. He claims that this narrative has also inspired support from its netizens over Chinese claims on territories that went beyond the confines of their borders. Most importantly, as he points to the growing influence of China in the region, he highlights the massive construction of airstrips, ports, and radar facilities in parts of disputed islands in the South China Sea that increasingly pose as a barrier to American ships conducting surveillance programs. Beijing is flexing its maritime military muscle, whether by reneging on its promise not to militarize islands in the South China

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<sup>31</sup> Campbell. C. "China Says It's Building the New Silk Road: Here are Five Things to Know Ahead of a Key Summit", Time, May, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell. C. "China Says It's Building the New Silk Road: Here are Five Things to Know Ahead of a Key Summit", Time, May, 2017.



Sea or recklessly closing on a U.S. destroyer in the international waters. All of which points to how China is slowly muscling the United States out of these waters and absorbing more South East Asian nations into their orbit of influence, including key American allies like Japan and Australia. While assessing the influence of China in international institutions, Will Moreland claims that China's moves at the United Nations Human Rights Council are challenging free and open societies abroad. While, at home, the Chinese administration has executed dramatic episodes of human rights violations through its Orwellian social credit system and the "reeducation camps" in Xinjiang.

As China has continued to rise in the region, it has introduced massive trade and infrastructure initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative that attracted many countries in the region and beyond. Financial institutions that were born out of such initiatives as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank have started to offer loans and assistance that challenge the existing dominance of the Bretton Woods institutions and the Asian Development Bank in the region.<sup>33</sup> Concurrently, its increased military advancements in the disputed territories of the East and South China sea has alarmed many of the American security partners and allies in the region. Therefore, the rise of China and its influence in the region has been a contentious subject in the areas of economic and security shifts, big power rivalry, and their implications in the region.

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<sup>33</sup> Prabhakar L.S. Williams, "The Clash of Interests: Issues of the US Pivot to Asia and China's Maritime Silk Road", 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018.

## **Chapter Two: With the Rise of China, could the U.S. become number two?**

*Let China sleep; when she wakes, she will shake the world.*

*-Napoleon, 1817*

*The greatest Chinese dream is the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.*

*-Xi Jinping, 2012*

This chapter will explain the foreign policies that China has conducted over the years within the context of a historical shift that led to China's reassertion of its strength and power in the region and beyond. It is imperative to note that the evolution of Chinese foreign policies has increasingly shown revisionist tendencies that has instilled fear and insecurity in many of the countries in Asia that kept the Americans vigilant in the region. This chapter will test whether the emergence of Chinese foreign policies are a genuine effort to integrate itself into the global order or whether they are indications of aspirations towards becoming the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Make China Great Again: The rejuvenation of the Chinese nation**

At Nazarbayev University in 2013, President Xi made a historical remark about the introduction of the New Silk Road in its historical city of Astana, Kazakhstan. His speech signaled a renewed significance to an ancient trade route that connected most parts of the Eurasian continent. This marked the launch of an ambitious initiative that has attracted a lot of countries in the region and around the globe. The inception of what was previously known as the One Belt and One Road (OBOR) was also an indication of the changes which China has taken in its foreign policies. This is a step forward in Chinese foreign policy that marks a significant shift from the policy of

“taoguang yanghuoi,” which refers to Deng Xiaoping’s slogans of ‘hiding one’s capacities and biding one’s time’ and ‘not seeking leadership,’ to a much more assertive foreign policy over the years.<sup>34</sup> The presidency of Deng Xiaoping initially marked a significant shift in major political and foreign policy initiatives that saw the Chinese leadership opening its door to greater cooperation with countries across the globe. For a long period of time, China insulated itself in a closed-door approach in their conduct of policies towards and relations with other states.

At the height of the Cold War, there were numerous dialogues between the Chinese and the Americans behind closed doors that initially sowed the seeds for the rise of China. Richard Nixon sent his National Security Advisor turned Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to China on a number of occasions to conduct various levels of diplomatic actions to encourage China to open its doors to the world. As Kissinger recalls his continuous effort and central role in this initiative, he also highlights that the formulation of Chinese attitudes and policies towards the West are equally influenced by its history, both ancient and recent.<sup>35</sup> The foreign policy of Deng focused on keeping a low profile while managing the country’s strength in a multipolar world where it promoted a concept of “mutual benefit and common development”.<sup>36</sup> However, reflecting back on the speech that Xi Jinping gave at Astana in 2013, China has introduced a more assertive approach to its foreign policies that has ambitions to put China at the forefront of global engagements.<sup>37</sup> This period has also pushed China to take a central role in various international intuitions and initiatives that contributed towards a renewed commitment to global governance. The great rejuvenation of

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<sup>34</sup>Chan Gerald, Lee, Pak K. and Chan L., H. “China Engages Global Governance: A New World Order in the Making?”, China Policy Series: Routledge, 2012, 23.

<sup>35</sup>Kakutani, Michiko. “An insider Views China, Past and Future” The New York Times, May, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/10/books/on-china-by-henry-kissinger-review.html>

<sup>36</sup> Callahan. William, “China’s Strategic Futures: Debating the Post-American World Order”, 2012, *Asian Survey*, 4(2012).

<sup>37</sup> Foot, Rosemary. “Doing Some Things in the Xi Jinping era: The United Nations as China’s Venue of Choice”, *International Affairs* 90(5), 2014, 1085-1100.

the Chinese nation as envisaged by President Xi has gradually started to grow in the minds and hearts of Chinese people. Concurrently, Asia and the world are gradually feeling the rifts widening in their relations with a rising China.

### **What does “Make China Great Again” mean?**

Just before the demise of Lee Kwan Yew, a premier China watcher and whom Kissinger called a man with “singular strategic acumen” on China, he answered the question raised by Graham Allison on whether China will be number one with piercing insight. He said “Why not? How could China not aspire to be number one in Asia and in time the world?”<sup>38</sup> This is a statement whose implications have become ever more apparent since Xi Jinping took office and promoted a vision of Making China Great Again. In the remarks made by Lee, he specifically mentioned that the twenty first century is going to be the century of the “contest for supremacy in Asia”. Xi’s presidency has brought about various policies and initiatives that has brought an even greater relevance to such assertions. It is fitting that the promotion of such policies sit well with the kind of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation that Xi envisions for its people and the country. It reminds people of the kind of China that they once learned in their history classes: an ancient super power, a “middle kingdom” existing between heaven and earth where China was the dominant power and its peripheries subservient to them. The series of interventions in China by the Western imperialists and then by Japan in various episodes of the Opium wars, the Boxer rebellion, and the massacres in Nanjing has led to a gradual loss of the status and dignity that it once held. Part of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the notion of making China great again stems from

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<sup>38</sup> Allison, G., *Destined for War: Can the US and China escape Thucydides’s Trap*, Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, New York, 2018.

overcoming the imperial legacies and re-establishing its own worth and power as the oldest continuous civilization on earth.

When one takes an in-depth look into the formulation of policies entailed by the ideal of making China great, there are several elements within such policies that concern the existing structure of power and influence in the region. While bearing a face of overcoming a century of humiliation, part of these efforts also point to the renewed commitment of the Chinese government, not only to bring its country forward in terms of economic prosperity and political stability, but to extend its power and influence in the region. As highlighted by Fairbank, the classical foreign policies of China included three most important components: “demands for regional dominance, insistence that neighboring countries recognize and respect China’s inherent superiority and willingness to use this dominance and superiority to orchestrate harmonious co-existence with its neighbors”.<sup>39</sup> The idea of exerting its power and dominance in its neighboring states has always been an integral part of Chinese foreign policy and it is the re-emergence of these principles that alarms its neighbors and their allies. As carefully assessed by Allison, the following is what is meant by “Make China Great Again:

*-Returning China to the predominance in Asia it enjoyed before the West intruded.*

*-Reestablishing control over the territories of “greater China” including not just Xinjiang and Tibet on the mainland, but also Hong Kong and Taiwan.*

*-Recovering its historic sphere of influence along its borders and in the adjacent seas so that others give it the deference great nations have always demanded.*

*-Commanding the respect of other great powers in the councils of the world.”<sup>40</sup>*

<sup>39</sup> Fairbank, John. “Introduction: Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience”, Harvard University Press, 1974.

<sup>40</sup> Allison, G., *Destined for War: Can the US and China escape Thucydides’s Trap*, Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, New York, 2018, 109.

### **Revisionist tendencies of Make China Great Again and the BRI**

The apparent revisionist intentions that hides behind the label of “Make China Great Again” is what directly or indirectly affects the ruling power, the United States, which has established its influence and power in the neighborhood of China. Firstly, returning China to predominance in Asia would entail a blow to the American influence that became established while China was absent from regional affairs. Secondly, the vision of regaining its sphere of influence in the seas has always been a controversial subject. China’s claim over the Nine-Dash Line in the South and East China Seas has caused a great uproar in the region as it directly intrudes upon the exclusive economic zones of many countries in the region. The assertion of the Nine-Dash Line and regaining its sphere of influence would push China to continue violating the sovereignty of these states and a blatant disrespect to the international laws as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. As China vehemently rejects the decision passed by the United Nations tribunal over the disputed territories in the South China Sea, it increasingly exposes its ability to unilaterally transgress international norms.

The expanding Chinese military activity in these disputed seas creates an unstable environment of heightened security in a region where the United States has vowed to stand in defense of its allies and security partners under mutual security agreements. Such an escalation increases the likelihood of conflict in the region. Alongside efforts to reestablish its authority over Hong Kong and Taiwan, China should also be reminded of the standoff it had in the Taiwan Strait Crisis in the 90s with the United States. The promotion of such foreign policies in the region reminds us of such episodes of standoffs that nearly brought military conflict to their doors. The projected implications of making China great again and realizing the “Chinese Dream” signals

revisionist intentions that demands a careful analysis of its actual and perceived threat and motives. From a realist standpoint, these policies and behaviors show how China has already positioned itself to challenge the current order and influence that the United States has established in the region over a long term.

### **From Sleeping Giant to Leading Giant? How China overtook US**

Some earlier scholars and leaders have referred to China as a sleeping giant, and when its time will arrive, it will take over the world. This paper assesses the rise of China and its aggressive and revisionist approach to its ascent that concerns the pre-existing dominant power in the region, the United States. As China has risen to prominence, many Western countries including the United States have been cautiously tracking the developments on the other side of the Pacific. Though the United States prides itself on being number one, there are various scholars whose assessments have instead pointed to the ways in which China has already overtaken the United States today. Lee Kwan Yew once mentioned that the magnitude of China's rise and its influence has meant that the world must find a new balance of power. Ultimately, it must be realized in our minds that China has secured itself a position and power that makes it "the biggest player in the history of the world".<sup>41</sup> The rapid economic growth of China has shown that it has "created a Greece every sixteen weeks and an Israel every twenty-five weeks".<sup>42</sup> The massive scale of economic development that has happened in China at such a rapid pace has shocked the international community. When a group of American students were asked about China's rise, they were shocked to learn that China has already surpassed the United States as the largest producer of computers,

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<sup>41</sup> Allison, G., *Destined for War: Can the US and China escape Thucydides's Trap*, 2018, Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, New York, 2018, 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

ships, cell phones, furniture, and textiles, making it the manufacturing powerhouse of the world.<sup>43</sup> Reinforcing this assessment of China's growth, when the International Monetary Fund published its annual growth report in 2014, an American news agency succinctly reported that "There's no easy way to say this, so I will just say it: We're no longer No.1".<sup>44</sup>

China's impressive growth in infrastructure and development has led to the creation of new and rapidly built accommodation for the millions it has lifted out of poverty in the last few decades. As Henry Kissinger recently said, recalling his state visits to China in the 80s, "if someone would say that Beijing would look like this today twenty-five years ago, I would say it is impossible."<sup>45</sup> The reality in China today has brought major transformations to mega-cities like Shenzhen, which used to be a small village of coastal China. Though Rome was not built in a day, the Chinese have somehow managed to build a 30-story building in less than fifteen days and a 57-story building in nineteen days.<sup>46</sup> In 2015, China also surpassed the United States as the country with the most billionaires, adding a new billionaire each week.<sup>47</sup> These developments have clearly shown the rate at which China is growing internally and the rising purchasing power of its citizens. Not only are these developments visible internally within China, but their effects can be seen in the way China has projected itself regionally and globally. In terms of China and its trading practices as seen internationally, it is becoming the largest trading partners of many countries around the world. While in Asia, Chinese trade with the members of Association of South East Asian Nations

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<sup>43</sup> Wen, Yi. "The Making of an Economic Superpower: Unlocking China's Secret of Rapid Industrialization", 2016, World Scientific Publishing.

<sup>44</sup> Arends, Brett, "It's Official: America is Now No.2", December 2014, Marketwatch. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/its-official-america-is-now-no-2-2014-12-04>

<sup>45</sup> Xinhua. "Beijing to Cut New Number of New Cars". October 2016, China Daily. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/25/content\\_27170185.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/25/content_27170185.htm)

<sup>46</sup> Macguire, Eoghan. "The Chinese Firm that Can Build a Skyscraper in a Matter of Weeks", CNN, 2015. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/26/asia/china-skyscraper-prefabricated/index.html>

<sup>47</sup> Frank, Robert. "China has More Billionaires Than US", CNBC, 2016. <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/02/24/china-has-more-billionaires-than-us-report.html>



(ASEAN) accounted for 15% of the total trade of ASEAN in 2015 while the United States only accounted for 9%.<sup>48</sup>

While the China-funded China Development Bank might have already taken over the World Bank as the biggest funder of development projects globally, its use of economic statecraft has consequences felt everywhere from Norway to the Philippines. As more countries become increasingly dependent on key imports from China and the attractive Chinese market for their exports, China often uses this economic advantage to punish states that come into disagreement and confrontation with China. Cutting out the entire salmon purchases from Norway while letting the Filipino bananas rot at the docks only because the Norwegians awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiabao and the Philippines took an issue of disputed territories with China to an international tribunal.<sup>49</sup> Coupled with their soft power, its expanding military capabilities through the initiative of the “Maritime Silk Road” has helped promote its \$1.4 trillion plan for the Belt and Road project, which is twelve times larger than the American Marshal Plan for the post-war reconstruction of Europe.<sup>50</sup> With such an advantage in economic leverage, its renewed leadership in various economic initiatives, and its expanding military capabilities across the world and most specifically in Asia, even the key allies of the United States are gradually shaking firm hands with China. As the former Special Envoy for North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, has said, “In the olden days when a crisis or issue arose, the first question Asian leaders always asked was:

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<sup>48</sup> Association of South East Asian Nations, External Trade Statistics, 2016. [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=external-trade-statistics-3](https://asean.org/?static_post=external-trade-statistics-3)

<sup>49</sup> Allison, G., *Destined for War: Can the US and China escape Thucydides’s Trap*, , Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, New York, 2018, 23.

<sup>50</sup> “Our Bulldozers, Our Rules” (2016), Economist, July 2016. <https://www.economist.com/china/2016/07/02/our-bulldozers-our-rules>

What does Washington think? Today, when something happens, they ask first: What does Beijing think?”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Allison, G., *Destined for War: Can the US and China escape Thucydides's Trap*, Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt,: New York, 2018, 24.

## Chapter Three: Is revisionist BRI a challenge to the American Influence in Asia?

*China is an economic threat for Southeast Asia. It is already a threat in terms of attracting foreign direct investment, and it is going to be a threat to Southeast Asia's world trade.*

*-Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, 2004*

*“Beijing's multibillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been called a Chinese Marshall Plan, a state-backed campaign for global dominance, a stimulus package for a slowing economy, and a massive marketing campaign for something that was already happening – Chinese investment around the world.”*

*-Lily Kuo & Niko Kommenda<sup>52</sup>*

This chapter will focus on answering the second research question: how does the revisionist Belt and Road Initiative of China pose a challenge to American influence in the region? It will introduce the official narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative and its proposed plans. It will then be pitted against the projected threat of economic and security risks that comes with the BRI. This section will also test the applicability of Mearsheimer's offensive realism on this dynamic in the region. Whether the threats that we foresee are real or merely perceived, they need a careful assessment to study how they affect American influence in the region.

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<sup>52</sup> Kommenda, Niko and Kuo, Lily. “What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?”, The Guardian. Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer>

## **Belt and Road Initiative: A Period of Chinese Hegemony?**

### *Official Narrative of BRI*

As set forth by the Chinese President Xi Jinping at Astana in 2013, the BRI is a one of a kind project that aims to strategically foster new financial, trade, and diplomatic relations with countries that are strategically placed under belts and roads. As Xi introduced the Belt and Road Initiative to the world, he envisioned an economic silk road that would essentially connect China to its economic partners from the Southeast Asian countries to the Baltics. The project is strategically aimed at promoting cooperation in key five areas: “coordinating policies; forging infrastructure and facilities networks; strengthening investment and trade relations; enhancing financial cooperation; and deepening social and cultural exchange”.<sup>53</sup>

In order to rapidly boost the infrastructure development in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and East Africa, the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) was built along these sea lanes.<sup>54</sup> This was also an effort to increase maritime cooperation and connectivity with the members of the Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN).<sup>55</sup> A project of this magnitude involves constructing railroads, highways, pipelines and building optical cables that will put China at the heart of global trade and development. This initiative also serves to deepen the regional integration with China as its leader while strengthening Chinese soft power in the region and beyond.<sup>56</sup>

The presidency of Xi Jinping has marked a period of forward-looking foreign policies that put the Belt and Road Initiative at the heart of these major shifts. In many of his speeches, one can

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<sup>53</sup> Boshi, Johnston. “The Costs and Benefits of China’s Belt and Road Initiative”, Asian Correspondent, 2018. <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2018/11/the-costs-and-benefits-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>

<sup>54</sup> Michael, J. Green. “China’s Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region”, The Center for Strategic International Studies, April 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-maritime-silk-road>

<sup>55</sup> Rolland, Nadege. “A Concise Guide to the Belt and Road Initiative”. National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019. <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-guide-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>

<sup>56</sup> Lazslo, Gere. “The Effects of the AIIB on the Multilateral Development Banks’ System”, May 2018. <http://www.geopolitika.hu/en/2018/05/16/the-effects-of-the-aiib-on-the-multilateral-development-banks-system/>

most certainly hear the sentiment of making China the respectable and powerful nation it once was. He envisions China regaining this status through the promotion of trans-continental initiatives like the Belt and Road. Over land, the initiative aims to connect Eurasia through a new ‘Eurasian Land Bridge,’ as this project will cross the proposed China-Central Asia-West Asia, China-Mongolia-Russia and China-Indo-China Peninsula economic corridors by utilizing key international transport routes along the corridors while using ‘economic industrial parks’ as cooperation platforms.<sup>57</sup> Alongside the land connectivity, connecting major sea ports across the Maritime Silk Road will provide smooth and efficient routes to advance business and trade opportunities across the oceans. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and Bangladesh-India-China-Myanmar Economic Corridor lies at the heart of the Maritime Silk Road, of which CPEC currently functions as the first active economic corridor that has a proposed \$40bi worth of bilateral investments in building highways, trains, ports and pipelines.<sup>58</sup> As the government of Pakistan reflects on the ongoing progress of the CPEC projects in Pakistan, it emphasizes that it has improved roads, rail and air transportation systems with exchanges of knowledge, culture, people to people contact, while enhancing a higher volume of business and trade across the country that promotes “cooperation with a win-win model that embraces a more integrated region of shared destiny, harmony and development”.<sup>59</sup> According to an analysis published by Euler Hermes, the countries that are involved in the Belt and Road Initiative account for 68 percent of the entire

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<sup>57</sup>“Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, National Development and Reform Commission, March 2015.

[http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330\\_669367.html](http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html)

<sup>58</sup> Rana, Shahbaz. “Pakistan to Pay China \$40bn on \$26.5bn CPEC Investments sin 20 Years”, The Express Tribune, December 2018. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1874661/2-pakistan-pay-china-40-billion-20-years/>

<sup>59</sup> China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Government of Pakistan. <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>

world's population, while the economies of the countries involved in this initiative are estimated to grow by US\$117 billion this year.<sup>60</sup>

As the leaders of the world convened in Beijing this May 2019, to participate in the second Belt and Road Forum, Xi has not missed the opportunity to make another powerful statement to sustain the growing interest being shown by country partners and multinational corporations. As he stood on the podium, he praised the prospects of a shared future for Asia and humanity while fostering a cooperative environment by “treating each other with respect and as equals; appreciating the beauty of all civilizations; adhering to openness, inclusiveness, mutual learning; and keeping pace with times”.<sup>61</sup> He emphasizes that one should advocate for a “Silk Road Spirit”, one that aspires to peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit.<sup>62</sup> Chinese government official narrative of the BRI has been a positive portrayal of the projects and proposed success it is destined to achieve. It emphasizes the roads, transportation hubs, and other facilities that it will bring to help deepen cooperation with different countries.

However, growing doubts about its intents and the long-term implications of this model has equally attracted a mounting concern from countries around the world. The language of a win-win approach and its renewed leadership in these growing projects resonates with the sentiment of achieving the Chinese dream in realizing China's “rightful place” in the world. Xi's shift from the previously moderate and cautious foreign policy to the pursuit of achieving global leadership

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Delaney. “China's island-building China's island-building and ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are part of same defence strategy, says US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo”, South China Morning Post, March 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3003767/chinas-island-building-and-belt-and-road-initiative-are-part>

<sup>61</sup> BRI website. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/90752.htm>

<sup>62</sup> “Xi Attends Opening of Conference on dialogue of Asian civilizations”. Belt and Road Portal, May, 2019. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/90752.htmhttps://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydylgw/201706/201706200153032.pdf>

through the Belt and Road not only aims to promote economic initiatives but also to project power overseas as the Chinese military increasingly becomes capable of doing.<sup>63</sup>

Beyond these attractive investments, there are several ways in which these trade initiatives in Asia specifically pose as a challenge to American power and influence in the region. Overall as we assess these developments in relation to the BRI's revisionism and their effects on American influence, we must look critically through two key lenses: economic and security risks. As the rise of China becomes apparent most significantly through their leadership in the Belt and Road Initiative, key economic and security interests of the United States are challenged in Asia. Beyond the official narrative of the Chinese government, the economic and security implications remain a concern to many of the countries in the Asia-Pacific today.

### **Economic and Security Challenges:**

When we look at the Chinese military developments in the East and South China Seas, one must not view it independently of the developments of the Belt and Road projects in Asia, and most specifically in the area of the East and South China Seas. It is equally important to observe such developments from an offensive realist lens, as revisionism and competition are at the core of these phenomena. When China launched the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the shortage of funding and investments in the developing states across the region of the Indo-Asia-Pacific meant a wide welcome for the proposals brought up by China. However, along with these investments, there were numerous projects all across the Indo-Pacific that included the construction of a number of port-development projects which have raised concerns about whether the construction of these ports as a part of the wider BRI projects is economically driven or harbors military intentions.

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<sup>63</sup> Ratner, Ely. *Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, January, 2018.

Among such suppositions, there are four ways in which the Belt and Road projects not only signal revisionist intentions but pose as a challenge to the promotion of American interests in the region.

Firstly, among MSR recipient countries in the South China Sea, there are several countries with pending disputes in the South China Sea against the Chinese territorial claims. As China continues to advance militarily in the disputed seas while bringing trade and investment opportunities in these countries, China could use a strategic geoeconomic approach to silence these claims over the disputed territories. A greater legitimacy of the Chinese over these disputed seas could also limit American vessels to exercise Freedom of Navigation and promote a “free and open” Indo-Pacific.

Secondly, the vast investment in the region also raises the probability of China to exercise its leverage over the domestic and foreign policies of the recipient countries which are highly indebted.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, cases of debt-trap diplomacy are projected to be a continuing trend of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Thirdly, through the wider militarization of the seas and expanding territorial claims, China is slowly pushing the United States out of the region. Increasingly, the “string of pearls,” projected by the U.S. Department of Defense as a security threat posed by China through the development of ports across the Indian ocean surrounding India, brings the U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (otherwise known as Quad) to a careful revision of their approach in the Indian ocean.

Lastly, the establishment of new institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Silk Road Fund that were built alongside the Belt and Road Initiative are becoming rivals to the US-supported Asian Development Bank and World Bank in the region. The Maritime Silk

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<sup>64</sup> Michael, J. Green. “China’s Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region”, The Center for Strategic International Studies, April 2018.  
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-maritime-silk-road>



Road therefore directly poses as a challenge to United States dominance in the region while affecting its economic partnerships and bilateral relationships with the members of APEC.<sup>65</sup> China is gradually seen in the region to be taking offensive approaches towards the disruption of regional security dynamics with its aggressive geoeconomic and military advancements.

*Disputes in the islands: Is BRI a way to justify China's militarization of the seas?*

The United States are a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of Seas (UNCLOS), and it has become a vital instrument to exercise its power and influence in the Asia-Pacific. Most importantly, in the disputed territories of the East and South China Seas, the United States has continued to deploy its vessels under Freedom of Navigation (FON) as permitted by the UNCLOS. As per this international convention, each country has the power to exert full sovereignty over the waters extending from their lands up to 12 nautical miles, while maintaining control of the exclusive economic zone over 200 nautical miles.<sup>66</sup> This is a standard that has been agreed by the international community to conduct commercial and other engagements in the seas. However, when we turn our attention to the South China Sea, there have always been contentions over territorial claims in the seas where international conventions like the UNCLOS have little meaning to the Chinese. In territories thousands of miles away from Beijing, China has still exerted their claim in the South China Sea under the vaguely defined concept of the 'Nine-Dash line' whose legitimacy is suspect. Beijing's claim over the "Nine-Dash line" goes beyond 2000km from the mainland of China and falls within less than 100km from the Philippines, Vietnam and

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<sup>65</sup> Prabhakar L.S. Williams, "The Clash of Interests: Issues of the US Pivot to Asia and China's Maritime Silk Road", 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 167.

<sup>66</sup> Liu Zhen. "What's China's 'Nine Dash Lines' and why has it created so much tension in the South China Sea", South China Morning Post, July, 2016. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1988596/whats-chinas-nine-dash-line-and-why-has-it-created-so>

Malaysia and encompasses up to 90% of the contested waters.<sup>67</sup> Till this day, China's aggressive expansion in these waters has caused high tension in the region while questioning American presence in the seas.

Recently in a public statement, the United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has clearly highlighted that the Chinese are investing in infrastructure projects in the South China Sea “not because they want freedom of navigation” or to be “good shipbuilders and stewards of waterways” but these actions clearly carry national security elements which are no different than the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>68</sup> Such an alarming statement by the American foreign policy chief also resonates with the increasing deployment of warship and aircraft patrols by the U.S. navy and air force in the South China Sea as an American reaction to promote a greater “free and open” Indo-Pacific which remains a key interest of the United States in the region. The Maritime Silk Road was in many ways born out of a direct response to the American Pivot in the region as the geographical scope of the Maritime Silk Road encompasses the U.S. vision for the Indo-Pacific construct.<sup>69</sup> As the United States has started to focus on re-energizing its security interests in the region, China has introduced a new “Asian Security Architecture” that aims to solve regional security issues through a regionally led initiative that pushes the United States out of the picture. However even to this day, China still has claims over four-fifths of the territories in the disputed area of the South China Sea (as seen in Figure 1) which is not only a home to the world's busiest

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<sup>67</sup> Liu Zhen. “What's China's ‘Nine Dash Lines’ and why has it created so much tension in the South China Sea”, South China Morning Post, July, 2016. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1988596/whats-chinas-nine-dash-line-and-why-has-it-created-so>

<sup>68</sup> Robert Delaney. “China's island-building China's island-building and ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are part of same defence strategy, says US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo”, South China Morning Post, March 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3003767/chinas-island-building-and-belt-and-road-initiative-are-part>

<sup>69</sup> Mahapatra, Chintamani. “One Belt, One Road: China, US and the Emerging Hegemonic Struggle in Asia”, 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 184.

shipping lanes but an expanding military base for the Chinese.<sup>70</sup> Even after the signing of a Code of Conduct between the Philippines and China in 1995, China has developed several reefs within the Spratly archipelago as a future naval base and has today transformed these into military outposts that have defense capabilities equipped with anti-aircraft and naval guns.<sup>71</sup> meanwhile, on Woody island, they have successfully built a pier and concrete airstrip that is large enough to accommodate all types of aircraft including bombers, transport and aerial-refueling tankers of the People's Liberation Army.<sup>72</sup> These developments in the disputed territories most clearly signal offensive approaches to militarization of the seas.

As another indication of the shift in power dynamics and increasing territorial assertiveness of the Chinese, an American Navy P-8 maritime patrol was intercepted in international airspace by a Chinese fighter plane hundreds of miles away from Hainan Island in 2014. With the United States having recently entered into an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines, it was only exercising its support for its allies in the airspace.<sup>73</sup> The Chinese claims to the disputed islands in the South China Sea suggests that they are interested in exploiting “untapped energy reserves and strategic military outposts”.<sup>74</sup> Alongside these developments, China has also refused to accept the decision of the United Nations-backed tribunal over the disputed territories in the South China Sea and eventually stopped American naval and air-force vessels from entering the exclusive economic zones, which is a clear violation of the United Nations Convention of the Law of Seas. As China gains political and military muscle in the global

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<sup>70</sup> Marwah, R. “Interrogating Competing Claims in South East Asia: The South China Sea or the West Philippine Sea”, 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 195.

<sup>71</sup> Pradt, Tilman. *China's New Foreign Policy: Military Modernization, Multilateralism and 'China Threat'* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Marwah, R. “Interrogating Competing Claims in South East Asia: The South China Sea or the West Philippine Sea”, 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 197.

<sup>74</sup> Shannon Tiezzi. “China Discovers Gas Field in the South China Sea”, The Diplomat, September 2014. <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/china-discovers-gas-field-in-the-south-china-sea/>

order, it is testing its capabilities in a region surrounded by key American allies which spikes security competition in the region. With increasing investments in countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan, China is using its economic leverage to silence and coercively punish them as they contest their rightful claims to the islands. China is already seen employing carrots and sticks to force American allies and partners to reduce their security engagement with the United States.<sup>75</sup> In these island disputes involving U.S. allies and partners, several security analysts have mentioned that China is specifically picking fights with American allies to test the US's commitment to upholding the “law by proxy, in steps small enough to make retaliation difficult”.<sup>76</sup>

As China begins to exert its power using such tactics, it is rapidly becoming more dominant in the region while making it increasingly difficult for the Americans to promote a “free and open” Indo-Pacific. Most importantly, China's territorial strategy is to push the American navy out of the “first island chain” which comprises Japan, the Greater Sunda islands, and Taiwan.<sup>77</sup> If China was to successfully implement this strategy through the use of the Belt and Road projects and coercive economic actions, a territory encompassing the East China sea, Yellow sea, and South China Sea will be blocked to the U.S. Navy, making it impossible to reach Korea in a likely time of war.<sup>78</sup> There are also on-going discussions in China to push the U.S. Navy out of the “second island chain,” comprising Guam and the Philippines. This could result in cutting off American naval support to its mutual defense treaty allies and its own overseas territories in the Pacific.<sup>79</sup> This chain of events directly resonates with Mearsheimer's predictions on the stand-offs that the United

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<sup>75</sup> Ratner, Ely. *Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, January, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> “Your Rules or Mine?” The Economist, November 2014. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2014/11/13/your-rules-or-mine>

<sup>77</sup> Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris Jennifer M. *War by Other Means*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2016, 112.

<sup>78</sup> Mearsheimer, J. “Can China Rise Peacefully?”, The National Interest, October, 2014 <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>

<sup>79</sup> Cronin, “The Strategic Significance of the South China sea”.

States and China will face over their control of Asia for the long-term as China tightens its grip over the region while raising the possibility of embarking on a path towards war. At such a rapid pace, China has not only been able to escalate militarily in the region, it has managed to pair such escalation with a full spectrum of measures that range from “geo-economic pressure-positive to coercive to forthrightly punitive”.<sup>80</sup>

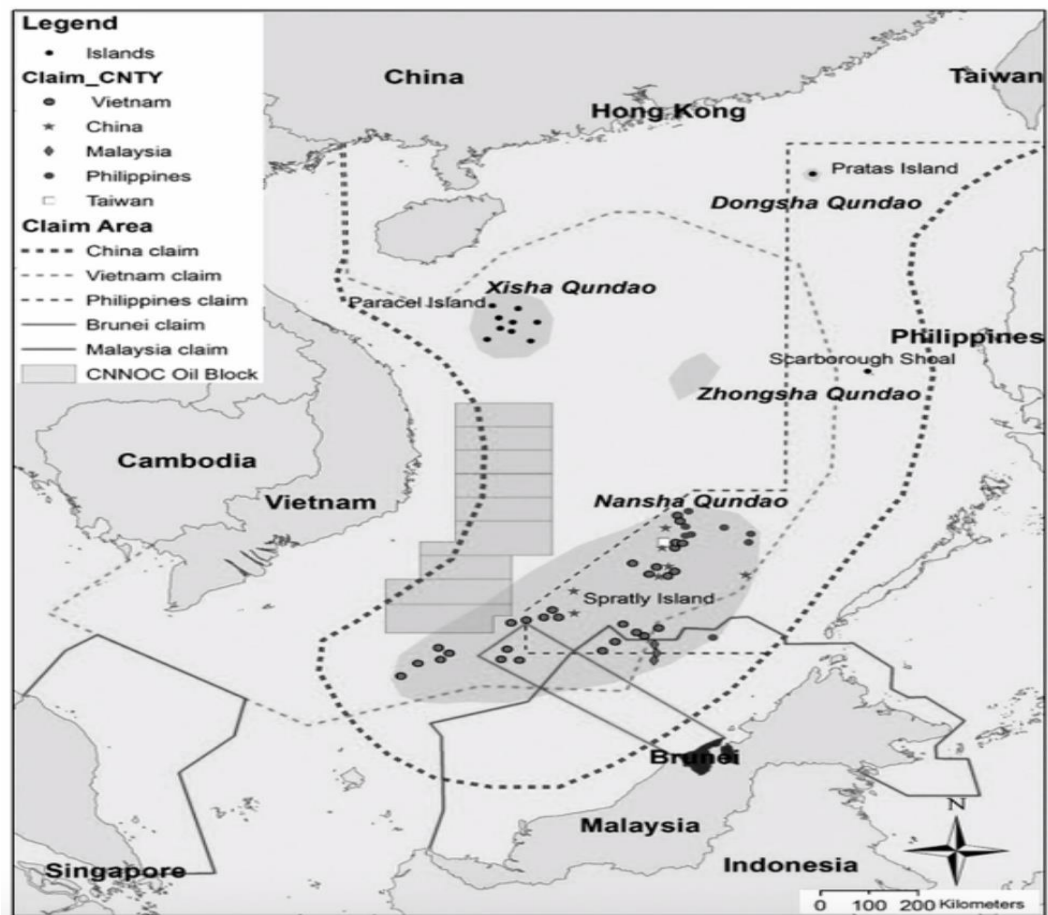


Figure1. Conflicting Claims in SCS

<sup>80</sup> Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris Jennifer M. *War by Other Means*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2016, 112.

*Carrot and Stick & Debt-Trap Diplomacy: China's new face of revisionism?*

Contested claims in the seas have shown the evolving behavior of China over the decades. Today, when China is questioned about the legitimacy of its claim in the South or East China Seas, repercussions in the form of costly retribution are increasingly becoming a feature of Chinese foreign policies. Xi's presidency is often marked by such policies that are formulated within the broader context of a geoeconomics strategy to put China at the "center of global economic activity, strength and influence".<sup>81</sup> According to Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris in their book *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, geoeconomics is 'the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests and to produce geopolitical results; and the effects of another nation's economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals'.<sup>82</sup> China has frequently used such tactics to encourage American allies and partners to steer away from American influence in the region. When the South Koreans decided to deploy the American supplied THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense) system, China promoted a boycott of South Korean goods, culture, and tourism through state media, which caused a dent in the South Korean economy.<sup>83</sup> Such a pattern of geoeconomic strategies are not new to American allies in the region. When Japan contested their claims on Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2010 against the claims of China by arresting a Chinese captain, China stopped the shipment of rare earth oxides, rare earth salts, and pure rare earth metals to Japan.<sup>84</sup> These are key elements of electrical components used in the Japanese manufacturing industry that the Americans and Europeans rely on. Following this escalation between the two countries, Japanese exports to China fell by 14 percent in September 2012, while

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<sup>81</sup> Johnson, Chris. "President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative", Center for Strategic International Studies, March 2016. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/president-xi-jinping's-belt-and-road-initiative>

<sup>82</sup> Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris Jennifer M. *War by Other Means*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Golley, Jane. and Ingle, Adam. "The Belt and Road Initiative: How to Win Friends and Influence People", ANU Press, 2018. in *The China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, Golley, Jane and Jaivin, Linda. ANU Press, 2018, 49.

<sup>84</sup> Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris Jennifer M. *War by Other Means*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2016.

overall Japanese exports sank 10.3 percent.<sup>85</sup> Some analysts have rightfully pointed out that these bold geo-economic steps against Japan are in fact skillfully aimed at the Americans. Ultimately, Beijing has sent a strong message to the United States that it is no longer fearful of targeting a U.S. treaty ally.

These geo-economic tactics used against American allies in the region are clearly revisionist in their nature as China continues to mobilize such patterns of action against American allies and partners that are recipients of the Belt and Road Initiative in the region. In Southeast Asia, China primarily positions its geo-economic actions to achieve three main objectives: “imposing costs on countries that cross China on territorial disputes, disrupting U.S. system of alliances in Asia, and keeping old friends close”.<sup>86</sup> In the Philippines today, Duterte has signed a number of infrastructure cooperation agreements with China under the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>87</sup>

However, the implications of the Philippines disputes with China over the islands in the South China Seas has already painted a grim picture of their future relation. In 2012, when the Philippines arrested Chinese fishermen at the disputed Scarborough Shoal, China took the decision to stop 150 containers of bananas from the Philippines which cost the Filipino farmers \$760,000.<sup>88</sup>

This later turned into a chain of events that eventually slowed the process of inspection of various other tropical fruits that the Philippines supply to their big markets in China. As these geo-economic strategies affected 30 percent of Filipino fruit exports, China has additionally discouraged Chinese tourism to the Philippines as well.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, the Philippines had to retreat

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<sup>85</sup> Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris Jennifer M. *War by Other Means*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2016, 110.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>87</sup> Estrada D. V. “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for the Philippines”, The Foreign Service Institute of the Republic of Philippines. March 2018, 5(3). <http://www.fsi.gov.ph/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-implications-for-the-philippines/>

<sup>88</sup> Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris Jennifer M. *War by Other Means*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2016, 112.

<sup>89</sup> Corr, Anders S. and Tacujan, Priscila A. “Chinese Political and Economic Influence in Philippines: Implications for Alliances and the South China Sea Dispute”, *Journal of Political Risk* 1(3), July 2013.

their ships from the Scarborough Shoal to have the economically coercive burdens lifted. Vietnam, alongside the Philippines, have also softened their tone on the South China Sea as Chinese trade with ASEAN members has reached \$350 billion in 2013, while bilateral trade of China with the Philippines has risen to \$36.4 billion and to \$40 billion with Vietnam. These events have reinforced the assertion of Mearsheimer that states will behave aggressively to preserve their own security interests. With an increasing pool of investments from Beijing, American allies and partners in the region are rapidly drawn into an inevitably coercive sphere of economic influence that forces the countries to sacrifice their security and territorial integrity.

*String of pearls: Can the Quad tackle the growing Chinese influence in the Indian ocean?*

Military rebalancing in the Indo-Pacific has been one of the key strategies of the United States under the Pivot. As China advances itself in the Pacific and Indian Ocean with its Belt and Road projects today, there are a growing number of concerns and threats projected that alarm the United States and its partners in the region. In the Indo-Pacific region, Chinese investments under the Belt and Road Initiative have manifested in a renewed interest in the Indian ocean. China's active search for partners in the Indian ocean for providing port facilities along the coasts has sparked concerns over China's intentions to secure sea lanes in the Indian ocean. As India remains an important member of the Quad and a key U.S. security partner in the Indo-Pacific, India treats these developments as Chinese interference in the Indian sphere of influence which has implications for the American presence in the region.<sup>90</sup> Over the last few years, China has already engaged in port modernization projects and constructed several new ports along the Indian ocean in Myanmar (Hianggy, Akab, and Mergui), Bangladesh (Chittagong), Pakistan (Gwader), and Sri Lanka

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<sup>90</sup> Pradt, Tilman. *China's New Foreign Policy: Military Modernization, Multilateralism and 'China Threat'* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2016, 26.



(Hambantota).<sup>91</sup> China views these port establishment projects as purely defensive and an essential component in carrying out the greater BRI projects in the region. However, the construction of these ports geographically encircles India and creates the threat projection called the ‘String of Pearls’. In a report published by the Center for Land Warfare Studies, Narender Kumar writes that Chinese “investments may not be principally driven by the concept of win-win development. Maritime infrastructure investment is inherently dual-use and is capable of furthering both legitimate business activities and military operations”.<sup>92</sup> As these ports become a part of the overseas economic zones of China, the autonomy of the littoral states over their ports becomes less visible and the greater assertion of China’s economic and military operation becomes more likely.

Political opponents in Sri Lanka have protested the Sri Lankan government on leasing the Hambantota port to China for a 99-year lease, citing fear of a gradual erosion of sovereignty.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, Pakistan has handed over the port construction of Gwadar to a Chinese company on a lease for 40 years.<sup>94</sup> As China gains a greater control over these ports, it is essentially a forgone conclusion that the Chinese will “demand shared sovereignty over the projects and railroads networks.”<sup>95</sup> And while China’s People’s Liberation Army advances its search for military bases overseas, the army and the People’s Armed Police will take advantage of the BRI recipient countries.<sup>96</sup> These scenarios can result in China taking control of major transportation facilities

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>92</sup> Naernder Kumar. “Belt and Road Initiative: A Potential Threat to the Region and Eurasia”, Center for Land Warfare Studies, August 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Nygren, Bertll. “The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin’s Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries”, Rutledge: London and New York, 2008.

<sup>94</sup> “Gwadar Port Leased to Chinese company for 40 years, Minister tells Senate”, Pakistan Today, April 2017. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/04/20/gwadar-port-leased-to-chinese-company-for-40-years-minister-tells-senate/>

<sup>95</sup> Naernder Kumar. “Belt and Road Initiative: A Potential Threat to the Region and Eurasia”, Center for Land Warfare Studies, August 2018, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Jennings, Ralph. “China May Consider These Countries for Its Next Overseas Military Base”, Forbes, October 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphjennings/2017/10/10/china-is-most-likely-to-open-future-military-bases-in-these-3-countries/>

like “sea ports and airports, in exchange for Chinese investment and debt forgiveness”.<sup>97</sup> One can see such scenarios playing out in the Indo-Pacific countries like Sri Lanka, while Myanmar and Pakistan remain vulnerable to fall into similar situations. As China acquires greater access to these ports in the region, “increased amphibious capabilities and power projection forces” become more apparent.<sup>98</sup> The String of Pearls comprises harbors strategically situated in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Hainan, China. Although these ports are not yet military in nature, they however contribute to China’s power projection capabilities in the Indo-Pacific which continues to provoke fear and insecurity in the Indian Ocean and most specifically in India. These factors disrupt the regional security dynamics, causing great anxiety and raising security in the Indian Ocean while signaling offensive military projections through these potential military advancements. As an active member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and an important strategic partner of the United States, India has continued to work together with the US to tackle such growing threats in its neighborhood. However, with the Chinese naval forces gaining access to the Indian ocean, their military will develop capabilities to protect and disrupt vital shipping lanes in the region as they advance submarines and anti-submarine warfare capabilities that represent security challenges to an American security partner surrounded by potential Chinese military power projections on their doorstep.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>Ratner, Ely. *Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, January, 2018.

<sup>98</sup>Pradt, Tilman. *China’s New Foreign Policy: Military Modernization, Multilateralism and ‘China Threat’* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2016, 52.

<sup>99</sup> Ratner, Ely. *Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, January 2018.

*AIIB and CDB: Is China pushing out the US by 'Asianizing Asia'?*

The construction of the Belt and Road projects has introduced various financial institutions both new and old, that are now active in funding development and infrastructure projects globally. As China launched these initiatives, it has also made an effort to assert itself in the region by normatively provoking sentiments of 'Asia for Asians'. Such sentiments gradually prevailed at a time when the United States was rebalancing its policies in the Indo-Pacific. While China pursues the greater integration of regional countries under its influence, it has strategically used the Belt and Road Initiative to guide the path forward. With a massive financial and trade surplus, China has created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund with an intent to serve as an alternative to the American supported World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank. Not surprisingly, BRI introduces unique economic development promises that come with no-conditionality clauses in regards to environmental restrictions and political institutions while paving the way for authoritarian regimes that do not subscribe to such regulations of the Bretton Woods institutions.<sup>100</sup> As more countries are drawn to these projects and initiatives, key American allies like France, Great Britain, and Germany have already become a part of the AIIB despite opposition from the US.<sup>101</sup> Today, Beijing's "alternative institutions" have established partnership and co-finance arrangements with almost all the highly reputed multinational development banks, comprising the African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.<sup>102</sup> Alongside the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund, Beijing has also offered

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<sup>100</sup> Prabhakar L.S. Williams, "The Clash of Interests: Issues of the US Pivot to Asia and China's Maritime Silk Road", 2018, in B.R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road*, Springer Nature: Singapore, 2018, 171.

<sup>101</sup> Zarolli, Jim. "New Asian Development Bank Seen as China's Growing Influence", 2015, NPR.

<sup>102</sup> Feigenbaum, Evan A. "Reluctant stakeholder: Why China's Highly Strategic Brand of Revisionism is More Challenging Than Washington Thinks", Marco Polo. April, 2018.

<http://www.fsi.gov.ph/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-implications-for-the-philippines/>

opportunities to finance BRI projects with the BRICS New Development Bank, the China-ASEAN Interbank Association and the SCO Interbank Association and sovereign wealth funds while gradually making the American supported financial institutions less relevant in the region.

One of the two key policies of the United States Pivot to Asia is the increasing engagements in commercial and economic relations in the Asia-Pacific with an emphasis on multilateral frameworks. As a part of this vision, the United States has brought the Asia-Pacific members together on working to achieve the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This was an important effort to secure American economic interests in the region while also challenging China's growing influence in the APEC member countries. However, the United States' retreat from the TPP has fueled perceptions of American protectionism across the region while portraying a less engaging US in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>103</sup> In this sense, the United States has a greater price to pay for creating a space and then leaving a vacuum. Additionally, the American dollar value could be affected in the long run as the Chinese government is encouraging more countries and companies along the BRI to issue renminbi bonds.<sup>104</sup> As a result, an increasing number of countries in the region could begin to conduct their bilateral trade with China in renminbi instead of dollars. This phenomenon suggests that the American dollar value could depreciate in the long run if this trend continues.

In other parts of the Indo-Pacific region, countries have struggled to pay back Chinese loans while gradually becoming indebted to China and losing parts of their sovereignty as a consequence. The Hambantota port of Sri Lanka is a classic example of how the Belt and Road Initiative could go south. The inability of Sri Lanka to pay back the Chinese loan has cost them a

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<sup>103</sup>Feigenbaum, Evan A. "Reluctant stakeholder: Why China's Highly Strategic Brand of Revisionism is More Challenging Than Washington Thinks", Marco Polo. April, 2018.

<sup>104</sup>Estrada D. V. "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for the Philippines", The Foreign Service Institute of the Republic of Philippines. March 2018, 5(3). <http://www.fsi.gov.ph/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-implications-for-the-philippines/>

hefty price. The process of negotiations on the repayment of their debt has led Sri Lanka to forcibly lease the port of Hambantota to China for the next 99 years. This example of so called “debt-trap diplomacy” has raised concerns in all the major developing countries along the BRI. As Chinese investments increase in the region through the Belt and Road initiative, more and more countries, including American allies, are likely to defy their national security interests in order to cater to the Chinese demands for economic purposes.<sup>105</sup> While the Chinese acquire an higher-level playing field in the region and a more dominant influence, the demise of American influence in Asia becomes less distant.

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<sup>105</sup> Ratner, Ely. *Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, January 2018.

## Conclusion:

Win-win development has been a slogan of the Chinese government in recent years. Though China claims to promote such outcomes in their trade and economic initiatives globally, the reality is quite different in practice. The growing revisionist nature of Chinese foreign policies has helped us understand that the Belt and Road Initiative itself is an extension of such revisionism. The official narrative of the Belt and Road established by close analysis of the information offered by government sources is quite the opposite of analysis drawn from scholars and practitioners with expertise in the field. As the Chinese government advances its BRI projects across the Indo-Pacific, it will continue to challenge American influence and power in the region.

Xi Jinping's presidency has marked an era of a new brand of foreign policies that went from hiding one's capacities to a much more assertive role in regional and global engagements. His flagship campaign to 'Make China Great Again' and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has helped instill a sense of national pride and a justification of more revisionist and expansionist behavior towards its neighboring countries. The idea of exerting power and dominance in its neighboring states are not a new direction for China. In fact, these visions and actions have always been an integral part of Chinese foreign policies and this is only a re-emergence of such principles that alarms its neighbors and their allies. It has thus become apparent that the vision of the 'Chinese Dream' and the 'rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' harbors clear revisionist intentions. A careful analysis of this vision has shown that China has already positioned itself to challenge the current order that the United States has established in the region over the long term.

The Belt and Road Initiative has manifested itself as an extension of such revisionist policies that has clear intentions of disrupting American influence in Asia. The Maritime Silk Road was aimed at directly countering the United States' reorientation in the Indo-Pacific. Chinese

investments in the Maritime Silk Road countries are also directed at silencing claims over disputed territories in the East and South China Seas. Close American allies and security partners are gradually falling victim to such coercion that limits the US's exercise of Freedom of Navigation in order to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific. The vast investment of the BRI in the region also questions the increasing possibility of China to exercise its leverage over the domestic and foreign policies of the recipient countries which are highly indebted.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, cases of debt-trap diplomacy are projected to be a continuing trend of the Belt and Road. As China muscles out the United States from the Indo-Pacific, it is rapidly building ports and other facilities surrounding key American security partners like India. Such constructions have raised concerns over the military projection capabilities of the People's Liberation Army in ostensibly commercial ports in the Indian ocean. While looking at the mechanisms of the Belt and Road Initiative, the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund have stood in competition against the American supported IMF and World Bank in the region for infrastructure and development projects. Therefore, the Maritime Silk Road poses a challenge to American dominance in the region as it affects economic and security partnership of the member states with the US.

These developments also help us better understand the projections made by neo-realist thinkers like Mearsheimer on the relations between the United States and China. As proposed by Mearsheimer, the United States and China will encounter face-offs in the process of acquiring greater control over Asia. China's increased militarization of the seas alongside its coercive geoeconomic measures have spurred an even greater competition for power in the region. In order to preserve its vital security and economic interests in the region, the United States has begun initiatives like the 'Pivot to Asia,' to which China has responded by bringing vast trade,

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<sup>106</sup> CSIS on maritime Silk Road <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-maritime-silk-road>

investment, and infrastructure projects across the region. While the United States asserts its presence in the Indo-Pacific by exercising Freedom of Navigation, China enforces an air defense identification zone, harassing American naval vessels in the East China Sea. With even greater coercive geoeconomic measures against American allies and partners, the US is facing an increasing challenge to promote its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. All these complications add to the shifting dynamic of order and security in the region amidst a continuing security dilemma that points to a greater assertion of power and influence from both sides. At the heart of such events lies the Belt and Road Initiative that serves as the benchmark for a revisionist China. The BRI has clearly written off all arguments proposed by China as to its genuine integration in the global order. If we fail to look at these developments from a realist point of view, we might underestimate China's revisionism in the region. This reinforces the argument made by Mearsheimer that China will entangle itself in a security dilemma with the United States, leading these two countries on a war path. However, conventional war between the two nuclear powers may not be foreseeable. A war could manifest in non-conventional form such as trade war and cyber war that could politically and economically affect each other's standing globally. One can witness trade sanctions and sanctions on theft of intellectual property already being imposed on China as a response to its revisionist rise. This could be a trend of what may define war between the two super powers, however the possibility of a full-blown conventional war remains low.

However, the challenges that China itself faces to promote the Belt and Road projects globally should not be neglected. Emerging political and economic scenarios in the Indo-Pacific region have led several countries in the region to suspend and withdraw certain projects under the BRI. The fluid political environment and changes in leadership in the region have failed to transpire strong and consistent policies towards the Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, China



is spearheading projects in parts of the world where instability and terrorism are often entangled. The attacks on the Chinese Consulate Office in Karachi by Balochi militant groups have already sparked concerns for the safety and security of Chinese interests and nationals abroad. If the projects result in mounting debt and wasted resources, alongside growing repression against its own Muslim population in Xinjiang, it could broaden the possibility of extremist attacks against the Chinese. These projects also involve regimes with high corruption, low labor standards, and environmental damages that China has to tackle in this pursuit.

Most importantly, as we reflect the current American standing in the Indo-Pacific, there are several ways in which the United States can position itself to advance its interests. At a time when the United States have retrieved from TPP and the Pivot has almost lost its relevance, it is ever more important to re-center the focus on the region while assuring a sense of renewed confidence and security for its allies and partners in the region.

### **Recommendations**

**Re-engaging in the Trans-Pacific Partnership:** TPP was perceived as one of the most important American economic leadership in Asia at the time. Trump's withdrawal from this important initiative have seriously questioned the American partnership and cooperation in the region. Though the Trump administration is currently pursuing a policy of promoting "free and open Indo-Pacific" as a counter-narrative to the Belt and Road advancement, an absence of economic approach could reap little success. Paired with its military engagement in the region, a wider economic engagement under the same framework of TPP could assure American allies and partners a confidence to continue their relation with the United States. While, allowing the United States to regain its strength and influence in the region.

**Countering Chinese expansionist behavior in the South China Seas:** China's revisionist engagements in the South China Seas have alerted many of the regional American allies and partners on their rightful sovereignty to their territories. Recent Chinese effort to push United States out of the first island chain could pose long term challenge to the promotion of both economic and security interests in the region. Through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, China seemed to have found a resolve for the "Malacca Dilemma" escaping American control over the Chinese gas imports through the strait of Malacca. While such development grows, United States should consider containing Chinese expansion in the South China Seas, as failure to do so could not only jeopardize its influence and relations with countries in the South China Seas but its partnership in the Indian Ocean as well.

**Expanding ties with India for stronger Indo-Pacific partnership:** As a key partner of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, United States should open space for Indian military to get access to the United States International Military Education and Training Program (IMET) for strategic educational and military training. There should be a consistent effort to engage India within the American alliance diplomatic circles and military exercises in the region. Greater cooperation in the Indian ocean could help tackle the BRI port development projects that harbors military intentions.

**Initiating information promotion platforms especially within allies and partners:** As Chinese government uses its state led media and other information platform to advance the government-oriented information on the Belt and Road Initiative, the United States should lead its effort to bring about more realistic picture of the initiative. Along with the State Department and the Department of Defense, there should be a concerted approach to work with its allies and partners in the region to voice concerns about the realities of BRI. A well-coordinated media and

information campaign could allow the region to realize the challenges and losses it could bring to the countries.

**Strengthening the capacity-building programs for the BRI countries:** Ultimately, it is a reality that there are no immediate alternative initiatives that could replace BRI projects today. Given that there are several American allies and partners who are recipients of the BRI projects, it is imperative for the United States to assure that these countries do not fall into coercive debt-repayment schemes. Such events build vacuum for China to advance its political and security agendas as a form of debt-repayment process. Regional and multilateral institutions in the region should work with the United States to assess the risks of such scenarios while building capacities of the recipient countries to tackle such foreseeable developments.

While the policies of the Trump administration in the Indo-Pacific remains unclear, trade war may not singularly help the US reposition itself in the region. Trade sanctions needs to be coupled with other strategic political and economic policies to tackle the growing influence of China in the region. As China rises in the region with its foreign policies and initiatives that signals clear intention to challenge American influence, the United States will continue to respond through trade sanctions and other means. This will contribute to a mounting tension and competition between the two countries. However, the Belt and Road Initiative is a relatively new initiative and there are limited resources to most accurately determine the future of this project. Nonetheless, drawing from the previous practices of Chinese government, its increasing revisionist behaviors in their foreign policies and the current developments among the recipient countries, it is likely that it will remain to challenge the promotion of American influence in the region. Therefore, it is imperative to continue further research in this field to fully analyze how these threats, both perceived and real could evolve through the time.

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