

*Openness in Asia is attainable without American primacy, but it is far from guaranteed.*

–MIRA RAPP-HOOPER

# From Primacy to Openness: U.S. Strategic Objectives in Asia

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The United States no longer possesses military-strategic primacy in Asia, and a combination of structural factors and Communist Party of China (CCP) regime intentions mean it is unlikely to recoup it soon. Despite this condition, much remains to be determined about the strategic landscape in Asia, and Washington retains significant ability to shape it. The United States reserves an abiding interest in ensuring that Asia is not dominated by a hostile hegemon in whole or in part and must hedge against this possibility by ensuring that China does not establish a closed regional sphere of influence. In the service of this strategic objective, the United States should seek to keep Asia open, preserving freedom of action for regional states, an open global commons, the free flow of information, and positive interstate cooperation. An open Asia will require a significant U.S. military presence and demands a credible defense strategy. It also calls for significantly improved coordination on sub-conventional threats among U.S. agencies and with foreign partners. Finally, it depends on economic, technological, and domestic investments, without which the United States cannot credibly preserve a viable balance of power. Openness in Asia is attainable without American primacy, but it is far from guaranteed.

Before proceeding, a definition of the term “primacy” is appropriate. Primacy is the condition of being the most powerful state in a global or regional system, including on military dimensions, albeit one against whom discrete military challenges may still be possible. Primacy implies that the leading state has no great power rivals within the system in question.<sup>1</sup> If a country lacks primacy in a given regional system, it definitionally does not possess it globally. Primacy is distinct from preeminence, however—a condition in which a state leads on most critical metrics of national power, even if one or more other states boasts significant capabilities in some areas.<sup>2</sup> A preeminent state may have near-peer rivals and be susceptible to their military challenges. To argue that American military-strategic primacy in Asia has passed is to acknowledge that China is a military-strategic rival within Asia, but not necessarily on a global level. The United States may (and likely will) remain the leading global power despite the loss of military primacy in Asia. It therefore remains globally preeminent.

## The Demise of Pacific Primacy

A combination of structural factors and regime intentions mean that China is likely to be a significant military-strategic challenger to the United States for the next several decades. Barring a stark discontinuity with present trend lines, Washington will find it difficult or impossible to reestablish primacy in Asia in the near term.<sup>3</sup> First, structural trends are likely to continue to support the growth of Chinese economic and military power in the region. Following decades of astounding development, China’s economy will probably sustain at respectable levels. Even if annual growth dips below 5 percent, China will still likely be the world’s largest economy by 2030.<sup>4</sup> Beijing’s technology sector may also overtake the United States’ in both research and development spending and market size.<sup>5</sup> Clear headwinds include its demographic cliff and labor force, as well as unknowns around its

incomplete economic transition to a consumption-based economy.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, China can afford growth-related setbacks and still continue to encroach upon the United States' relative position in Asia.

For the last 25 years, moreover, China's military budget has grown with its GDP, rising from \$17 billion in 1990 to \$152 billion in 2017—a 900 percent increase.<sup>7</sup> Beijing's development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities already calls into question the ability of the United States to mount a direct defense of its allies.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, its recent Five-Year Program addresses weaknesses in command structures and force coordination<sup>9</sup> while shifting priority away from ground forces and toward naval and air assets, which are likely to strengthen joint operations capabilities and overall military effectiveness.<sup>10</sup> China is therefore already a leading military power in Asia and can rival the United States in the quantitative, local military balance, as well as below the traditional conflict threshold, even if it cannot accomplish either of these globally.<sup>11</sup> From a strict and definitional military perspective, then, American primacy in Asia has withered, and China's broader economic picture gives us no reason to expect an imminent reversal.

The CCP leadership, moreover, has made it abundantly clear that American regional military primacy is inimical to its strategic objectives. Since the 2008 financial crisis and Xi Jinping's 2012-2013 ascent, the CCP has been explicit about its goal of re-establishing regional hegemony in Asia and of climbing to the status of global superpower by mid-century.<sup>12</sup> The CCP's "Two Centenaries" may make China one of the most transparent great powers in history. Not only has it issued timestamps for its goals of regional hegemony and global power status, but it has identified some general requirements of those strategic conditions, including the attenuation of American power in Asia, a restoration of significant regional influence, and the reestablishment of control over disputed territories.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, as China's favorable trendlines have sustained and Xi has declared his strategic ambitions, the CCP has undeniably become more authoritarian at home. Xi's domestic accolades include an even stronger role for the government in the Chinese economy, the systematic internment of ethnic minorities, the manufacture of a sophisticated surveillance state with a closed internet at its core, and the abolition of the notion of collective leadership in favor of Xi's permanent installation.<sup>14</sup> American analysts cannot presume that China's propitious tailwinds will blow in a linear fashion or that they are irreversible. Yet, the United States does not itself possess the ability to upend China's growth trajectory, military spending, stated strategic objectives, or current preference for authoritarianism. For the time being, then, American strategists must devise an approach that allows the United States to live with and protect vital interests from an authoritarian near-peer in Asia.

Undesirability of this condition notwithstanding, the strategic picture in Asia is more fluid than structural trends or CCP goals would suggest. Xi's declared objectives of regional hegemony and global power status hardly guarantee that Beijing will achieve them or elucidate the form they will take if it does. Xi's goal of cross-Straits reunification, for example, may be accomplished in two radically different ways, and along a timeline that will remain malleable.<sup>15</sup> Regional and global power status may also be defined in a variety of ways, and we should expect the exertions of a twenty-first-century great power to look different than those of its nineteenth-century peers. We do not anticipate the CCP will engage in outright territorial conquest to reassert its role in Asia, for example, with the possible exception of Taiwan. It is much more likely to attempt to secure its vision for twenty-first-century power through economic, technological, and sub-conventional approaches, and its choice of means will be at least somewhat responsive to the international environment. The exact form that China's regional influence takes is far from determined.

This is all the more true because rising powers have a reliable history of risk aversion. Precisely because they seek to reach global heights, ascending states often eschew forms of belligerence that would catalyze countervailing coalitions or derail their rise.<sup>16</sup> While he has adopted an assertive foreign policy, Xi has also demonstrated risk aversion, preferring to advance China's aims where little or no general U.S. deterrence is present, as with his South China Sea campaign or the westward push with the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>17</sup> When Washington has

sought to establish immediate deterrence in the face of Beijing's advances, these have proven effective, as with the establishment of a clear declaratory policy around the Senkaku Islands in 2013-2014 and a stark warning about Scarborough Shoal in 2016.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the vagaries of and risk aversion embedded in Beijing's stated objectives bestow the United States with valuable advantages—namely, the ability to deter and defend against some of China's most significant advances, so long as it can define its own vital interests and accept some risk. The loss of American military primacy in Asia, therefore, does not portend an Asia dominated by hostile Chinese power. Washington will retain the ability to secure its vital interests in Asia and, to some extent, to shape China's own conception of its regional objectives.

### **Strategic Objective: Openness in Asia**

While the United States cannot avoid a stronger China able to exert significant regional influence, it can nonetheless secure its longstanding political, security, and economic interests in the region and avert the conditions that would most directly threaten them. Since the late nineteenth century, the United States has sought to prevent a hostile hegemon from dominating Eurasia, as this condition would impede commercial interests and potentially expose the U.S. homeland to military threats.<sup>19</sup> Potential domination may come in novel forms, but the same objective remains worthy today. The United States should seek to avert the hostile domination of Asia.

We cannot envision the precise form it will take, but Xi Jinping is seeking some form of a sphere of influence in Asia.<sup>20</sup> And while a state's domestic regime preferences do not neatly predict its regional behavior, Xi's affection for a closed Chinese information environment already has a foreign policy analogue.<sup>21</sup> Other international governance attempts may have similar features. For several years, strategists have argued that the United States must oppose a Chinese regional sphere—a geographic area in which China exercises predominate influence in military, diplomatic, or economic terms.<sup>22</sup> Chinese influence in parts of Southeast or Central Asia, however, is not a *prima facie* threat to American interests. Nonetheless, U.S. strategy must hedge against the possibility that China's regional aspirations are fundamentally irreconcilable with its own objectives.

Washington should seek to prevent China from establishing a *closed* sphere of influence—a bloc that would allow it to dominate part or all of Asia in a manner that displaces U.S. political, economic, or military power. An exclusive zone could leave the United States unable to access vital markets and strip it of its forward defensive position, thereby threatening U.S. prosperity and national security and, by extension, domestic freedom. This grave condition would occur if China co-opted the political, economic, or military independence of other states, preventing them from making free choices through coercion. Closure of the global commons could have similarly grievous effects.

The positive objective of U.S. strategy should therefore be an open Asia.<sup>23</sup> Openness characterizes both American strategic priorities in the region as well as the types of interactions the United States should seek to facilitate in their service. An open Asia is one in which regional states have political and economic freedom of action and are able to make independent strategic decisions without being forced into blocs or camps that could result in their hierarchical dominance. Under this concept, Asia's commons must also remain open, essential as they are to international commerce. Openness favors sustained interstate cooperation, beneficial trade, and the free flow of information across borders. It also calls for transparent international governance, even among those states that are not themselves full-fledged democracies.

An openness-based strategy seeks to prevent shuttered economic, political, and security spheres in Asia by helping regional states preserve their flexibility and independence and doing the same in the skies and sea lanes. It rejects the notion that regional states should “choose” between the United States and China and instead incentivizes them to eschew great power dominance in favor of agency. At a time when the CCP seeks a more

closed Chinese society, commons, and domestic and international information space, the United States should strive to preserve the region's dynamism and fluidity. An openness-based strategy acknowledges that the United States will not retain strategic primacy in Asia. It also recognizes that Washington does not require unequivocal regional dominance to prevent China from establishing a hierarchy of its own.

## **Securing Openness**

Openness in Asia will not be easily obtained. It will require the United States to focus consistently on Asia as its primary foreign policy theater, allocate substantial military resources to the region, develop a viable island chain defense strategy, improve its coordination against sub-conventional threats within U.S. agencies and with foreign partners, and invest in regional openness economically, technologically, and domestically. Despite a relatively more constrained position in Asia, the United States can secure openness, but its objective is far from guaranteed.

Regional openness requires a strong American military presence but does not demand military primacy. The United States and its allies must retain sufficient strength to deter China from making a bid that could result in its hierarchical dominance of any part of the region, to defend against it if it were to mount one, and to keep the global commons open.<sup>24</sup> These defensive requirements, in turn, mean that the United States absolutely must maintain its treaty alliances and forward position in Asia. Since the early Cold War, Washington has understood the First Island Chain archipelago to be its defensive front line, but China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) approach makes the direct defense of allies increasingly tenuous.<sup>25</sup> If it lacks the ability to defend and deter on behalf of its treaty allies, the United States will struggle to maintain the regional position that will allow it to meet its minimum deterrence requirements. Washington currently lacks a strategy for First Island Chain defense. A counter-A2/AD strategy that relies on land- and sea-based missiles may be the most feasible approach but will be politically taxing to enact.<sup>26</sup> Beyond an ally-focused defense strategy, military openness will be far easier to obtain if the United States can continue to strengthen its strategic position in Southeast Asia. It should buttress capacity-building efforts with Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines; prioritize defense cooperation with India; and synchronize similar disparate efforts with Japan and Australia. Despite modest improvements, it must also increase significantly its Foreign Military Financing to the region.<sup>27</sup>

Openness will not be guaranteed through military strategy alone. Indeed, China's regional and global objectives mean it should prefer to establish its sphere without triggering the conflict that could derail its rise. We should therefore expect China's regional expansion to continue to occur largely below the military threshold. American military-strategic objectives will therefore need to rely heavily on non-military tools. The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) recognizes the persistence of so-called "grey zone" challenges, but the NDS does not articulate an approach to sub-conventional competition, nor does the Department of Defense's 2020 budget request refer to it at all.<sup>28</sup> By their nature, sub-conventional incursions occur outside of the traditional Pentagon purview and at the seams of other agencies, making them more difficult to address.<sup>29</sup>

Whether incursions come in the form of maritime grabs, cyber intrusions, economic coercion, or information and influence campaigns, sub-conventional deterrence generally requires swift transparency, specific deterrent threats, clear messaging, and some tolerance for risk.<sup>30</sup> The United States has most of the diplomatic, intelligence, and economic tools it should want to more fully engage these types of threats, yet many of the relevant offices lack the ability to coordinate among themselves or with their foreign government counterparts.<sup>31</sup> The United States cannot seek to deter or prevent all Chinese coercion, but it should focus on thwarting sub-conventional bids that may contribute to closed spheres, such as efforts to restrict freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, to shutter the regional information environment, or to imperil states' political independence. It will need to improve its interagency and international coordinating capacities to do so.

The promotion of openness as a strategic objective also has components that are entirely nonmilitary. Economic openness requires that the United States abandon reflexive protectionism and restore itself as a credible trading partner. Technological openness requires that Washington and its allies provide alternatives to closed and unreliable systems of information provision.<sup>32</sup> It calls for the United States and others to promote new openness-based rules and regimes in under-governed spaces like the internet and cyberspace, lest China's preferences crystallize into new international norms.<sup>33</sup> It suggests that the same states should give infrastructure and development aid that promotes transparency, and to push China to meet those standards. Finally, all of the forgoing requires that the United States harness its own competitive capacity through strategic domestic investments in education, high-skills immigration, and government-backed research and development. Openness does not require primacy, but it does demand American innovation, dynamism, and the ability to marshal them for geostrategy.

### Openness, Not Overreach

Just as important as the requirements for securing openness in Asia is a clear understanding of what the United States should not do if it wishes to achieve it. While Washington should devote a significant percentage of its considerable defense resources to Asia, it should not seek to recoup commanding military primacy in the region at the expense of other tools of foreign policy. Diplomatic, intelligence, and economic instruments and coordination among them are arguably more deserving of budgetary augmentation given how frequently they are likely to be used.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the United States should not hope to match the exercise of Chinese power symmetrically, seeking to thwart it everywhere it springs. This is a recipe for national exhaustion and one that does not guarantee success even if it were possible. Rather than devise a Belt and Road analogue, for example, Washington and its partners should make available selective high-standards infrastructure opportunities. China's projects have already begun to generate countervailing effects of their own, and the mere existence of more open options restores a measure of political independence to the states in question. Likewise, the United States need not seek to undermine China's closer relationships with individual states, such as Laos and Cambodia. Some increase in Chinese influence in Southeast and Central Asia is impossible to prevent and does not necessarily result in problematic regional closure.

Third and finally, the United States will be unable to separate its strategic objectives in Asia from its domestic imperatives. Washington cannot offer openness-promoting digital and infrastructure alternatives if it is not fully exploiting its own innovative capacity, for example. While China's growing power presents a significant challenge to the United States and the region, it need only result in a closed Asia if the United States fails to sustain openness. Indeed, the United States' security and prosperity face peril if its own foreign policy erraticism persists in an environment of intense political polarization.<sup>35</sup> American global preeminence absent military primacy is sufficient to prevent a closed Chinese sphere in Asia: a strategically steady United States, however, is necessary.

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- <sup>34</sup> For examples of non-defense counter-grey-zone proposals, see Kathleen H. Hicks and Alice Hunt Friend, “By Other Means: Part I-Campaigning in the Grey Zone,” CSIS International Security Program, July 2019, pp. 19-27.
- <sup>35</sup> Kenneth A. Schultz, “The Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 4, No. 4 (Winter 2018): 7-28.