

JOURNAL OF

INDO-PACIFIC

AFFAIRS

VOL. 6, NO. 8 NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2023



JIPA THE JOURNAL OF INDO-PACIFIC AFFAIRS

Chief of Staff, US Air Force

Gen David W. Allvin

Chief of Space Operations, US Space Force

Gen B. Chance Saltzman, USSF

Commander, Air Education and Training Command

Lt Gen Brian Robinson, USAF

Commander and President, Air University

Lt Gen Andrea D. Tullos, USAF

Director, Air University Press

Dr. Paul Hoffman

Editorial Staff

Dr. Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell, *Editor in Chief*

Jon Howard, *Deputy Editor in Chief*

Dr. Achala Gunasekara-Rockwell, *Assistant Editor in Chief*

Catherine Smith, *Illustrator*

Diana Faber, *Print Specialist*

Sandhu Aladuwaka, *Intern*

Shalini Singh, *Intern*

Tharishi Hewavithanagama, *Intern*

Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs (JIPA)

600 Chennault Circle

Maxwell AFB AL 36112-6010

email: JIPA@au.af.edu

Visit *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* online at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/>.

ISSN 2576-5361 (Print) ISSN 2576-537X (Online)

Published by the Air University Press, *The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs (JIPA)* is a professional journal of the Department of the Air Force and a forum for worldwide dialogue regarding the Indo-Pacific region, spanning from the west coasts of the Americas to the eastern shores of Africa and covering much of Asia and all of Oceania. The journal fosters intellectual and professional development for members of the Air and Space Forces and the world's other English-speaking militaries and informs decision makers and academicians around the globe.

Articles submitted to the journal must be unclassified, nonsensitive, and releasable to the public. Features represent fully researched, thoroughly documented, and peer-reviewed scholarly articles 5,000 to 6,000 words in length. Views articles are shorter than Features—3,000 to 5,000 words—typically expressing well-thought-out and developed opinions about regional topics. The Commentary section offers a forum about current subjects of interest. These short posts are 1,500 to 2,500 words in length. Submit all manuscripts to JIPA@au.af.edu.

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government.



<https://www.af.mil/>



UNITED STATES
SPACE FORCE

<https://www.spaceforce.mil/>



<https://www.aetc.af.mil/>



<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>

SENIOR LEADER PERSPECTIVES

- 1 **Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the 8th Annual CSIS Republic of Korea–United States Strategic Forum**
25 September 2023

FEATURES

- 7 **Kim’s Nukes, Yoon’s Qualms**
Strengthening the US Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea
Dr. Adam B. Lowther
- 29 **Irregular Influence**
Combating Malign Chinese Communist Party Actions in Southeast Asia
Lt Col Jeffrey S. Lehmkuhl, USAFR
- 53 **China’s Increasing Space Power and India–China Orbital Competitions**
Implications in the Indo-Pacific with a Focus on South Asia
Most. Farjana Sharmin
- 74 **Securing the Digital Seabed**
Countering China’s Underwater Ambitions
Raghvendra Kumar

VIEWS

- 91 **China’s Authoritarian Grip**
How China Reinforces Social Control, Cultivates a Climate of Fear, and Minimizes Dissent
LCDR Jordan J. Foley, JAGC, US Navy
- 105 **China’s Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands**
Wider Implications for Geopolitics in the South Pacific
Joseph Hammond
- 114 **The Nuclear Revolution**
Fact or Fiction?
Lt Col Elijah S. Porter, USAF

Secretary Antony J. Blinken
at the 8th Annual CSIS
Republic of Korea–United States
Strategic Forum
25 September 2023

Thank you very, very much, and good morning. John, wonderful to be back here.¹ And so good to be with all of you this morning. I want to thank John Hamre, I want to thank Ambassador Kim for the invitation to be here.

As I was walking in, I heard the voice of my good friend and colleague Jin Park. And I just want you to know that he is an exceptional colleague, and I'm so gratified to be able to work with him virtually every day.

And yes, this is something, as Victor said, of a homecoming for me, having been here nearly 20 years ago. I have to admit to feeling a little bit jealous, because I'm a veteran of the building on K Street. So, every time I walk into this building, it's—what happened? Timing is everything.

But thanks to John Hamre, thanks to other colleagues, I had a couple of extremely rewarding years here at CSIS. And in particular, I had an opportunity firsthand to watch John grow it into the tremendous intellectual force that it is today, and I benefited from the expertise of an extraordinary community of scholars. The only reason I left is I was—I had my arm twisted by a certain senator from the state of Delaware who had just taken over the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

And it's especially good to be with my friend, Dr. Cha. He is quite literally one of the first calls that we make whenever we need cool counsel on regional crises and developments. We were talking just a few minutes ago, and that levelheaded response, the thoughtfulness that he brings to everything, is a tremendous source of strength. The only place he doesn't bring that equanimity is when it comes to his and my beloved New York Giants. This is starting out to be a little bit of a tough year.

But this forum comes at a moment of remarkable dynamism and importance for the US–Korea relationship. As you all know, in just a few days we will celebrate

¹ Secretary Blinken delivered this speech Center for Strategic and International Studies' ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum 2023, Washington, DC, Monday, 25 September 2023.

70 years since our countries signed the Mutual Defense Treaty—70 years of relationship that has grown from a key security alliance into a vital global partnership, one that’s broadening in scope and significance seemingly every day.

Now, first and foremost, that’s a testament to the extraordinary close ties between our people and between our economies, to the democratic values and the vision for the world that we share, but also, I believe, to the leadership of President Biden and President Yoon.

And it’s a testament to the power and purpose of our diplomacy. Since day one of this administration, we have worked to re-engage, to revitalize, to reimagine our core alliances and partnerships.

Our intensified engagement with the Republic of Korea is maybe one of the most striking examples of how we’re not only deepening our alliances, but also how we’re weaving them together in innovative and mutually reinforcing ways across issues and across continents and into new, fit-for-purpose coalitions. Simply put, on so many consequential priorities for our people, for the Indo-Pacific, for the world, we are working in partnership with the Republic of Korea.

And I think if you look at it, we have been strengthening all aspects of our partnership, starting with our security. If you go back seven decades, our two nations joined in an alliance, as we say, “forged in blood.” A pact sealed by the shared sacrifice of thousands of our servicemembers who stood together, who fought together, who died together to defend Korea’s freedom and democracy. Ever since, our alliance has been fortified by our enduring cooperation—by the shared spirit of “Katchi kapshida”—“we go together.”

Today, that commitment to mutual defense is ironclad. And that starts with extended deterrence, particularly in the face of the DPRK’s provocative actions, including its missile launches, which as everyone here knows, violate multiple UN Security Council resolutions and undermine stability on the peninsula and beyond.

Beyond the launches themselves, the DPRK’s threats to broader security were demonstrated clearly by Kim Jong-un’s visit to Moscow this month. Now, we’re seeing this a two-way street that is increasingly dangerous, with on the one hand a Russia desperate to find equipment, supplies, technology for its ongoing aggression against Ukraine, but also a DPRK that is looking for help to strengthen and advance its own missile programs. We’re working hand-in-hand with other partners and allies to highlight the dangerous ways Russian and North Korea’s military cooperation threaten global peace and security.

In April, President Biden and President Yoon pledged to significantly strengthen US–ROK coordination through the Washington Declaration, committing to engage in deeper cooperative decision-making on nuclear deterrence, including through enhanced dialogue and enhanced information sharing; discussing

nuclear and strategic planning, enhancing the visibility of U.S. strategic asset deployments to the Korean Peninsula, including by restarting port visits of nuclear-capable missile submarines; and expanding the cooperation and coordination between our militaries.

Already, in just the space of a few months, we're translating the declaration into concrete action. Earlier this summer, for the first time in four decades, a nuclear-capable submarine made port in Busan. The Nuclear Consultative Group, created by the Washington Declaration, had its first meeting in July. And this month, the U.S.-ROK Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group held its second meeting already in Seoul.

Last month—I think as you all saw—President Biden hosted President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida for a historic Camp David summit. Now, we all tend to throw around the word *historic* a little bit loosely, but I think this one genuinely meets the definition. It really did mark the start of a new era in trilateral cooperation among our countries. Just over the last year, Korea and Japan have continued to address difficult and sensitive issues of history while pursuing an increasingly ambitious and affirmative agenda. And this starts with the political courage and personal commitment of their leaders.

At the summit, our leaders discussed how to strengthen cooperation on a range of shared priorities. We committed to consult with one another expeditiously to coordinate our responses to threats to our collective security and interests. On the North Korean nuclear front, our countries agreed on practical ways to improve our joint responses through the real-time sharing of DPRK missile warning data, trilateral defense exercises, and efforts to counter the DPRK's malicious cyber activities, a growing challenge, which fund its WMD and ballistic missile programs.²

We've already had the opportunity to demonstrate that enhanced trilateral cooperation, in response to the DPRK's second failed attempt to deploy a satellite launch vehicle earlier this month, can make a difference.

At Camp David, the leaders emphasized our shared commitment to a rules-based order. That includes freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes. They also reaffirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity for the entire international community.

Our security alliance is essential; it's at the foundation of our partnership. But it's not the only element that makes our relationship so consequential. We're also intensifying our economic partnership.

² Weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Since the KORUS Free Trade Agreement was approved, bilateral trade has surged dramatically. And over the last two years alone, Korean companies have invested more than USD 100 billion in the United States, driving innovation, creating good jobs for Americans and Korean workers alike.

In Bay City, Michigan, at the SK Siltron CSS—CS—excuse me—CSS facility, which provides key inputs for semiconductors, we’ve brought Korean and American innovation together to drive even greater growth for our countries. In Whitfield County, Georgia, thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act, Hanwha Qcells is setting up a USD 2.5-billion plant to make solar panels. That will support thousands of local jobs and the global transition to a green economy.

Investments like these in each other’s countries and workers are critical for strengthening our supply chains and reducing our reliance on unreliable suppliers.

We’re also working together to power inclusive, sustainable, shared economic growth across the entire Indo-Pacific region. Together, through the 14-country Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, we’re supporting a race to the top on issues that are shaping the twenty-first-century economy, including supply chain resilience, the clean energy transition, digital connectivity. At APEC, we’re teamed up to advance a more “resilient and sustainable future for all”—focused on greater trade and investment in the region, innovation, digitalization, and strong and inclusive growth.³

And we’re also partnering together on a range of development initiatives—sustainable management of river systems in the Mekong subregion, climate resilience in the Pacific Islands, marine protection throughout Southeast Asia.

The United States and our partners are committed to making and demonstrating a stronger offer to countries in the region and to developing countries around the world, working to deliver on the issues that actually matter in their lives, from high-quality infrastructure to inclusive economic growth, to climate resilience and adaptation solutions. The strength of that offer is directly tied to the strength of the partnerships working to deliver it.

Technology and innovation have long been the foundation of both our countries’ economic strength, and we’re broadening our cooperation there to take on global challenges. For example, we are collaborating on potential green shipping corridors between our countries, which will require all ships to use low- or zero-emissions

³ The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is a regional economic forum established in 1989 with the objective of harnessing the increasing interdependence within the Asia-Pacific region. APEC’s 21 members aspire to foster greater prosperity among the region’s inhabitants. This is achieved by promoting well-balanced, inclusive, sustainable, innovative, and secure economic growth, while expediting regional economic integration.

fuels, and all ports to reduce emissions so that we can put the shipping sector on the path to full decarbonization by 2050. We're launching a next-generation critical and emerging technologies partnership to enhance collaboration on everything from biotechnology to batteries, semiconductors to digital and quantum technologies. We're even taking our technological partnership all the way to space, with new cooperation on space science and lunar exploration. All of these efforts, all these initiatives designed to enhance the global good.

Finally, we're putting our partnership to work in driving peace and security around the world.

That includes in Ukraine, where Korea under President Yoon has been a valued partner in supporting Kyiv in the face of Russia's brutal war—and in its defense of principles at the heart of the international order and the United Nations Charter: sovereignty, territorial independence, freedom. President Putin's aggression against Ukraine has been a monumental strategic failure for Putin, but it has succeeded in one thing: bringing the Transatlantic and Indo-Pacific closer than ever before. When Russia cut off oil and gas supplies to Europe to try to freeze countries out of supporting Ukraine, Korea—along with Japan—joined America's liquified natural gas producers to ensure that European countries would have enough energy to keep their homes warm throughout the winter.

Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand are now regular and active participants in NATO meetings. As President Yoon has said, European and Indo-Pacific security are now truly indivisible.

All across the world stage, Korea is taking on increasing global leadership. As a partner in reforming multilateral development banks so that they meet the needs of people in low- and middle-income countries; as the next host of the Summit for Democracy; as a participant, along with Japan, at the U.S.-hosted Trilateral Conference on Women's Economic Empowerment: a critical pillar of development—in democracies and nondemocracies, low and middle-income countries alike. And when Korea takes its seat as a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council next year, we look forward to its strong voice, the voice that will—it will bring in defense of the UN Charter.

And of course, all of you know this is an extraordinary moment for brand Korea around the world. If you look at the Netflix list of top shows, inevitably you will find Korean programming at the top of that list. A few months ago, I had the opportunity to be on one of our late-night TV shows based in New York, and as we drove up to the stage door, I saw a huge crowd of young people gathered. And I thought, well, that's pretty nice—a lot of people waiting here for me. Turned out there was another guest on the show that night, the leading Korean K-pop band.

Needless to say, the young people gathered at the door had no idea who I was, but were extremely excited about the K-pop band that followed in my wake.

But I think what you're seeing is an extraordinary ambition between and shared by Korea and the United States for the next generation of our partnership. Just over the last couple of years, we've made great strides in beginning to realize that vision. And we're prioritizing steps to institutionalize our cooperation across so many areas, so that it endures for many years and many governments to come—to the benefit of our people and, we believe, to people around the world.

CSIS, the Korea Foundation, so many people in this room today, who are joining us by video, are absolutely critical to these efforts. And what I look forward to is the opportunity to make sure that the ongoing dialogue that we have continues, so that we together can continue to take the US–Korea partnership into the future.

Thank you so much. 🌟

Kim's Nukes, Yoon's Qualms

Strengthening the US Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea

DR. ADAM B. LOWTHER

Abstract

Since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, its rapid expansion of nuclear weapons and missiles has raised doubts in South Korea about US extended deterrence commitments. In 2023, President Yoon Suk-yeol opened discussion of an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal. This article examines South Korean perspectives and support for nuclear weapons through expert interviews and polling data analysis. It finds enduring fears of US abandonment drive South Korean interest in indigenous capabilities or a return of US nuclear weapons. Experts emphasize the need to improve South Korean understanding of nuclear strategy and assurance policies. Recommendations include strengthening the US–ROK Nuclear Consultative Group, increasing strategic asset deployments and exercises, enhancing information sharing on nuclear planning, and expanding Korean involvement in nuclear consultations and training. Given President Yoon's concerns, concrete assurance efforts are critical to preventing a collapse of the global nonproliferation regime and a new nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia.

On 11 January 2023, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol announced that North Korea's continued nuclear expansion could push the Republic of Korea (ROK) to pursue an indigenous nuclear weapons program.¹ At the time of Yoon's statement, American credibility had diminished due to the United States' failure to deter the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) from developing nuclear weapons and advanced ballistic missiles.² Former President Donald Trump's handling of the Korean Peninsula also played a significant role in garnering popular support among South Koreans for an indigenous nuclear weapons program, with 71 percent expressing approval in recent public opinion polls.³ Despite South Korea's conventional superiority

¹ Sang-Hun Cho, "In a First, South Korea Declares Nuclear Weapons a Policy Option," *New York Times*, 12 January 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

² See: Scott Berrier, *North Korea Military Power* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021).

³ Sangyong Son and Man-Sung Yim, "Correlates of South Korean Public Opinion on Nuclear Proliferation," *Asia Survey* 61, no. 6 (2021): 1028–57, <https://doi.org/>; and Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, *Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons* (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2022), 3–4.

over North Korea, the DPRK's possession of nuclear weapons raised concerns among South Koreans.⁴

In the days and weeks following President Yoon's announcement, think tanks in Washington, DC, extensively discussed the gravity of Yoon's remarks and their potential implications for the United States and the alliance.⁵ The Biden administration promptly responded with an invitation for President Yoon to visit the White House.⁶ In the weeks leading up to Yoon's visit, the administration formulated a plan aimed at bolstering American assurance of the ROK and dissuading Yoon from pursuing an independent nuclear arsenal.

During President Yoon's visit to the United States from 24 to 29 April, he dedicated 26 April to meetings with President Joe Biden at the White House.⁷ In addition to commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the ROK–US alliance, the visit served as an opportunity to outline their strategy for enhanced cooperation. Officially known as the “Washington Declaration,” this statement focused on eight lines of effort.⁸

First, the United States and South Korea created the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) as a means for improving cooperation on matters of deterrence concerning North Korea.⁹ This group will bring senior defense officials together to discuss nuclear strategy. The creation of the NCG received positive feedback, although some in Korea mistakenly equated it with the to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Nuclear Planning Group.

Second, the ROK reaffirmed its commitment to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) as the cornerstone of international nuclear nonproliferation and peaceful use. For the United States, the ROK's agreement with this stance held paramount significance. A treaty ally pursuing nuclear weapons would erode American credibility.

Third, the United States pledged to increase the presence of strategic assets in and around South Korea, including additional exercises. The deployment of

⁴ Jennifer Ahn, “Beyond US Credibility Concerns: Factors Driving the Nuclear Weapons Debate in South Korea,” Korea Economic Institute, 17 February 2023, <https://keia.org/>.

⁵ Jessica Corbett, “‘Outrageous’: South Korean President Under Fire for Considering Nuclear Weapons,” *Common Dreams*, 12 January 2023, <https://www.commondreams.org/>.

⁶ Justin Sink and Jenny Leonard, “Biden Plans to Host Spring State Dinner for South Korea's Yoon,” *Bloomberg*, 15 February 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

⁷ “Republic of Korea State Visit to the United States” (fact sheet, The White House, 26 April 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁸ Mitch Shin, “Yoon and Biden Announce, ‘Washington Declaration’ to Lock in Nuclear Deterrent,” *The Diplomat*, 27 April 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁹ Victor Cha, “The U.S.-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group's Successful Launching,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 20 July 2023, <https://www.csis.org/>.

nuclear-capable bombers and ballistic missile submarines to Korea is perceived as a means to reassure South Korea and deter North Korea.

Fourth, both nations agreed to more effectively integrate South Korea's strategic capabilities into the alliance's combined force structure, thereby facilitating joint planning and execution. The ROK is establishing its own "Strategic Command" explicitly tasked with overseeing the nation's conventional strategic weapons.¹⁰

Fifth, the United States will incorporate ROK military personnel into training courses and educational programs aimed at expanding their comprehension of nuclear issues and operations. This step is crucial given the limited understanding of strategic deterrence within the Ministry of National Defense, the military, and the broader foreign policy establishment.

Sixth, the United States and ROK will conduct intergovernmental and inter-agency simulations and separate tabletop exercises with US Strategic Command to enhance understanding of nuclear planning and operations. These endeavors hold particular significance for the ROK military, which strongly desires a better understanding of when and how the United States might employ nuclear weapons. Given the small size of the Korean Peninsula, these concerns are entirely justified.

Seventh, the alliance's joint exercises will enhance the level of realistic training and introduce trilateral exercises that involve Japan. Realistic exercises are essential for building trust in the Yoon administration. With President Yoon aiming to strengthen ties with Japan, their inclusion in trilateral exercises is a logical progression.¹¹

Eighth, the United States and ROK will utilize the Regional Cooperation Working Group to enhance maritime domain awareness and foster defense cooperation with other Indo-Pacific partners.¹² Given North Korea's activities in proximity to South Korean shores and China's assertive conduct in the region, South Korea has compelling reasons to pursue closer maritime integration.

The Washington Declaration promptly garnered a positive response in both the United States and South Korea, with many regarding the agreement as a tangible effort to enhance American assurance and fortify the alliance. The implementation of the outlined lines of effort commenced almost immediately.

South Korean military delegations promptly traveled to Washington, DC, and Omaha, Nebraska, with the expectation of gaining insight into American plans

¹⁰ Daehan Lee, "South Korea to Create New Command that Would Control Strategic Weapons," *Defense News*, 11 July 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

¹¹ Tim Kelley, "Japan Welcomes Thaw with South Korea in Gloomy Annual Security Assessment," *Reuters*, 27 July 2023, <https://www.aol.com/>.

¹² "Washington Declaration" (press release, The White House, 26 April 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

for the use of nuclear weapons. Understandably, the Yoon administration seeks a deeper understanding of American strategy.

On 18 July, the USS *Kentucky* (SSBN-737), a ballistic missile submarine, made a port call in Busan. Less than 24 hours later, North Korea conducted two ballistic missile tests in direct response to the *Kentucky*'s visit.¹³ Potentially in reaction to North Korea's provocation, the USS *Annapolis* (SSN-760), a *Los Angeles*-class attack submarine, paid a visit to South Korea's Jeju Island on 25 July.¹⁴

The NCG commenced its work in July with the first face-to-face meetings when an American delegation visited South Korea.¹⁵ Defining the precise methods of operation for the group will require time. In essence, the swift transformation of words into actions provides substantial evidence that the Washington Declaration goes beyond mere empty promises.

Nevertheless, analysts on both sides of the Pacific are closely monitoring whether this initial burst of activity will be sustained. Presently, the public commitment from the Biden administration, followed by concrete actions, is achieving the desired effect. The discourse surrounding South Korea's potential development of its nuclear arsenal has significantly subsided. However, this does not imply that the Yoon administration will abandon the pursuit of a nuclear weapons program if American actions do not align with the threat posed by North Korea.

A renewed commitment from the United States to South Korean security is warmly welcomed by South Koreans, who recall President Richard Nixon's withdrawal of the Seventh Division from South Korea in 1970, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter's advocacy for complete withdrawal in 1975, and President Trump's proposal to withdraw in 2020.¹⁶ Therefore, South Koreans possess a natural inclination to believe that it may only be a matter of time before they find themselves without US forces standing alongside them in a confrontation with North Korea. After all, if the Americans contemplate withdrawal to save resources, there is a concern that they might withdraw to prevent trading Los Angeles for Seoul.

¹³ Luis Martinez, "North Korea Launches Ballistic Missiles after US Nuclear-capable Sub Arrives in South Korea," *ABC News*, 18 July 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/>.

¹⁴ Mike Glenn, "Second US Submarine Docks in South Korea Amid North Korean Threats," *Washington Times*, 25 July 2023, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/>.

¹⁵ Eunice Kim, "US, South Korea Kick Off Nuclear Consultative Group in Seoul," *Voice of America News*, 18 July 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

¹⁶ Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 52–71; David Choi, "Trump Considered 'Complete Withdrawal' of US Troops from South Korea, Former Defense Chief Says," *Stars and Stripes*, 10 May 2022, <https://www.stripes.com/>; and Veronica Stracqualursi, "Trump Apparently Threatens to Withdraw US Troops from South Korea Over Trade," *CNN*, 16 March 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

Such sentiments gain further credence from the perceived American restraint in the face of recurrent North Korean provocations.¹⁷ The prevailing thought questions whether the United States would provide a robust response to events such as the North Korean sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* in 2010, the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, or numerous illicit missile and nuclear tests. This raises doubts about South Korea's reliance on the United States in defending the ROK during a nuclear conflict.¹⁸ Given North Korea's rapid advancements in nuclear and ballistic missile technology in recent years, coupled with Kim Jong-un's directive for "exponential" expansion of his nuclear arsenal, South Koreans have ample reasons for concern.¹⁹

It should not surprise anyone that the Yoon administration and South Koreans desire consistent and conspicuous demonstrations of American assurance. As part of a broader initiative supported by the Strategic Multilayer Assessment, this article aims to enhance our understanding of how US Strategic Command can more effectively assure the ROK of American commitment to extended deterrence. Consequently, this article initiates with a literature review that explores contemporary perspectives on nuclear assurance, with a particular emphasis on South Korea. It then proceeds to analyze semi-structured interviews conducted with more than a dozen prominent Korean security experts in both the United States and South Korea. Each expert answered a set of questions concerning South Korean support for nuclear weapons and the potential implications for the nation. The article concludes with a series of recommendations designed to assist US Strategic Command in improving assurance efforts.

Literature Review

If Denis Healy, former Defense Minister of the United Kingdom, is correct in asserting that "[i]t only takes five per cent credibility to deter the Russians, but ninety-five per cent to reassure the Europeans," understanding assurance becomes

¹⁷ Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, "Cheonan and Yeonpyeong," *RUSI Journal* 156, no. 2 (2010): 74–81.

¹⁸ So Gu Kim, "Forensic Seismology Vis-à-Vis an Underwater Explosion for the ROKS Cheonan Sinking in the Yellow Sea of the Korean Peninsula," *International Journal of Physics Research and Applications* 6 (2023): 73–89, <https://www.physicsresjournal.com/>; "North Korean Artillery Hits South Korean Island," *BBC*, 23 November 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/>; and Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984–Present," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23 April 2023, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/>.

¹⁹ Associated Press, "North Korea's Kim Orders 'Exponential' Expansion of Nuclear Arsenal," *National Public Radio*, 1 January 2023, <https://www.npr.org/>.

paramount when examining South Korean perspectives on nuclear weapons.²⁰ Although there is no single universally accepted definition of *assurance*, scholars offer valuable explanations and descriptions of this concept.

The earliest definition of assurance is found in Thomas Schelling's *Arms and Influence*, where he suggests assurance is a measure of credibility one state has with an adversary in promising not to undertake a negative action.²¹ Initially, assurance, according to Schelling and others, primarily related to the perceived capacity to deter. It was only later that deterrence became associated with dealing with adversaries, while assurance became linked with allies.²² The 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* stands out as one of the earliest defense documents to clearly distinguish between assurance of allies and partners, defining it as one of four key defense policy goals.²³

In more recent scholarship, David Yost defines *assurance* as “communicating a credible message of confidence in the dependability of security commitments.”²⁴ Expanding on this definition in the context of American assurance of South Korea, Go Myung-hyun adds, “Assurance goes beyond effective deterrence as it requires the United States to foster and maintain a firm belief in its allies that it will come to their defense should deterrence fail.”²⁵ As Go points out, assurance is less about deterring adversaries and more about ensuring that allies feel safeguarded.

Australian scholar Rod Lyon provides further clarification to our understanding of assurance. He proposes that assurance can be categorized into two forms: positive and negative.²⁶ Positive assurance stems from one country's commitments to another, outlining specific behaviors in given circumstances, thus reassuring through specific commitments. Negative assurance, on the other hand, arises from one country's commitment to another regarding actions it will refrain from taking. A similar perspective is shared by Jeffrey Knopf, who contends that “Assurances are

²⁰ Michael Ruhle, “Deterrence: What It Can (and Cannot) Do,” *NATO Review*, 20 April, 2015, <https://www.nato.int/>.

²¹ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 74.

²² Jeffrey Knopf, “Varieties of Assurance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012): 375–99.

²³ Donald Rumsfeld, *Quadrennial Defense Review* (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, 2001), 14.

²⁴ David Yost, “Assurance and US Extended Deterrence in NATO,” *International Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2009), 775.

²⁵ Myong-Hyun Go, *North Korean Provocations and the Challenges for the ROK-US Alliance* (Seoul: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2022), 7–9.

²⁶ Rod Lyon, “The Challenges Confronting US Extended Nuclear Assurance in Asia,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July 2013); 929–41, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

promises. They involve declarations or signals meant to convey a commitment to take or refrain from taking certain actions in the future.”²⁷

Knopf introduces an additional element to consider—*reassurance*. In this context, one state seeks to convince another state that it holds no hostile intentions and will refrain from taking negative actions. Essentially, reassurance involves persuading a potential adversary that there are no harmful intentions.²⁸

David Santoro and John K. Warden explain that assurance can manifest in various forms. Activities such as dialogues, consultations, joint planning, and enhancing relations across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains all have the potential to contribute to improved assurance.²⁹ In both the European and Korean experiences, the presence of US troops serves as a vital tool for assurance.

As the ROK–US alliance celebrated its seventieth year in Washington, DC, in April 2023, it is unsurprising that the alliance has experienced its share of difficulties. North Korea’s initial nuclear weapon test in 2006 fundamentally altered the significance of the alliance with the United States for both South Korea and Japan. According to Keith Payne, the ROK requested the return of nuclear weapons to South Korea for the first time since their withdrawal in 1991.³⁰ South Korean Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-un urged the United States to declare that any use of nuclear weapons against the ROK would trigger a nuclear response.³¹ However, over the years, the United States chose not to reintroduce nuclear weapons to the peninsula. During this period, the DPRK conducted an additional five nuclear tests and developed a range of nuclear-capable short- and long-range ballistic and cruise missiles capable of targeting South Korea and the United States.³²

The United States’ reluctance to respond robustly to North Korean provocations, such as the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* in 2010 or the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in the same year, left South Koreans uncertain about US commitment. Additionally, Washington actively worked to dissuade Seoul from mounting forceful responses to these events, a factor that contributed to shaping South Korean perspectives on the credibility of US deterrence.

²⁷ Jeffrey Knopf, *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 3.

²⁸ Knopf, *Security Assurances*, 14.

²⁹ David Santoro and John K. Warden, “Assuring Japan and South Korea in the Second Nuclear Age,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 147–65.

³⁰ Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, “A History of US Nuclear Weapons in South Korea,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* 73, no. 6 (2017), 349–57.

³¹ Keith B. Payne, “On Nuclear Deterrence and Assurance,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 43–80, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

³² Terrence Roehrig, “The US Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea: Nuclear Weapons and Extended Deterrence,” *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 4 (Winter 2017–2018): 651–84, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

For South Korea, geography does not offer a favorable position. China, which historically dominated the Korean Peninsula for a millennium, is reasserting itself and presents a long-term challenge for Seoul.³³ The DPRK, governed by a Kim family regime that South Koreans both fear and struggle to comprehend, is rapidly advancing its nuclear and missile capabilities, capable of causing significant harm to South Korea.³⁴ Russia, too, eyes Korea with aspirations, continually seeking access to warm-water ports and greater strategic flexibility. South Koreans have not forgotten the Japanese occupation of Korea throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century, with its associated horrors.³⁵ In short, South Korea looks in every direction and perceives threats posed by better-armed powers, leading to concerns about whether the United States would prioritize San Francisco over Seoul.

In 2007, the Department of State's International Security Advisory Board published the *Report on Discouraging a Cascade of Nuclear Weapons States*, emphasizing the importance of the nuclear umbrella for American allies. Even then, during a period of relative peace and prior to China and North Korea's significant nuclear arsenals expansion, the report warned that US assurances were beginning to ring hollow.³⁶ Despite the United States' ongoing modernization of the strategic triad, South Koreans harbor a long-standing skepticism about US commitment and view an independent nuclear arsenal, coupled with the presence of US troops, as the preferable option.³⁷

Within the English-language scholarly literature, there is limited support for an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal, the return of American nuclear weapons, or any form of nuclear-sharing agreement. Joshua Byun and Do Young Lee specifically argue against a nuclear-sharing arrangement, which is often seen by many South Koreans as a middle-ground solution.³⁸ According to Byun and Lee, there are four reasons why such an approach is ill-advised. First, there is no common frontline in America's East Asian alliances. Second, there is a shortage of limited targets to strike. Third, the United States maintains a favorable conventional balance. Fourth, the ROK possesses a superior military compared to the

³³ Taylor Washburn, "How an Ancient Kingdom Explains Today's China-Korea Relations," *The Atlantic*, 15 April 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

³⁴ See: Jung H. Pak, *Becoming Kim Jung Un* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2020).

³⁵ "South Korea and Japan's Feud Explained," *BBC*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

³⁶ Charles R. Robb, *Report on Discouraging a Cascade of Nuclear Weapons States* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2007).

³⁷ Alexander Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 57, 110–30; "Nuclear Weapons: Why South Koreans Want Them," *BBC*, 22 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/>; and Son and Yim, "Correlates of South Korean Public Opinion."

³⁸ Joshua Byun and Do Young Lee, "The Case Against Nuclear Sharing in East Asia," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 67–87.

DPRK. Consequently, the return of nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula under a nuclear-sharing agreement would be deemed unnecessary.³⁹

Furthermore, concerns persist that nuclear sharing could trigger preemptive aggression on the part of North Korea. The rhetoric of former President Trump left many South Koreans apprehensive that the ROK could become entangled in a nuclear conflict between the United States and the DPRK, not of its own making. For some allies, the United States leans excessively on nuclear weapons to ensure security, thereby rendering them a necessity. As pointed out by Alexander Lanoszka, US domestic politics frequently influence Washington's foreign policy responses to emerging challenges.⁴⁰

The removal of US nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula in December 1991 raised concerns among South Koreans. However, with the Cold War drawing to a close, there was substantial optimism that tensions might significantly diminish. The turning point for US–ROK relations occurred in 2000 when South Korea's president, Kim Dae-jung, shifted to an engagement policy with the DPRK. It was not until North Korea's first nuclear weapons test in 2006 that South Koreans elected conservative Lee Myung-bak as president. Lee aimed to restore the alliance, and Defense Minister Kim Jae-yong publicly announced that the ROK would request the United States to redeploy nuclear weapons to South Korea by 2010, sending a clear signal of South Korean apprehensions.⁴¹

Despite ongoing weapons testing and missile development by North Korea, the United States did not return nuclear weapons.⁴² Now, more than a decade since South Korea's request for the return of US nuclear weapons, the country is often described by experts as resembling the United States in its political division.⁴³ This often results in the presidency alternating between progressives (Democratic Party of Korea, DP) and conservatives (People Power Party, PPP).⁴⁴ Progressives favor negotiations with North Korea, while conservatives advocate for stronger ties with

³⁹ Byun and Lee, "The Case Against Nuclear Sharing," 75.

⁴⁰ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, 44.

⁴¹ Scott Snyder and Joyce Lee, "Infusing Commitment with Credibility: The Role of Security Assurances in Cementing the US-ROK Alliance," in *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation*, ed. Jeffrey Knopf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 175.

⁴² See: Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of North Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 November 2022, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/>; and Mary Beth Nikitin, *North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023).

⁴³ Duyeon Kim, "How to Keep South Korea from Going Nuclear," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* 76, no. 2 (2020): 69–74. See also: Lami Kim, "South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?," *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 115–33.

⁴⁴ TK, "South Korea's Political Parties: The Basics," *The Blue Roof*, 6 September 2020, <https://www.bluroofpolitics.com/>.

the United States and either the return of US nuclear weapons or, preferably, the development of an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal.

Prior to the narrow election of conservative Yoon Suk-yeol in March 2022, progressive Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) led a largely unsuccessful effort to improve inter-Korean relations.⁴⁵ Moon's endeavors concluded much like previous South Korean de-escalation efforts, with continued North Korean nuclear and missile development. Donald Trump's presidency coincided with the Moon administration, catching South Koreans largely unprepared. The deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missiles deeply offended Beijing, which imposed economic sanctions on South Korea.⁴⁶ President Trump's public questioning of the US–ROK alliance and willingness to bypass President Moon to engage directly with Kim Jong-un often left the Moon administration on the defensive, questioning whether the United States would provide support if North Korea took aggressive action against the South.

For North Korea and the Kim regime, periodic strains in the US–ROK relationship are perceived as a positive sign that the DPRK's strategy is effective. As noted by Go Myung-hyun, the DPRK considers regular US–ROK military exercises akin to North Korean nuclear tests. Thus, North Korea aims to ultimately create a disconnect in threat perception between Washington and Seoul by heightening its nuclear threats. As Go asserts, "Ultimately, North Korea aims to decouple threat perception between Washington and Seoul by heightening its nuclear threats. Pyongyang is inciting decoupling between Washington and Seoul by sowing doubts about US extended deterrence. This shows that undermining assurance is also an important North Korean strategic objective."⁴⁷

Cho Young-won presents three reasons why North Korea pursued and continues to engage in provocative actions related to its nuclear program. First, the DPRK's conventional capabilities weakened, while the ROK achieved conventional superiority, making nuclear weapons the most cost-effective choice (costing USD 3 billion in the first decade). Second, the DPRK's apprehensions of a potential US nuclear strike heightened following the collapse of the Soviet Union and a decrease in Chinese commitment. Third, nuclear weapons serve as the most effective means to ensure the survival of the regime. In essence, North Korea's strategy represents

⁴⁵ Choe Sang-Hun, "Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korean Conservative Leader, Wins Presidency," *New York Times*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/>; and Charlie Campbell, "The Negotiator," *Time*, 4 May 2017, <https://time.com/>.

⁴⁶ Kim, "South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?" 116–17.

⁴⁷ Go Myong-Hyun, *North Korean Provocations and the Assurance Challenge for the ROK-US Alliance* (Seoul, Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2022), 8.

a form of “poor man’s deterrence.”⁴⁸ It is crucial to keep in mind that the Kim regime still aspires to reunify the peninsula under the North Korean flag, and undermining the US–ROK alliance remains a top priority for Kim Jong-un.

South Korean public opinion consistently supports the return of American nuclear weapons or, as indicated by survey respondents, the development of an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against this threat.⁴⁹ The following section outlines the methodology employed in interviews with experts who possess insights into South Korean perspectives on nuclear weapons. These experts were drawn from inside and outside government and from the United States and South Korea.

Methodology

To gain profound insights into South Korean perspectives regarding the utility of nuclear weapons, we employed the structured interview technique. We conducted interviews with over a dozen American and South Korean experts, specifically chosen for their expertise in Korean security and familiarity with South Korean public opinion polls concerning nuclear weapons. As these interview participants had close affiliations with either the United States or South Korean governments, serving as military officers, civil servants, or experts linked to government-related think tanks, I ensured their anonymity.

I selected interviews as the methodological approach because this article focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of how the United States and US Strategic Command can enhance the assurance of American extended deterrence to South Korea. As part of this endeavor, gaining a more detailed understanding of South Korean perspectives on security threats, the return of American nuclear weapons, and the desire for an indigenous nuclear weapons program was crucial. If an interview is defined as “a conversation with a purpose,” then the qualitative interview, which captures an individual’s perspectives, experiences, emotions, and narratives with guidance from the interviewer, is an appropriate method to achieve my desired outcomes.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Young-won Cho, “Method to the Madness of Chairman Kim: The Instrumental Rationality of North Korea’s Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons,” *International Journal* 69, no. 1 (2014): 5–25; and Christy Lee, “North Korea Likely to Continue Escalating Threats Next Year, Experts Say,” *Voice of America*, 7 December 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

⁴⁹ Son and Yim, “Correlates of South Korean Public Opinion,” 1–30; Dalton, Friedhoff, and Kim, *Thinking Nuclear*, 3–4; and Kim, “How to Keep South Korea from Going Nuclear,” 68–75.

⁵⁰ R. Kahn and C. Cannell, *The Dynamics of Interviewing: Theory, Technique and Cases* (Oxford: Wiley and Sons, 1957), 149; and Felice Billups, *Qualitative Data Collection Tools* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2021), 36.

Admittedly, interviews come with various strengths and weaknesses and are not universally suitable for all research.⁵¹ As a research method, interviewing represents an intensive approach to data collection, aimed at gathering information about participants' experiences, viewpoints, and beliefs.⁵² The use of structured interviews, and allowing participants to provide information beyond the predefined set of questions, offers flexibility in the interview process.⁵³

For this specific research project, the primary risk associated with the interview process was the potential oversight of South Korean cultural norms and expectations.⁵⁴ To mitigate this risk, both the set of questions and the interview approach underwent scrutiny by American personnel with experience in Korea and familiarity with South Korean cultural norms. This refinement enhanced the design of culturally sensitive questions, ensuring they were posed within an appropriate cultural context.

The structured interview approach chosen was not intended to yield quantitative data. Given the limited number of Korean security subject matter experts who also possess knowledge of South Korean public opinion, this method was deemed appropriate. It is worth noting that Margaret Harrell and Melissa Bradley's *Data Collection Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups* provides a comprehensive guide for designing questionnaires, like the one used in this study.⁵⁵ In summary, the approach adopted—structured interviews—proved to be the optimal methodology.

More than a dozen subject matter experts from both the United States and South Korea participated in these interviews, conducted via Microsoft Teams and averaging 60–90 minutes each. The results of these interviews offer significant clarity in understanding South Korean public opinion and the perspectives of experts who specialize in the issues under discussion. As expected, there were nuances, which we discuss in the following section.

⁵¹ Billups, *Qualitative Data Collection Tools*, 37–40.

⁵² Carl Patton and David Sawicki, *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 97; and Sylvie D. Lambert and Carmen G. Loiselle, "Combining Individual Interviews and Focus Groups to Enhance Data Richness," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 2 (2008): 228–37, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵³ Frances Ryan, Michael Coughlan, and Patricia Cronin, "Interviewing in Qualitative Research: The One-to-One Interview," *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation* 16, no. 6 (2009), 310.

⁵⁴ Eva Codo, "Interviews and Questionnaires," in *The Blackwell Guide to Research Methods in Bilingualism and Multilingualism*, ed. Li Wei and Melissa J. Moyer, (New York: Blackwell, 2008), 162.

⁵⁵ Margaret Harrell and Melissa Bradley, *Data Collection Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2009).

Analysis

Participants in these interviews were drawn from both the American and South Korean military, civil service, and think tanks, many of which had close government affiliations. Individual anonymity has been preserved in the subsequent analysis, aiming to provide interviewees with the freedom to candidly respond to questions. The analysis that follows reveals intriguing patterns in their responses. Despite participants holding political views spanning the left, right, and center, it was often their nationality—rather than their political perspective—that emerged as the most significant factor influencing their outlook. In essence, American and South Korean subject matter experts exhibit distinct perspectives on the nuclear issue, suggesting that Miles' Law may apply to nationality as effectively as it does to bureaucratic position.⁵⁶

Below is an analysis of participant responses, structured according to the sequence in which the nine questions were presented during the interviews. Each question is accompanied by a description and an analysis of the responses. Notably, when participants diverged from the specific questions and delved into broader topics, they provided some of the most insightful information, and these insights are also included.

Over the past decade, a number of public opinion polls show that an increasing percentage of South Koreans support nuclear weapons in South Korea—either a return of American nuclear weapons or an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal. What are the reasons motivating this increase in support for nuclear weapons in South Korea?

For more than a decade, public opinion polling in South Korea consistently indicates that citizen support for the return of American nuclear weapons or the development of an indigenous nuclear arsenal remains at around 70 percent. This figure declines significantly when respondents are informed about potential sanctions that might accompany South Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons.⁵⁷ Interview participants unanimously concurred that the primary driving force behind South Korean support for nuclear weapons is the DPRK's expanding nuclear arsenal. As one Korean participant emphasized, "Koreans want to be liberated from fear." Additionally, South Koreans favor an indigenous nuclear arsenal to a lesser extent

⁵⁶ Rufus Miles, "The Origin and Meaning of Miles Law," *Public Administration Review* 38, no. 5 (1978): 399–403. Miles' Law suggests where you sit (position), determines where you stand (on an issues).

⁵⁷ See: Sang Sin Lee et al., *KINU Unification Survey 2023: Public Opinion on South Korea's Nuclear Armament* (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification, 2023), <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/>.

for reasons of prestige. To echo the sentiments of most American and South Korean participants, if a relatively impoverished and underdeveloped country like North Korea can assemble a nuclear arsenal, why can't South Korea?

There was widespread consensus that the public leans toward the development of an indigenous nuclear arsenal rather than a return of American nuclear weapons. South Korean interviewees pointed out that the most significant factor influencing support for nuclear weapons is political affiliation, with conservatives displaying a much higher likelihood of endorsing nuclear weapons compared to progressives. Politics in South Korea closely mirror those in the United States.⁵⁸

Finally, interview participants suggested that many South Koreans harbor concerns about the credibility of American extended deterrence. As mentioned earlier, three past presidents flirted with the idea of withdrawing American troops from South Korea, leading many South Koreans to apprehend that the United States might not prioritize its commitments to Seoul over its own national security. There are also fears that in the event of a conflict between China and the United States, South Korea could be left vulnerable.⁵⁹ Consequently, an indigenous nuclear arsenal is viewed as the optimal choice, or at the very least, a return of US nuclear weapons could serve as evidence of US commitment to ROK security.

What do South Koreans think about the ramifications of both a return of American nuclear weapons and an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal?

Opinion polls over the past decade have rarely included specific questions regarding the public's awareness of the potential costs associated with either an indigenous nuclear weapons program or the return of American nuclear weapons. However, the *KINU Unification Survey 2023*, published in June, delved into previous survey responses and posed more detailed questions to current respondents regarding nuclear weapons and their consequences.⁶⁰ For instance, when survey participants were presented with a general inquiry about their support for nuclear weapons in South Korea, 60 percent expressed support. However, when given the choice between maintaining American troops in South Korea or pursuing an indigenous nuclear weapons program, backing for nuclear weapons dropped dra-

⁵⁸ Yoon Chae-yung, "Public Opinion Poll: 35.2% of Its Own Nuclear Armament, 16% of the United States' Tactical Nuclear Redeployment, 40% of Maintaining Denuclearization," *News24*, 10 October 2022, <https://www.news24.com/>.

⁵⁹ Leon Whyte, "Evolution of the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Abandonment Fears," *The Diplomat*, 22 June 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁶⁰ Sang et al., *KINU Unification Survey 2023*.

matically.⁶¹ As one South Korean interviewee emphasized, “We should not exchange the alliance for nuclear weapons.”

The South Korean public’s limited understanding of the potential costs associated with nuclear weapons, whether US or indigenous, was a point of unanimous agreement among both American and South Korean interview participants. South Koreans, for instance, rarely contemplate the likely ramifications of withdrawing from the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). They possess only a vague notion of the costs associated with a nuclear weapons program. While South Korean experts within government and major think tanks have a better grasp of these costs, they, too, are largely unfamiliar with the specific sanctions stipulated in US law.⁶²

Interview participants anticipate that the United States would impose sanctions on South Korea if it were to pursue an indigenous weapons program. However, South Korean participants expressed optimism that the United States would treat South Korea similarly to Pakistan after discovering its nuclear weapons program and, subsequently, after conducting a nuclear test in 1998—imposing limited sanctions for a brief period. For South Korean proponents of nuclear weapons, the preferred option is the development of an indigenous arsenal that would position South Korea akin to the United Kingdom, as a nuclear-armed ally of the United States.

How do you see South Koreans weighing the return of American nuclear weapons versus an independent South Korean nuclear arsenal? Do they prefer one over the other?

Both American and South Korean interview respondents agreed that the majority of South Koreans favor the development of an indigenous nuclear arsenal. As previously discussed, the concern that the United States might prioritize the defense of San Francisco over Seoul, coupled with South Koreans’ perception of their global standing, drives their preference for an independent arsenal. Nevertheless, some older South Koreans and defense experts view the return of US nuclear weapons as a compromise solution that enhances ROK security while averting sanctions from the United States, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the United Nations, and other international organizations. As one South Korean participant articulated, “A US return allows Koreans to have their cake and it eat too.”

⁶¹ Sang et al., *KINU Unification Survey 2023*, 21.

⁶² Newell Highsmith, “Would the US Sanction Allies Seeking the Bomb?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 April 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

Are other measures of American assurance, such as increased military integration, public statements of commitment, and expanded information sharing, adequate demonstrations of American commitment to ROK security?

One South Korean participant succinctly summarized the perspective of many South Koreans with the phrase, “You can never say I love you too much.” Consistent with this sentiment, both American and South Korean participants indicated that the Washington Declaration and its initial efforts are already enhancing assurance. South Korean participants emphasized the importance of ongoing information sharing, the integration of nuclear planning and operations, and the deployment or stationing of strategic assets in South Korea. Additionally, it was suggested that in the absence of a return of nuclear weapons to South Korea, the nuclear submarine-launched cruise missile was the preferred option because it offers greater tactical utility compared to a submarine-launched ballistic missile.

One South Korean expert noted that the assurance challenge primarily involves the United States and the ROK defense community, as they are concerned that Americans might be diverted from Korean security in the event of a Taiwan conflict. There is apprehension that North Korea could take advantage of such a situation to alter the status quo. Therefore, the desire for closer integration between US Strategic Command and South Korea’s new Strategic Command is of utmost importance.⁶³ South Korean defense experts, like many of their American counterparts, view the possibility of conflict between China and the United States as a significant and definite challenge for the ROK.

How do South Koreans think the United States would respond to ROK efforts to build an independent nuclear arsenal?

Without reiterating the previously mentioned points, it’s essential to acknowledge that there is no unanimous consensus among experts, whether American or South Korean, regarding the actions that the United States or the international community might take if South Korea were to develop nuclear weapons. South Korean public opinion on this matter is also divided. According to South Korean interview participants, the occupant of the White House is arguably the most significant factor in determining any US response.

⁶³ Shin Ji-hye, “Military to Establish ‘Strategic Command’ by 2024 to Control Three-axis System,” *Korea Herald*, 6 July 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/>.

Does South Korean elite opinion differ markedly from the broader public's view on nuclear weapons and the impact of developing a nuclear program?

For more than a decade, the South Korean public consistently showed higher support for nuclear weapons compared to South Korean elites. However, this trend is undergoing a shift as a larger proportion of elites are now expressing support for the return of nuclear weapons, whether American or indigenous. The elite class's understanding of the economic and security implications of an indigenous nuclear weapons program consistently drove down support, even though elites, both in and out of government, were generally more skeptical of US extended deterrence. The growing nuclear arsenal of the DPRK and the United States' perceived failure to deter Kim Jong-un's ambitions are causing both the public and elite opinion to align more closely on this issue.

During an interview with a South Korean expert, it was emphasized that fewer than a dozen specialists are actively driving the debate in South Korea. There is a notable scarcity of individuals with even a basic understanding of nuclear deterrence and proliferation. Interestingly, the Korean security experts interviewed for this study were all well-versed in South Korean public opinion polls and their results, which greatly contributed to understanding Korean perspectives.

How do South Koreans and their political leaders think China will respond to either the return of American nuclear weapons to the Peninsula or an independent Republic of Korea nuclear program?

For readers unfamiliar with South Korea's perspective, it is crucial to recognize that any discussion about China posing a threat to the ROK is an extremely sensitive topic. The People's Republic of China is South Korea's largest trading partner and has shown a willingness to leverage its economic power to retaliate against any criticism it disagrees with. This creates a situation of "China restraint," where South Korean defense experts are hesitant to openly criticize China due to the economic repercussions it could entail. South Korean concerns in this regard are entirely reasonable. For instance, when the United States deployed THAAD ballistic missile defenses to South Korea in 2017, China used its economic leverage to pressure and punish South Korea.⁶⁴ This sensitivity is challenging for Americans to fully grasp given their global position.

⁶⁴ Ethan Meick and Nargiza Salidjanova, *China's Response to U.S.-South Korean Missile Defense System Deployment and its Implications* (Washington, DC: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2017), <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

Nevertheless, among South Korean participants, there was an acknowledgment that China is becoming an increasingly significant concern. The ongoing actions of Xi Jinping, in particular, raise worries. These experts held varying views on how China might react to an indigenous South Korean nuclear program. While there was an expectation of Chinese sanctions, some believed that China might not view a South Korean arsenal as a direct threat, understanding the intention to deter North Korean ambitions. From the South Korean perspective, the worst-case scenario would involve China increasing its support for the DPRK.

If the Republic of Korea were to develop an independent nuclear arsenal, what would be the main objectives of the effort—diplomatic, military, economic?

As expressed by one South Korean participant, the prevailing sentiment can be summed up as “DPRK, DPRK, DPRK!” It comes as no surprise that the looming threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear arsenal was the predominant reason cited by experts for considering the pursuit of an indigenous nuclear arsenal. Additionally, some mentioned that South Korea’s interest in nuclear weapons also carries an element of prestige. As one South Korean interviewee remarked, “Security is the only reason, but some talk about prestige.” It is important to note that the significance of prestige only arises because of the DPRK’s expanding arsenal. In the absence of North Korea’s nuclear threat, there would be minimal support for nuclear weapons in South Korea.

What do South Koreans and their political leaders think about the American role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) versus Korea—as it relates to nuclear weapons?

Both American and South Korean participants reached a consensus that the South Korean public desires an alliance akin to NATO, driven by the perception that the European alliance is stronger than American commitment to the ROK. The NATO dual-capable aircraft mission holds appeal for the ROK military, as it is viewed as the most practical means to exhibit nuclear deterrence, involving F-35s equipped with B61 nuclear gravity bombs. However, there exists a widespread misunderstanding among most South Koreans regarding NATO’s nuclear mission, with a mistaken belief that NATO member-states have considerably more access and authority over American nuclear weapons than is the reality. The collective defense obligations outlined in the Atlantic Charter’s Article 5 are perceived as

placing a much more robust requirement on the United States to defend NATO compared to the obligations in the US–South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty.⁶⁵

In 2022, South Korea initiated a mission to NATO, partly with the aim of gaining deeper insights into the inner workings of the alliance.⁶⁶ As the sole alternative to the US–South Korea alliance, South Koreans seek a better understanding of NATO, contemplating whether modifications should be pursued in their own alliance with the United States. Additionally, there exists an unspoken concern among many South Koreans that the United States might be more committed to defending NATO, driven by the fact that most Americans can trace their ancestry to Europe. This suspicion has been exacerbated by periodic suggestions from US presidents about the potential withdrawal of US troops from South Korea.

The analysis of interview responses provides valuable insights into the perspectives of the South Korean public and Korean security experts. The following recommendations are aimed at outlining ways in which US Strategic Command can bolster South Korean assurance, particularly in the face of growing belligerence from both North Korea and China.

Recommendations

The work of scholars examining assurance and the insights gathered from interview participants contribute to the formulation of recommendations that could aid US Strategic Command in reinforcing American assurance of South Korea. While it is acknowledged that not all these recommendations may be feasible for various reasons, they warrant consideration as the command assumes a more significant role in assuring South Korea and the broader Asian region. The introductory sections of this study outlined the eight main lines of effort within the Washington Declaration, and several of these efforts are detailed below.

First, reassess the classification requirements for information that can be shared with the ROK. South Korea's primary aspiration is to gain deeper insights into how the United States approaches the use of nuclear weapons. Reviewing classification guidelines, including involving the South Korean liaison officer at STRATCOM in more discussions, could substantially enhance assurance.

Second, conduct classified wargames in collaboration with the ROK that incorporate scenarios involving North Korean nuclear weapon use and potential US

⁶⁵ Katherine Ebright, "NATO's Article 5 Collective Defense Obligations, Explained," Brennan Center, 15 November 2022, <https://www.brennancenter.org/>; and Emma Chanlett-Avery and Caitlin Campbell, *US–South Korea Alliance: Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022).

⁶⁶ Nam Hyun-woo, "South Korea's Mission to NATO Approved," *Korea Times*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/>.

nuclear responses. Even if these wargames take the form of tabletop exercises, they can offer South Korea valuable insights into American strategic thinking. Developing a shared operational understanding of when and how the United States would react to a North Korean nuclear event is a key objective of such exercises.

Third, provide support to the ROK in establishing its new Strategic Command. While United States Forces Korea and Combined Forces Command have a well-established history of collaboration with the South Korean military, assisting in the development of a strategic culture within the ROK will further strengthen mutual trust. Embedding STRATCOM personnel within the new command structure would be mutually beneficial for both nations.

Fourth, establish a mechanism for South Korean intelligence, military, and foreign affairs professionals to contribute to American understanding of the DPRK. South Koreans possess invaluable insights into the workings of the Kim regime that surpass American understanding. Creating a platform for them to enhance their input will grant the ROK a voice they currently feel is lacking.

Fifth, maintain the initiatives that have emerged from the Washington Declaration. These efforts have proven effective by all accounts. A recent visit to Seoul by General Anthony Cotton, the Commander of US Strategic Command, exemplifies actions demonstrating the United States' commitment to Korean security.⁶⁷

Sixth, integrate nuclear weapons into existing ROK–US joint exercises. This will afford South Koreans the opportunity to operate in scenarios where nuclear weapons are a factor. Such a visible display of US commitment holds significant importance for South Korea.

Seventh, deploy strategic assets to South Korea. While the port call of the USS *Kentucky* in Busan clearly signaled US commitment, periodic deployments of B-52s, for instance, would serve as a robust demonstration of US assurance.⁶⁸

Eighth, assist the South Korean military in developing a comprehensive training program encompassing nuclear deterrence theory, strategy, policy, nuclear weapon physics, effects, and radiological response. Establishing a dedicated career field within the ROK army akin to the US Army's Nuclear and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) Functional Area 52 can enhance South Korea's understanding of the multifaceted aspects of nuclear conflict and deterrence.

Ninth, institute a professional continuing education program (unclassified and one-week-long) targeting government officials, military officers, and defense aca-

⁶⁷ Unshin Lee Harpley, "Cotton Talks Extended Deterrence in First Visits to Japan, S. Korea as STRATCOM Boss," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 5 September 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

⁶⁸ Richard Pollina, "Nuclear Sub USS Kentucky Makes First Port Call in South Korea in Four Decades," *New York Post*, 18 July 2023, <https://nypost.com/>.

demics. This program would provide participants with a foundational understanding of nuclear strategy, operations, and policy. Given the limited knowledge of these subjects among South Koreans who influence policy and public opinion, improving their comprehension can help demystify these crucial matters.

Tenth, reconsider sending South Korean government officials, military delegations, and defense experts to Washington, DC, during their visits to the United States. The nation's capital often lacks the necessary nuclear expertise. South Koreans are more interested in gaining insights into nuclear operations than the broader policy toward the ROK. Visits to operational bases, weapons labs, and other tangible manifestations of US extended deterrence serve as more effective assurance mechanisms. Additionally, it is essential to diversify the voices South Koreans hear during these visits, rather than repeatedly presenting the same perspectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the insights gleaned from the preceding pages underscore the complex nature of the assurance challenge with South Korea. It becomes evident that there is no single, straightforward solution to address the concerns of South Koreans, who rightfully harbor apprehensions about both North Korean aggression and the prospect of US disengagement. The historical backdrop reminds us that since the armistice in 1953, North Korea has initiated over 220 provocations, some of which could be deemed acts of war.⁶⁹ Furthermore, as highlighted earlier, three past US presidents have entertained the idea of withdrawing US troops from the ROK, adding to South Korea's unease.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize the larger geopolitical context in which these dynamics are unfolding. China, in its quest to regain dominance in Asia, poses an additional challenge that South Korea must contend with. Given these multifaceted threats, it becomes clear that assuring South Korea effectively to dissuade the pursuit of an indigenous nuclear arsenal requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond merely maintaining an American tripwire force on the Korean Peninsula.

To bolster South Korean confidence and commitment to the alliance, a multifaceted strategy must encompass information sharing, joint wargaming, integration of nuclear capabilities, collaboration in the establishment of South Korea's Strategic Command, and enhancing mutual understanding of each nation's perspectives and concerns. It is incumbent upon US Strategic Command to actively engage in

⁶⁹ Shin Hea-in, "N.K. Commits 221 Provocations Since 1953," *Korea Herald*, 5 June 2011, <https://www.koreaherald.com/>.

these efforts to strengthen US assurance of South Korea in an era where North Korea and China pose increasingly complex challenges to regional stability.

In the face of these intricate dynamics, the path forward demands continued collaboration and adaptability on the part of both nations. By addressing the multifaceted dimensions of the assurance challenge and fostering a deeper, mutual understanding, the United States can work alongside South Korea to build a more secure and stable future for the region. 🌟

Adam B. Lowther, PhD

Dr. Lowther, a nuclear deterrence expert, currently serves as the Vice President of Research at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies and host of *Nuclecast*. This article was written for the National Strategic Research Institute (NSRI) and sponsored by the Strategic Multilayer Assessment. Dr. Lowther's extensive background includes directing multi-domain operations programs at the Army Management Staff College (AMSC) and teaching at the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS).

He also served as the founding director of the School of Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies (SANDS) at Kirtland AFB and directed the Center for Academic and Professional Journals at the Air Force Research Institute (AFRI), overseeing publications like *Strategic Studies Quarterly* and the *Air & Space Power Journal*. Dr. Lowther is a prolific author and contributor to various publications, including the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Joint Force Quarterly*, and *Strategic Studies Quarterly*.

Irregular Influence

Combating Malign Chinese Communist Party Actions in Southeast Asia

LT COL JEFFREY S. LEHMKUHL, USAFR

Abstract

As the United States seeks to reorient its foreign policy to effectively compete with China, it must gain a profound understanding of China's ambitions. Uncovering the historical roots and driving forces behind Chinese actions is crucial for comprehending the underlying motivations fueling these ambitions. This research scrutinizes the global ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and assesses the strategic means by which it seeks to realize them. It critically examines the CCP's pursuit of global hegemony and outlines its strategy, with a particular focus on its regional ambitions in Southeast Asia. Emphasis is placed on the CCP's utilization of malign influence as a tool to achieve its objectives while carefully avoiding actions that might provoke a military response from the United States. This research is relevant to foreign relations experts and the operational military force alike.¹

China, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), constitutes an amalgamation of Confucian and Marxist-Leninist authoritarian ideologies, drawing significantly from its more recent Maoist history in shaping its approach to “struggle.”² Chinese President Xi Jinping has revived the Maoist adage celebrating “the rise of the East and the decline of the West” as a reflection of shifting dynamics in the world order.³

The CCP actively employs unrestricted warfare tactics in Southeast Asia to achieve its regional objectives, thereby advancing its broader global ambitions with

¹ This article is the first in a two-part series and will focus on the “problem.” It presents a strategic estimate of China's application of influence in Southeast Asia as it relates to competition with the United States. The material serves as a basis for understanding the threat to US interests, the roots that fuel the competition, China's frame, narrative, and strategy, as well as the current US perception and response. Part two of the series will address the estimate and present a course of action for the US government to address and deter CCP actions in Southeast Asia that impede US strategic objectives. It will detail a phased strategy to address the threat, as analyzed in the strategic estimate, as well as the legal authorities, assumptions, risk assessment, and mitigation measures pertaining to this strategy.

² Kevin Rudd, “The Return of Red China: Xi Jinping Brings Back Marxism,” *Foreign Affairs*, 9 November 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

³ Kevin Rudd, “The World According to Xi Jinping: What China's Ideologue in Chief Really Believes,” *Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 101 (2022): 8.

the aim of reorienting the prevailing world order to one centered on Beijing. The CCP adopts a nuanced strategy of irregular warfare (IW), skillfully exploiting the intersection of political warfare and influence to attain its goals while meticulously avoiding actions that could trigger a military response from the United States. This strategy subverts traditional forms of benign statecraft, such as diplomacy, by weaponizing them as instruments of IW.⁴

The CCP executes a sophisticated and deliberate plan that concurrently leverages all elements of power to operationalize the means required to achieve its desired end-state. In Southeast Asia, the constituent objectives converge on the reunification of Taiwan. The security of both the CCP and China itself is fundamental to and intertwined with this objective. Beijing is in the process of implementing a strategy aimed at creating conditions conducive to a forceful reunification of Taiwan, if necessary. This entails securing access to vital resources, establishing institutionalized supply lines, and exporting Chinese influence. Southeast Asia emerges as the pivotal region in ensuring the successful reunification, serving as the initial domino in a broader plan for regional and ultimately global hegemony.⁵

The desires of the CCP are in direct contrast to US regional objectives and impede its capacity to project military power to counter China's ambitions. Without a revamped US strategy for confronting China, both the freedom of movement in the Pacific and US strategic interests will face significant ramifications.

Roots of the Conflict

China's Historical Consciousness

The phrase *wu wang guo chi* (勿忘国耻), translating to “never forget national humiliation,” holds a central place in CCP narratives and is deeply ingrained in the contemporary Chinese psyche.⁶ This narrative is predicated on the framing of the “Century of Humiliation,” spanning the years from 1839 to 1949 when China's

⁴Thomas A. Marks and David H. Ucko, “Gray Zone in Red: The Threat from China's Political Warfare Past,” *Journal of Counterterrorism & Homeland Security International* 26, no. 3 (1 January 2021): 31. For extensive background discussion, Thomas A. Marks, *Counterrevolution in China: Wang Sheng and the Kuomintang* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

⁵CAPT Monthol Yossomsak, Royal Thai Navy, “China and Thailand: Threat or Opportunity?” (thesis, Washington, DC, College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University, 2023), 12, 19.

⁶Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, *Contemporary Asia in the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3.

government lost control over substantial portions of its traditional territory to foreign powers.⁷

This period commenced in 1839 when British gunboats ascended the Yangtze River, compelling China's leadership to open its ports to the opium trade, thus instigating the First Opium War.⁸ Subsequently, the Boxer Rebellion aimed to expel foreigners from China but ultimately failed, culminating in the Boxer Protocol. This accord effectively partitioned control of China among an eight-nation alliance comprising Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the United States, Italy, and Austria-Hungary.⁹ This agreement subjected China to foreign influence and obligated it to pay substantial reparations. Japan also brutally invaded China, culminating in World War II. Additionally, China experienced intermittent internal strife, infighting, and rebellions, which further compounded its challenges.

The period ended when the CCP, led by Mao Zedong, emerged victorious in the Chinese civil war, establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.¹⁰ The consolidation of power by the PRC forced the Kuomintang (KMT) to retreat to Taiwan, setting the stage for the ongoing power struggle known as the "Taiwan question." The imperative of achieving the reunification of Taiwan remains a paramount objective for the CCP, as underscored in official speeches and engagements.¹¹ Deep-seated beliefs regarding the century of humiliation and the reunification of Taiwan serve to solidify the CCP's legitimacy and signify the rectification of a lingering historical injustice. Taiwan's reunification arguably stands as the sole nonnegotiable vestige of that era.¹²

An examination of this historical context is essential for comprehending the Chinese psyche and the narrative employed by the CCP to foster nationalism and solidify its legitimacy. The national trauma associated with the century of humiliation can be likened to the American sentiment following the events of 11 September 2001.¹³ Although many Americans did not directly experience this event, subsequent generations are likely to connect with it through media and storytell-

⁷ Alison A. Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," unclassified testimony before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission (Washington, DC: 10 March 2011), 1, <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

⁸ Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," 2.

⁹ Joseph V. O'Brien, "Boxer Protocol, 1901," in *Information for Students* (website), John Jay College of Criminal Justice, n.d., <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/>.

¹⁰ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 84.

¹¹ Xi Jinping, *Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects*, Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Beijing, China, October 16, 2022), 4.

¹² Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," 1.

¹³ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 3.

ing. In contemporary China, the four Chinese characters 勿忘国耻 have acquired symbolic significance and are enshrined in nationalistic pledges and educational materials for the youth. This is complemented by the CCP's construction and renovation of more than 10,000 memorial sites since 1991, serving to amplify patriotism.¹⁴

Distrust of the Liberal Order

The CCP harbors deep distrust toward the current organization of the liberal international order. This sentiment primarily stems from the century of humiliation and the perception that China was exploited for the benefit of the West. Many in China regard the Western-led liberal order as an ill-fitting "suit," considering it a relic of the nineteenth century that retains its combative nature and has essentially remained unaltered since its inception.¹⁵ They see it as a Western-created relic of the nineteenth century that is combative in nature and has remained essentially unchanged since its inception. According to this worldview, the present international order is a rigged system designed to uphold the existing status quo.

Beijing identifies the United States as the current global hegemon and the principal beneficiary in perpetuating the status quo. Consequently, this aligns the United States and, by extension, the West, with the prevailing system. China's concern with this status quo is profound, driven by the belief that the system comprises both strong and weak nation-states competing for dominance. However, those with the greatest power, such as the United States, can control outcomes in their favor.¹⁶ China's mistrust of the current world order, coupled with its perception of vulnerability, fuels the CCP's imperative to reshape the existing international order in its favor.¹⁷

Ironically, China has prospered within the confines of the current international order. It has transformed itself from a divided, developing state into the world's second-largest economy, poised to become the largest by some measures in the coming years.¹⁸ In 1971, China secured a permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council, replacing Taiwan, which held the legacy China seat, and has assumed global leadership roles with Chinese officials leading four of the fifteen

¹⁴ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 6.

¹⁵ Fu Ying, "The US World Order Is a Suit That No Longer Fits," *Financial Times*, 6 January 2016, <https://www.ft.com/>.

¹⁶ Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," 6.

¹⁷ Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," 7.

¹⁸ "Chinese Economy to Overtake US 'by 2028' Due to Covid," *BBC News*, 26 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

UN specialized agencies.¹⁹ This complexity underscores China's intricate relationship with the existing liberal order.

Despite apparent benefits, China has consistently stressed the need to reform the current international order. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), previously known as the Shanghai Five, frequently employs phrases such as *multipolarity* and *democratizing international relations* in its messaging.²⁰ In 1997, China, along with Russia, issued a joint declaration “a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order.”²¹ Subsequently, China has adopted a more assertive approach to international security strategy.²²

The emphasis on the necessity of a multipolar world may be indicative of future CCP ambitions. Some argue that China seeks a flexible, partial, and adaptable multipolar system that allows it to amass influence before overtly consolidating hegemony, initially at the regional and then global levels.²³ This aligns with China's approach to IW. Although former President Deng Xiaoping's 1992 statement advocating for China to “hide its strength, bide its time, and never take the lead” has evolved under President Xi, the tactic of waiting for the opportune moment remains relevant.²⁴ Consequently, an analysis of CCP messaging regarding its world order preferences and its actions reveals inconsistencies that the party has not addressed.

Chinese Exceptionalism

The concept of Chinese exceptionalism closely parallels that of US exceptionalism. It serves as a framework for understanding China's behavior in international politics, rooted in the perception that China is inherently “good” and “different.”²⁵ This notion plays a pivotal role in CCP strategy, linking Chinese nationalism and narratives to a growing sense of manifest destiny on the global stage.

¹⁹ “China's Approach to Global Governance,” Council on Foreign Relations, n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/>.

²⁰ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Bridging the Gap (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 128.

²¹ “China-Russia: Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order,” *International Legal Materials* 36, no. 4 (July 1997): 986–89, <https://doi.org/>.

²² Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 13.

²³ Nadege Rolland, “China's Vision for a New World Order: Implications for the United States,” Policy & Security Affairs (Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2 October 2020), 3, <https://www.nbr.org/>.

²⁴ Rudd, “The World According to Xi Jinping,” 8.

²⁵ Benjamin Ho, *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: International Order and Global Leadership* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 15, <https://doi.org/>.

Xi assumed power in 2012 and guided China toward an expanding global influence. The rise of antiglobalist populism that brought President Donald Trump to the White House resulted in a temporary decline in US global leadership, which Xi promptly leveraged.²⁶ Substantial gains achieved within a relatively short time-frame fueled a sense of destiny.

At this juncture, the concept of time becomes significant. Prolonged success tends to breed expectations of continued success—a fallacy that exceptionalism can perpetuate. Another pitfall lies in the heightened boldness and risk-taking inherent in decision making. Xi's newfound assertiveness has led to an increase in chauvinism within the CCP. China has actively sought to remove any mention of universal human rights from UN resolutions and has initiated the creation of China-centric international organizations, challenging those established by the West, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the SCO.²⁷ In his address to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi explicitly expressed his intent to assume a more decisive global role and criticized what he termed as “hegemonic, high-handed, and bullying acts of using strength to intimidate the weak.”²⁸ This increasingly audacious critique of global norms signals a more proactive Beijing strategy under Xi.

Xi believes that China has entered a *strategic opportunity phase*, even though this specific term was omitted from the 20th Party Congress report. It remains pertinent to strategic assessment. The 2022 US *National Security Strategy (NSS)* designates China as the primary competitor, aligning with recent US efforts to address the competition with China.²⁹ Xi likely perceives a narrowing window to secure China's ascent now that the US has focused its efforts on addressing the China challenge. The concept of *tianxia* (天下, “all-under-heaven”) presents an area where Chinese exceptionalism may foster expansionism or at least increased influence beyond traditional Chinese territorial boundaries, potentially broadening China's reach.³⁰

Tianxia operates on a civilizational rather than a nation-state basis.³¹ This means that the idea of Chinese Confucian cultural universalism can be exported to the extensive Chinese diaspora worldwide. The *tianxia* system prioritizes soft power

²⁶ Yi Edward Yang, “China's Strategic Narratives in Global Governance Reform under Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 128 (4 March 2021): 299–313, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁷ Rudd, “The World According to Xi Jinping,” 9.

²⁸ Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 42.

²⁹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 12 October 2022), 23, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

³⁰ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 71.

³¹ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 72.

elements such as culture, morality, and harmony over a military role in maintaining order. Central to *tianxia* is the belief that China is the sole true civilization, possessing unchallenged cultural superiority that is exportable and capable of assimilating outsiders. These drivers of exceptionalism are discernible in Xi's official statements and underlie the CCP's influence strategy.³²

Lessons Observed and Lessons Endured

China's perspective on competition with the United States has been significantly influenced by what Rush Doshi refers to as the "traumatic trifecta." This trifecta encompasses the events of Tiananmen Square (1989), the Gulf War (1990–1991), and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991). These events intensified Beijing's concerns about the United States and instigated fundamental shifts in its perception of contemporary warfare.³³

The Tiananmen Square incident solidified the imperative of safeguarding the CCP as the guardians of greater China. Xi emphasizes that the unraveling of a regime often commences with a threatening ideological spark.³⁴ Tiananmen Square provided the CCP with firsthand insight into how rapidly anti-authoritarian sentiment can propagate and the threats it poses to the party.

The Gulf War served as a lesson in US military supremacy. Highly coordinated operations executed at a rapid tempo, combined with technological superiority, resulted in an unexpectedly swift victory. China acknowledged this conflict as a notable shift in the character and pace of warfare. In response, China's Central Military Commission (CMC) conducted a series of studies to analyze the conflict and formulate a strategy to counter the superior military capabilities witnessed in Iraq.³⁵ To offset this military advantage, the CCP adopted the aforementioned strategy of unrestricted warfare, showcasing China's preferred method of warfare by shaping desired outcomes and deceptively establishing conditions that favor future conflicts while avoiding provocations that might trigger a US military response.

The final major lesson shaping CCP strategy and its present actions was the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Beijing observed the fall of an authoritarian communist regime that had previously served as a mentor. The regime's collapse also destabilized China's northern border, necessitating a renewed regional focus. During this period, Chinese scholarly articles on "China Threat Theory" surged,

³² Xi, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism," 42.

³³ Doshi, *The Long Game*, 47.

³⁴ Rudd, "The World According to Xi Jinping," 4.

³⁵ Doshi, *The Long Game*, 75.

coinciding with work on multilateralism.³⁶ The CCP keenly felt the ability of the US hegemon to extend its influence into its backyard, compelling Beijing to develop a strategy to counteract this threat.

The perceived ideological threat posed by liberal ideals, evident in both the events of Tiananmen Square and the Soviet Union's demise, prompted the CCP to initiate the United Front initiative. This initiative seeks to eliminate internal and external adversaries by forging ambitious alliances and partnerships in a common struggle against tyranny, both domestically and internationally. Its application involves eliminating divisions within and rallying opponents to resist US hegemony. A more detailed analysis of this initiative will follow in the subsequent threat strategy. For now, it is sufficient to note that Beijing's assessment of US strengths and the perceived threat it poses drive the CCP's strategy of contention. Southeast Asia has emerged as a pivotal battleground in this contest.

The CCP perceives Southeast Asia as the arena for extending its regional influence and establishing a buffer zone between mainland China and the United States, thereby extending its security perimeter beyond the first island chain. East Asian countries, notably Japan, lie firmly within the sphere of US influence, making Southeast Asia a more feasible target. Additionally, Southeast Asia's geography plays to the CCP's advantage. Dominating access to the South China Sea is more attainable than controlling the open ocean to the east, rendering Southeast Asia pivotal in controlling entry to the region. Lastly, Southeast Asia provides the CCP with the opportunity to set conditions for a forceful reunification of Taiwan, representing the initial step toward regional hegemony.

Frames and Narrative

The frames through which the CCP perceives the world and constructs its narrative are closely linked to the previously outlined historical roots. The CCP's collective memory, marked by its trials and lessons drawn from encounters with the United States, threads its way through the narrative. In this research, China's government is intentionally referred to as the CCP rather than the PRC or the Chinese people. This choice reflects the party's absolute control and the repressive practices associated with authoritarian governance. While CCP propaganda exerts a significant influence on the Chinese population, it would be inaccurate to assert

³⁶ Doshi, *The Long Game*, 107.

that CCP actions represent the broader Chinese populace, notwithstanding the CCP's claim to speak for the "Chinese people," both within China and abroad.³⁷

Diagnostic Frame

The CCP directs attention to perceived historical injustices, using them as a catalyst to amplify supposed injustices in the modern world. Beijing harnesses the century of humiliation as the foundation for portraying Western bullying and aggression, often referred to as the "master narrative."³⁸ This narrative sows the seeds of resistance within the collective psyche of its citizens, carefully selecting kernels of truth to "prove" China's victimization primarily at the hands of the United States.

Building upon these narratives, Xi has initiated a shift away from dwelling solely on humiliation and victimization, emphasizing the CCP's ascent. However, the notion of alleged victimhood continues to underpin the diagnosis of contemporary global issues.

Once the narrative of trauma inflicted by the West is established, attention shifts toward framing enemy actions as the basis for a 'us versus them' struggle that must be overcome. The CCP highlights instances of Western foreign invasions, as exemplified in Iraq and Afghanistan, to illustrate imperialistic tendencies that pose a threat to China.³⁹ Beijing need not search far to fuel concerns about a US threat, particularly after China's elevation to the primary US competitor, as evidenced in the 2022 *NSS*.⁴⁰ Xi has seized upon this to accuse the West of disseminating "anti-China" propaganda. The CCP employs terms such as *racist*, *xenophobic*, or *Sinophobe* when referencing the United States to deflect criticism.⁴¹

Lastly, Beijing points to US involvement in regional Asian affairs and its role as a global "puppet master" within an international system perceived as rigged to disadvantage China. This puppet master narrative is wielded to drive a wedge between Southeast Asian countries and the United States.

Prognostic Frame

In response to this diagnosis of global challenges, the CCP presents itself and greater China as the remedy. The CCP attributes the nation's successful revolution

³⁷ Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangene Vilmer, "Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment" (Paris: Institute for Strategic Research, October 2021), 11, <https://www.irsem.fr/>.

³⁸ Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives in Global Governance," 300–01; and Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 47.

³⁹ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 98.

⁴⁰ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 23.

⁴¹ Charon and Jeangene Vilmer, "Chinese Influence Operations," 11.

to its ability to unite the country, lift it from ruin, and propel it to glory. Without the CCP's leadership, achieving such a feat would have been implausible, serving as a crucial justification for the continuation of its one-party rule.⁴²

Xi portrays a vision of a promising future led by China, poised to rectify the deficiencies of the current international system. He pledges to foster respect through harmony, delivered through the framework of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." China's economic prowess and its willingness to invest in marginalized regions, he contends, stand as evidence of China's benevolent leadership, commitment to mutual respect, and advocacy for a multipolar system.⁴³ The national reunification and subsequent rejuvenation serve as just a glimpse of the global greatness that will result from renewed Chinese leadership in addressing contemporary global issues.⁴⁴ This prognostication is also extendable to Southeast Asia under Xi's vision of "Asia for Asians," which promises increased prosperity through regional harmony.

Motivational Frame

"Now is the time for China!" This is the rallying cry employed by Xi to inspire his party and nation to embrace the task at hand. The CCP has resurrected China, transforming it from a vulnerable nation into one destined to reclaim its central role on the global stage.⁴⁵ The CCP stands alone among modern Chinese political entities for effectively resisting foreign aggression and repelling would-be subjugators.⁴⁶

The "Chinese Dream" is now within reach, which is why Xi emphasizes the advent of a "new era" and explicitly acknowledges its resonance with the people.⁴⁷ The surge in Chinese exceptionalism, rooted in ancient tianxia principles, illustrates the rise of nationalism and signifies a means to disseminate Chinese values beyond its borders.⁴⁸ It is both equitable and rational to reinstate China to its "rightful" position as the paramount global power, rectify the global order, and construct a superior world founded on harmony.⁴⁹

⁴² Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 127.

⁴³ Xi, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism," 43.

⁴⁴ Rudd, "The Return of Red China: Xi Jinping Brings Back Marxism."

⁴⁵ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 91.

⁴⁶ Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," 3.

⁴⁷ Xi, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism," 43.

⁴⁸ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 77.

⁴⁹ Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives in Global Governance," 301. Also, Xi, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism," 15.

Once again, this motivational framework can be adapted for export to Southeast Asia. While the Chinese Dream may not have a direct translation, alternatives for a brighter future do exist. A reimagined international system founded on inclusivity and harmony, coupled with the concept of *tianxia*, holds appeal in Southeast Asia.

Frame Resonance

Frame resonance varies drastically depending on the audience. It is notably high within China’s borders, characterized by a strong sense of patriotism and robust public support.⁵⁰ This is exemplified by internal polls conducted between 2003 and 2016, which yielded an average citizen satisfaction rating regarding the central government at a remarkable 89 percent (see fig. 1).⁵¹ In contrast, US presidents typically average around a 53 percent approval rating.

*Overall Satisfaction by
Level of Government (2003-2016)*

		2003	2004	2005	2007	2009	2011	2015	2016
Central	1	1.3	1.8	1.4	0.6	0.3	1.2	0.4	0.3
	2	7.6	9.5	7.6	5.2	2.9	5.0	6.3	4.0
	3	60.7	59.2	59.8	54.1	50.9	54.5	55.2	61.5
	4	25.4	22.9	20.7	38.2	45.0	37.3	37.6	31.6
	Avg	3.16	3.11	3.11	3.32	3.41	3.3	3.31	3.3
	Dis.	8.9	11.3	9.0	5.8	3.2	6.2	6.7	4.3
	Sat.	86.1	82.1	80.5	92.3	95.9	91.8	92.8	93.1

Figure 1. Pre-COVID CCP Overall Satisfaction Poll (Source: Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jesse Turiel, *Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion through Time* [Cambridge, MA: Ash Center, July 2020], <https://ash.harvard.edu/>.)

The high level of internal resonance arises from several factors. First, it attributes much of its strength to the recent robustness of the Chinese economy, which has brought tangible improvements to the population’s quality of life. Second, the CCP’s absolute control over information and its effective use of propaganda play a pivotal role, and we should not underestimate these aspects. Constructing a narrative hinges on selecting truths that deeply resonate with the target audience while

⁵⁰ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 1.

⁵¹ Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jessie Turiel, *Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion through Time* (Cambridge, MA: Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, July 2020), 3, <https://ash.harvard.edu/>.

discarding counterproductive facts.⁵² The CCP demonstrates selective amnesia regarding its “dark anniversaries,” such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the 1959 Tibetan uprising, or the 1989 Tiananmen Square tragedy. These episodes are perceived as threats to the CCP and are entirely expunged from history, including public displays, textbooks, and any mention in various forms of media.⁵³ Additionally, the CCP narrative adapts as the party’s needs evolve over time to ensure its sustained legitimacy and the advancement of its objectives.⁵⁴ Worth noting is the recent occurrence of protests in China due to Xi’s Zero-COVID policy, which is unusual given the CCP’s strict measures to suppress public dissent.⁵⁵ This suggests some vulnerabilities in the CCP’s control and legitimacy, although it is premature to gauge the depth of this sentiment.

Externally, the CCP’s narrative encounters significantly more resistance and scrutiny. Many individuals and nations appear to regard China’s ascent with apprehension, driven by concerns about its expanding military power, growing international influence, and the repressive nature of the regime. Furthermore, China grapples with an image problem due to allegations of severe human rights violations, exemplified by the confirmed existence of Uyghur internment camps and forced sterilization campaigns on women.⁵⁶ Western countries tend to hold a more negative view of China than their Asian counterparts, although both groups believe that China’s influence is on the rise while that of the United States is declining (see fig. 2).⁵⁷

Southeast Asian countries share a more intricate relationship with China compared to the West. As territorial neighbors, “countries in the region found it necessary to thread carefully when engaging in major powers, finding balance between competing economic assistance and balancing political-security trade-offs.”⁵⁸ This balancing act is evident in the prevalent hedging strategies adopted by Southeast

⁵² Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 10.

⁵³ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 208.

⁵⁴ Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 133.

⁵⁵ “China Covid: Protesters Openly Urge Xi to Resign over China Covid Curbs,” *BBC News*, 27 November 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/>; and “Chinese Strategic Intentions: A Deep Dive into China’s Worldwide Activities,” A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper (Boston: NSI, December 2019), 20, <https://nsiteam.com/>.

⁵⁶ Charon and Jeangene Vilmer, “Chinese Influence Operations,” 53.

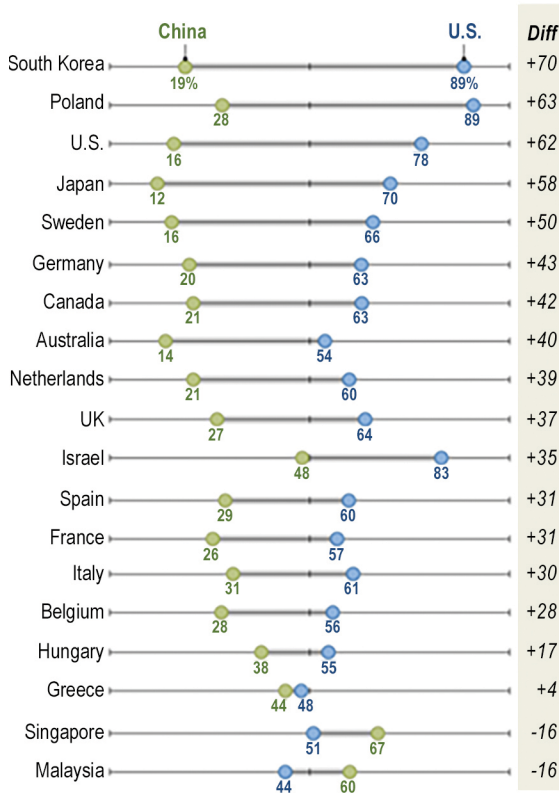
⁵⁷ Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, “Across 19 Countries, More People See the U.S. than China Favorably—but More See China’s Influence Growing,” Pew Research Center (blog), 29 June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>.

⁵⁸ Nestor Herico, “China’s Use of Influence in the Philippines and Southeast Asia,” e-mail response to the author, 30 November 2022.

Asian nations, with Thailand, for instance, embracing a policy of “active neutrality” for precisely this reason.⁵⁹

U.S. receives more positive ratings than China in most countries

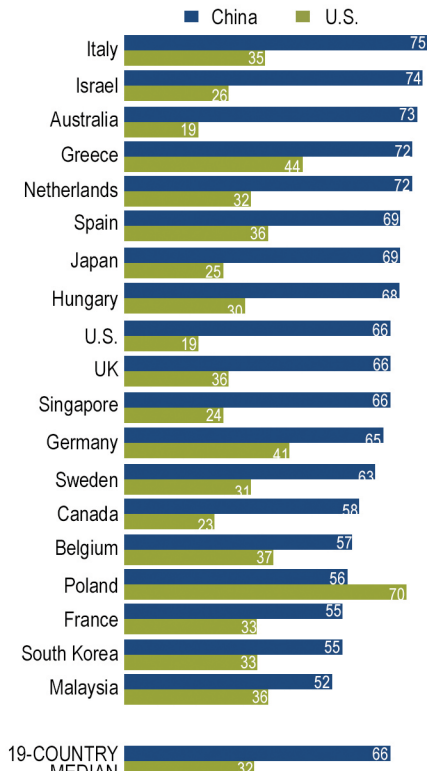
% who have a *favorable* view of ...



Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Most see China's influence growing while few say the same of the U.S.

% who say ___'s influence in the world is *getting stronger*



Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2. Polls on US/China Favorable Ratings & China's Growing Influence. (Source: Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, “Across 19 Countries, More People See the U.S. than China Favorably—but More See China's Influence Growing,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), 29 June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>.)

Ongoing disputes, such as those in the South China Sea (SCS), significantly challenge China's narrative. Beijing asserts sovereignty over the SCS islands and adjacent waters, a claim contested by six other Southeast Asian nations in accor-

⁵⁹ Yossomsak, “China and Thailand,” 77.

dance with the 1994 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁶⁰ This serves as an example of a contradiction in the CCP's narrative, particularly regarding its respect for the sovereignty of other countries.⁶¹

Culturally, however, Southeast Asian countries exhibit a greater receptiveness to Chinese influence at a broader level. Chinese culture and economic ventures are widely exported throughout the region, affording the CCP substantial influence and a degree of familiarity and shared values to propagate its narrative. Internally within China, frame alignment is reasonably well-established due to the CCP's control over information and its capacity for indoctrination. Externally, achieving frame alignment becomes considerably more challenging, given the complexity of obscuring information on a broader scale.

Threat Strategy

To grasp the intricacies of the CCP's approach to achieving its regional and global objectives, we need to delve into its threat strategy. This strategy involves a multifaceted approach that combines regional aspirations with global ambitions. In this section, we will explore the specific objectives and methods that the CCP employs to secure its regional interests, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia. At the core of this regional strategy lies the unspoken core interest of reunifying Taiwan, a goal that holds immense significance for the CCP's legitimacy and its broader global agenda.

With this context in mind, we will examine the ways and means that the CCP uses to achieve its regional objectives. This includes an analysis of its strategic approach, which leverages unrestricted warfare to mobilize all aspects of national power in alignment with the CCP's Five-Sphere Integrated Plan. Furthermore, we will delve into the distinct lines of effort—secure, indoctrinate, and subjugate—that the CCP employs to set conditions for reunification while pursuing other core interests.

Now, let us proceed to analyze the components and intricacies of the CCP's threat strategy as it unfolds in the Southeast Asian region.

Ends

The CCP's overarching objectives revolve around securing regional goals to facilitate its broader global aspirations. This dual pursuit of regional and global

⁶⁰ Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, and Ronald O'Rourke, *China Primer: South China Sea Disputes* (Washington, DC: Library Of Congress, 2021), 1.

⁶¹ Xi, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism," 42.

objectives underscores the importance of regional hegemony, which not only bolsters China's legitimacy but also fortifies its influence on the global stage. Our focus here is on the CCP's regional aspirations in Southeast Asia, a critical aspect of its threat strategy. Central to these regional ambitions, albeit unacknowledged by China, lies the reunification of Taiwan—an issue so vital that it is considered a nonnegotiable core interest for the CCP due to its direct impact on legitimacy.⁶²

To realize these regional ambitions effectively, the CCP adopts a strategic approach aimed at setting conditions for Taiwan's reunification while simultaneously advancing its other core interests, which include ensuring the security of China and the party, securing essential resources and logistics, reducing US influence, and enhancing China's global image and public opinion. This strategy aligns seamlessly with the CCP's comprehensive Five-Sphere Integrated Plan, which encompasses economic, political, cultural, social, and eco-environmental domains to bring the Chinese Dream to fruition.⁶³

Ways and Means

Strategic Approach. The CCP employs unrestricted warfare as its strategic approach to achieving its objectives. This iteration of IW mobilizes all the instruments of national power, operationalizing methods outlined in the CCP's Five-Sphere Integrated Plan. Beijing wages political and influence warfare with the intent of achieving objectives and gaining a cognitive advantage. This approach “is a coercive struggle that erodes or builds legitimacy for the purpose of political power.”⁶⁴

Due to the nature of unrestricted warfare, traditional phasing is not observed, except in the context of the reunification of Taiwan. Here, the CCP adopts a calculated approach, setting conditions in its favor for reunification before considering forceful actions such as military invasion. Ideally, Beijing prefers coercion over the use of force and employs three primary lines of effort (LOE) to achieve its objectives: secure, indoctrinate, and subjugate. Each LOE includes subordinate campaigns designed to achieve interim goals that ultimately lead to the desired outcomes, as depicted in figure 3. Coercive tactics are consistently employed across these LOEs, encompassing subversion, bribery, seduction, confusion, and entrap-

⁶² Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 4.

⁶³ Khalid Taimur Akram, “The Communist Party in China (CPC): A True Model of Excellent Governance,” Institute for a Community with Shared Future—Communication University of China, 16 September 2021, <https://icsf.cuc.edu.cn/>; and Xi, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism,” 27.

⁶⁴ David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, “Redefining Irregular Warfare: Legitimacy, Coercion, and Power,” Modern War Institute, 18 October 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/>.

ment, among others, effectively transforming conventional statecraft and soft power into weapons in a new era of warfare.

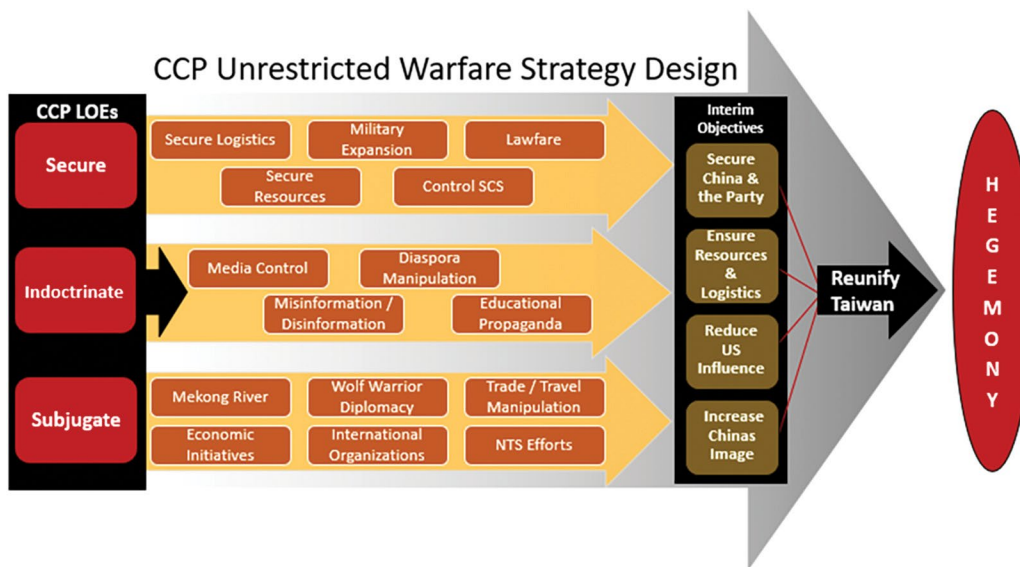


Figure 3. CCP unrestricted warfare strategy design

Secure Line of Effort. The Secure LOE’s primary objective is to fortify China’s position and enhance its strength. In Southeast Asia, this effort predominantly centers around three major initiatives: the BRI, SCS activities, and military expansion. Within this LOE, the BRI aims to bolster China’s logistical networks and secure access to critical raw materials, ensuring sustainable growth and preparedness for potential conflicts.⁶⁵ The CCP’s “dual circulation” policy seeks to establish domestic supply chain resilience by exploring alternative organic options that circumvent vulnerable strategic choke points.⁶⁶ Beijing perceives choke points like the Straits of Malacca as potential areas of risk that could threaten China’s stability during heightened tensions or conflicts with the United States. Currently, approximately 76 percent of China’s oil imports and 23 percent of its natural gas imports pass through the Strait of Malacca and the SCS.⁶⁷ Concerns regarding the United States’ ability to effectively implement a military blockade have significant implications for China’s military objectives, including the potential retak-

⁶⁵ Sigfrido Burgos and Sophal Ear, “China’s Strategic Interests in Cambodia: Influence and Resources,” *Asian Survey* 50, no. 3 (2010), 617, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶⁶ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 2022), IV, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁶⁷ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 141.

ing of Taiwan. The transition toward organic logistics and production not only enhances China's economy but also confers strategic advantages.

To counterbalance the United States' military superiority, there has been a substantial overhaul of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in recent years. The CCP is committed to achieving a world-class military with an accelerated target of 2027, emphasizing the concept of active defense in the region and taking Taiwan by force.⁶⁸ The bolstering of military hard power serves to reinforce the CCP's soft power and influence pursuits in the region. Furthermore, this modernization effort extends Beijing's operational reach, creating a security buffer while limiting US access and maneuverability.

China's considerable influence over Cambodia serves as a prime illustration of the CCP's strategy to mitigate logistical and resource risks through military access. The CCP has made substantial investments in Cambodia's Port of Sihanoukville/ Ream Naval Base area, which includes the donation of 14 warships and patrol boats.⁶⁹ While acknowledging concerns raised by neighboring countries, Cambodia has affirmed its sovereign right to receive foreign assistance for self-defense, asserting, "No foreign country will be given exclusive rights in the management of this base nor in other activities in any part of it."⁷⁰ However, Cambodia has not outright rejected China's utilization of the port, as indicated in an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) report. This situation epitomizes the CCP's utilization of economic means to exert influence. The CCP capitalizes on corruption, cronyism, and nepotism in Cambodia, exploiting President Xi's close ties with Prime Minister Hun Sen to further China's strategic objectives. The CCP's assertive territorial claims in the SCS further underscore its efforts to strengthen security projection and resource access.⁷¹

The CCP's persistent assertion of sovereignty over the vast majority of the SCS through its nine-dash line creates a significant military advantage for Beijing in the region (see fig. 4).⁷² In 2009, the CCP reaffirmed its position at the UN, stating, "China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the SCS and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof."⁷³ However, this stance directly contradicts

⁶⁸ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, V.

⁶⁹ Burgos and Ear, "China's Strategic Interests in Cambodia," 620.

⁷⁰ *ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlook 2021* (Brunei Darussalam, 2021), 41–42, <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/>.

⁷¹ Burgos and Ear, "China's Strategic Interests in Cambodia," 632.

⁷² *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 113.

⁷³ "China's Response to Submission by the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, dated 7 May 2009" (New York: United Nations, 7 May 2009), <https://www.un.org/>.

the 2016 UN arbitral tribunal's ruling on the Philippines' case against China, which overwhelmingly rejected China's claims, including the illegitimacy of its nine-dash line. China responded negatively, asserting that the ruling was "null and void," maintaining an assertive posture to defend its position.⁷⁴ China's expansion into the SCS serves to secure access to natural resources and supply routes, while simultaneously projecting military capability around Taiwan, making US intervention in the region more challenging. Furthermore, the CCP employs a blend of legal and coercive tactics in its lawfare approach to advance SCS claims, effectively holding territory. The CCP's utilization of fishing vessels and its maritime militia to advance political objectives in disputed waters while obscuring ownership of these fleets ensures plausible deniability.⁷⁵

Indoctrinate Line of Effort. The Indoctrinate LOE predominantly encompasses efforts under the CCP's United Front initiative and psychological and public opinion warfare, which are nested under the Three Warfare doctrine. Beijing pursues a strategy of "constant, ongoing activity aimed at long-term influence of perceptions and attitudes."⁷⁶ Campaigns within this LOE strive to sway nations and populations in Southeast Asia to align with China's causes while molding perceptions in favor of Beijing, enabling future actions. Notably, not all aspects of this LOE are overtly coercive. China allocates substantial resources, amounting to billions of dollars, to promote Chinese language, facilitate educational exchanges, expand media cooperation, and elevate pop culture icons—potential tools of soft power intended to secure diplomatic and economic advantages.⁷⁷ These forms of soft power serve as vehicles to export Chinese culture to the broader region. A notable influence tactic in this regard is the "slow burn," involving the gradual influence of populations over generations without arousing suspicion.⁷⁸ Additionally, the CCP employs an extensive array of information operations, including disinformation and misinformation, to sow confusion and shape the information

⁷⁴ Nestor Herico, e-mail.

⁷⁵ Gregory B. Poling et al., *Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia*, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), November 2021), 47, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁷⁶ Dean Cheng, "Winning Without Fighting: Chinese Public Opinion Warfare and the Need for a Robust American Response," Background Number 2745, *Heritage Foundation*, 26 November 2012, 3.

⁷⁷ Herico, e-mail.

⁷⁸ Howard Gambrell Clark, *Influence Warfare Volume III: Case Studies*, draft (Washington, DC: Narrative Strategies Ink, 2022).

domain to its advantage.⁷⁹ Such tactics have been documented in regional neighbors, including Thailand.⁸⁰

Outposts in the Spratly Islands

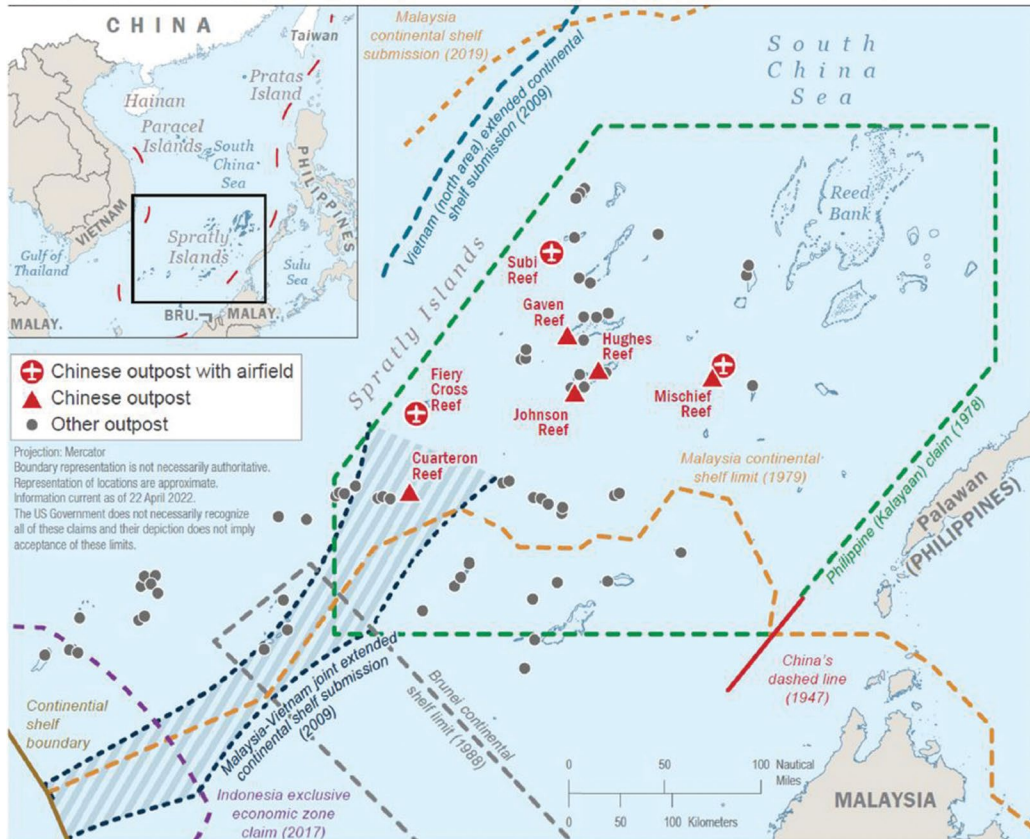


Figure 4. Nine-Dash Line & PLA projection in the South China Sea. (Source: Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” 2022, 113, <https://media.defense.gov/>.)

Leveraging the widespread Chinese diaspora in the region has proven effective in advancing cultural expansionism, given its inherent sympathies toward China. For instance, Singapore boasts a substantial majority, approximately 74.5 percent, of Chinese descendants among its population. Consequently, Beijing promotes a narrative portraying Singapore as a “Chinese country,” implying a loyalty to “greater

⁷⁹ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 161.

⁸⁰ Jane Tang, “China’s Information Warfare and Media Influence Spawn Confusion in Thailand,” *Radio Free Asia*, 13 May 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/>; and Yossomsak, “China and Thailand,” 2.

China.”⁸¹ The diaspora has been subject to blackmail and coercion, serving as a conduit to access foreign technology acquisition strategies and intelligence.⁸² This tactic extends beyond Singapore and is employed across the region, facilitated by the CCP’s advanced surveillance capabilities.⁸³

Subjugate Line of Effort. This is designed to compel compliance with Beijing’s directives within the region. This approach involves a multifaceted strategy, employing both incentives and punitive measures to entice regional neighbors and coerce them when necessary. A clear manifestation of this strategy can be seen in the CCP’s interest in the Mekong Basin. China is nearing completion of its fourth hydroelectric dam on the upper Mekong River, granting the CCP control over water flow and energy production to downstream countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. This control provides Beijing with a significant source of coercive power, given the Mekong River’s critical role as a major artery in Southeast Asia.⁸⁴ The CCP also combines nontraditional security (NTS) efforts in this region with its growing involvement in international organizations like ASEAN to bolster regional influence. Substantial evidence supports the CCP’s regional NTS participation to achieve geopolitical objectives, including the New Security Concept of 2002, which aims to counterbalance US influence.⁸⁵

Attractive offerings under the BRI have led weaker nations to submit to the CCP’s will. In Cambodia, BRI projects and infrastructure aid come with favorable terms that undercut competing lenders. The CCP, through Chinese state-owned enterprises, can finance projects that hold long-term strategic political significance, even if they lack immediate financial viability. This approach allows China to secure Cambodia’s unwavering allegiance, which it leverages as a pawn in great-power competition. Cambodia benefits by gaining security, stability, and investment in exchange for Beijing’s ability to influence its decisions in critical regional votes or disputes. Cambodia’s complicit obstruction of measures condemning CCP actions in the SCS within ASEAN forums serves as a case in point.⁸⁶

Retribution, or the threat thereof, constitutes another CCP influence warfare tactic. Restrictions on investment, trade, and tourism pose significant concerns for Southeast Asian nations, as China represents the largest importer of goods in the

⁸¹ Charon and Jeangene Vilmer, “Chinese Influence Operations,” 513–14.

⁸² *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 133.

⁸³ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*.

⁸⁴ Burgos and Ear, “China’s Strategic Interests in Cambodia,” 622.

⁸⁵ Xue Gong, “Non-Traditional Security Cooperation between China and South-East Asia: Implications for Indo-Pacific Geopolitics,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (1 January 2020), 35.

⁸⁶ Stefan Halper, *China: The Three Warfares*, Report for the Office of Net Assessment (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2013), 132.

region and the final destination for many regional consumables. For instance, the Philippines experienced a series of restrictions from 2012 to 2014 in response to its filing of charges over contested areas in the SCS to the UNCLOS arbitral tribunal. The CCP implemented restrictions on Philippine banana imports and Chinese tourism as a public punitive measure while maintaining a veil of deniability.⁸⁷

Center of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities

In the realm of the CCP's governance and its role on the global stage, understanding the concept of *center of gravity* (COG) is paramount. This section delves into the COG and its accompanying critical vulnerabilities (CV), illuminating the core of CCP's power and the vulnerabilities that surround it. As the CCP consolidates its authority as China's paramount decision maker, the COG represents the linchpin upon which its influence and policies pivot. However, this concentration of power also exposes the CCP to vulnerabilities, both domestically and internationally.

Let us explore the intricacies of the COG and the vulnerabilities that challenge the CCP's stability and legitimacy.

Century of Gravity

The legitimacy of CCP governance as the exclusive arbiter of policy and power in China constitutes the COG. In its role as an autocratic governing body, the CCP has positioned itself at the apex of decision making within the nation. This positioning significantly enhances the government's capacity to enforce its directives, owing to the concentration of control and authority at its highest echelons. However, as discussed in the section on Chinese exceptionalism, this centralized leadership also places sole responsibility on the leadership when outcomes deviate from the intended course. Mismanagement of narratives and a failure to sustain China's prosperity could raise doubts regarding the CCP's legitimacy and its vision for the future.

Critical Vulnerabilities

The most substantial vulnerability to the CCP's legitimacy, particularly on the international stage, is Beijing's inconsistent narrative. Idealistic phrases like *harmony*, *peaceful coexistence*, and *noninterference*, employed by Xi to portray China as a benevolent emerging power, stand in stark contrast to the coercive trade agreements

⁸⁷ Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey, and Tracy Beattie, "The Chinese Communist Party's Coercive Diplomacy," International Cyber Policy Centre, 1 September 2020, 40–41, <https://apo.org.au/>.

and encroachments into sovereign territories. The CCP's actions in the SCS provide a glaring example of Beijing simultaneously professing adherence to international rule of law while subverting it.

The second CV is Beijing's ideology, which can be exploited. In repressive forms of government, rifts are likely to emerge over time. The masses are often willing to endure repressive control if their living standards remain reasonable, especially when those standards continue to rise, as has been the case in recent years. As noted in the context of exceptionalism, once a pattern of upward mobility becomes the norm, it can be expected. Vulnerabilities arise when China's economic growth levels off or encounters setbacks. Moreover, highlighting inconsistencies in the ideology can serve to undermine it. In a socialist government, this may reveal clear class distinctions between affluent party members and the proletariat. Such discrepancies undermine Maoist principles and, when coupled with simmering discontent, as witnessed during the Zero-COVID policy protests, can fracture the nation.

Present Government Response

In the face of China's ascendancy as a prominent global player, the United States has undertaken a comprehensive and resolute response strategy. This concluding section delves into the present government response, highlighting the gravity with which the United States views China's rise.

State Perception of the Threat

The United States' elevation of China as the primary pacing threat in its national strategic documents underscores its serious concern regarding China's ascent. The shift in focus is quantified by notable changes in combatant command (COCOM) priorities and defense expenditures, as evidenced in the recent National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) since 2019.⁸⁸

Acknowledging the CCP's activities across the spectrum of competition, the United States is actively developing strategies to address identified gaps. The renewed emphasis on the US theory of victory in the Indo-Pacific region places significant importance on the enhancement of collective capacity with allies and partner nations. The overarching goal is to ensure the Indo-Pacific region remains free and open, while safeguarding the current rules-based international order.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ "NDAA Tough on China," *Defense Drumbeat*, 7 December 2020, <https://republicans-armedservices.house.gov/>.

⁸⁹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 23, 37.

Response Strategy

The US strategy takes a comprehensive approach to outperforming China, with a focus on three key areas. First, it involves strengthening domestic capabilities. Second, it seeks alignment with allies and partners to pursue common goals. Third, it aims to compete effectively in shaping the global environment surrounding China. This competitive approach is most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific region but extends globally.⁹⁰

While competition is a significant aspect, President Joe Biden also recognizes the importance of collaboration on transnational issues, particularly those where interests align, such as addressing climate change.⁹¹

Furthermore, notable progress has been achieved through initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy, which has received positive feedback from ASEAN.⁹² Additionally, recent economic policies, including the CHIPS Act and targeted sanctions in the semiconductor sector, demonstrate a strong commitment to confronting China.⁹³

Critique

The current US strategy exhibits significant gaps and remains incomplete. It lacks a discernable end-state beyond the overarching goal of approaching China from a position of strength and surpassing it. Ambiguity in key policy areas, such as Taiwan, may be intentional to influence CCP decision making. However, this ambiguity also raises doubts among our regional allies and partners, many of whom have already adopted hedging strategies. To address this, deliberate efforts should be made to cultivate stronger relationships with our partners and align our interests more effectively. To date, our strategy has been predominantly regionally formulaic, overlooking nuanced opportunities that could be leveraged with existing partners and newcomers alike.

Moreover, the United States has lost its ability to craft a compelling narrative that contrasts with that of the CCP. Previously, Washington projected itself as “the leader of the free world.” However, America appears to have not only lost its footing on the global stage but also its voice. Nevertheless, the United States still pos-

⁹⁰ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 24, 37.

⁹¹ “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China” (press release, The White House, 14 November 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁹² *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2022), 4, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁹³ Stanley Chao, “Will Biden’s Chip Sanctions Work on China?,” *Industry Week*, 27 November 2022, <https://www.industryweek.com/>.

Lehmkuhl

sesses a value proposition that sharply contrasts with that of China. It is crucial to elevate strategic communications and narrative within our strategy moving forward. Rectifying misinformation and highlighting CCP contradictions can help bridge gaps in messaging and influence warfare that have not yet been addressed. Prioritizing truth in messaging aligns with our liberal democratic core values when operating in the information environment. Crafting a more holistic strategy that elevates various instruments of power alongside traditional military deterrence will present complex scenarios for Beijing to navigate. ✪

Lt Col Jeffrey S. Lehmkuhl, USAFR

Lieutenant Colonel Lehmkuhl is a combat search & rescue helicopter pilot in the United States Air Force Reserve and is currently the Director of Operations for the 908th Operations Support Squadron, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He can be reached at Jeffrey.Lehmkuhl.2@us.af.mil.

China's Increasing Space Power and India–China Orbital Competitions

Implications in the Indo-Pacific with a Focus on South Asia

MOST. FARJANA SHARMIN

Abstract

The space race reflects terrestrial geopolitical anxieties, with the Indo-Pacific witnessing an extension of its rivalries into space. India and China, prominent players in this arena, showcase terrestrial conflicts influencing their space strategies. China, evident through projects like the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia, emphasizes its strategic space policy. India, although lacking a dedicated space force like China, has established itself regionally. Both nations possess antisatellite capabilities and reject the UN resolution banning antisatellite missile tests. This study investigates China's expanding space influence, raising security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, particularly South Asia. Employing explanatory research, the article explores the geopolitical implications, shedding light on perspectives often overlooked in the context of great-power rivalries: those of smaller aspiring spacefaring nations.

The present space age epitomizes multipolarity, with many new spacefaring countries joining old players in the race.¹ However, more actors' space exploitation involvement could increase disagreements over legal principles and global commons rights, intensifying the geopolitical environment and outer-space politics.² The Indo-Pacific space race presents a complex scenario of a growing astropolitical bloc.³

This study examines China's growing space power and its security implications for the Indo-Pacific, particularly South Asian countries. During the initial space age, both China and India were space aspirants who avoided the space race. However, China's space program took a military turn, while India remained focused on

¹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan and Abhijnan Rej, "Space crisis in a multipolar world: lessons from a simulation exercise," *ORF*, February 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

² Saadia M. Pekkanen, "Governing the New Space Race," *American Journal of International Law* 113, 1 April 2019, 92–97, <https://doi.org/>.

³ Nadir Ali, "Spacepower in the Indo-Pacific Region," *The Geopolitics*, 12 April 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/>.

civilian needs until China's antisatellite (ASAT) test in 2007 prompted a shift.⁴ New Delhi recognized the importance of countering Chinese capabilities in space, aligning with India's evolving regional and global environment.⁵

The militarization and weaponization of space have historical roots, with major powers like the United States, Russia, China, and India demonstrating counterspace abilities through antisatellite weapon tests.⁶ Additionally, countries like Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Iran, South Korea, and North Korea are investing in such capabilities. China's approach to developing counterspace capabilities raises concerns for the Indo-Pacific region and the global environment. This arms race in space, including direct-ascent, electronic warfare, co-orbital, directed energy, and cyber-attack capabilities, could lead to destabilizing situations.

This expansion of the space arms race further divides the world into technologically superior and inferior states, creating hegemonic powers. The Indo-Pacific region, home to major space-power countries, has historical hostilities that influence regional states' space programs and policies. China and India's space race reflects these dynamics, impacting the growth of smaller space-aspiring South Asian nations.

China's space power extends beyond military pursuits; it also aims to expand territorially through space economy and commercialization strategies.⁷ Future space warfare will likely revolve around exploiting space resources for geo-economic interests.

The study is structured into several sections: Section one discusses the India-China orbital competition within the context of regional geopolitical hostility. Section two explores their involvement in the new space race focused on commercialization and resource exploitation. Section three analyzes China's space strategy and Space Silk Road initiative in South Asia. Section four delves into China's offensive and hard-power strategy in space. Section five examines how India's space policy doctrine reflects regional rivalry. Section six discusses why the

⁴ Rosita Dellios, "China's Space Program: A Strategic and Political Analysis," *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies* 7, no. 1 (December 2005), 1–15, <https://silo.tips/>.

⁵ "Challenges to Security in Space," Defense Intelligence Agency, January 2019, 7–28, <https://aerospace.csis.org/>; and Shahid Hussain and Khurram Shahzad, "India's Quest for 'Global Space and Influence' through the 'Outer Space' Domain," *Journal of Space Safety Engineering*, 30 May, 2023, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶ Jakub Pražák, "Dual-use Conundrum: Towards the Weaponization of Outer Space?," *Acta Astronautica* 187 (October 2021): 397–405, <https://doi.org/>; Bledwyn E. Bowen, *Original Sin: Power, Technology and War in Outer Space* (London: Hurst, 2022); and Brian Weeden and Victoria Samson, eds., *Global Counterspace Capabilities: An Open-source Assessment* (Washington, DC: Secure World Foundation, 2023), <https://news.paceeconomy.ca/>.

⁷ Deniel Deudney, *Dark Skies: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the Ends of Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

India–China space competition is a concern for South Asian countries. Section seven addresses legal loopholes in space governance and treaties, discussing barriers to space cooperation between the two Asian states. The final section summarizes the study's critical insights, findings, and suggestions.

This research employs explanatory research methods to shed light on China's growing influence in outer space, encompassing militarization, weaponization, and commercialization. It seeks to highlight the geopolitical dimensions of China's astropolitical engagement, often overshadowed by great-power rivalries. The extension of geopolitics into space aligns with Everett C. Dolman's *astropolitik* theory, which posits that space dominance leads to earthly conquest, a principle evident in China's space endeavors despite its official commitment to maintaining space as a peaceful global commons.⁸

Extension of Geopolitical Hostility into Space: India–China Orbital Competition Status

The astropolitical dimension of India–China relations stems from broader geopolitical considerations and security concerns. Given their history of confrontations on land and sea, it is not surprising that these Asian giants might extend their rivalry into outer space. Before delving into the current orbital competitions between India and China, it is essential to understand why this astropolitical rivalry is intertwined with regional and global power struggles.⁹ The China-India rivalry is inherently geopolitical and strategic, further exacerbated by factors like China's close ties with Pakistan and its increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁰ Conversely, India has strengthened its relationships with China's rivals like the USA and other Indo-Pacific nations to counterbalance China's influence. These developments have fueled mutual caution and competition in the region.

India is acutely aware of the growing threat posed by China's expanding geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean region and South Asia. China's presence and actions have become central topics of discussion in numerous multilateral forums, particularly those involving India and the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) countries.

For instance, at a recent G-7 summit, member nations openly criticized China's actions. Simultaneously, a sideline meeting among Quad countries underscored

⁸ Everett C. Dolman, *Astropolitik: Classical Geopolitics in the Space Age* (Hoboken, NJ: Routledge, 2001).

⁹ Brandon K. Yoder and Kanti Bajpai, "Introduction: Explaining Cooperation and Rivalry in China-India Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China* 32, no. 141 (21 June 2023): 353–68, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁰ Paul J. Smith, "The Tilting Triangle: Geopolitics of the China–India–Pakistan Relationship," *Comparative Strategy* 32, no. 4 (September 2013), 313–30, <https://doi.org/>.

their collective commitment to “De-risking from China.” This initiative aims to impose restrictions on Chinese technology enterprises. Additionally, India asserted its stance against “any unilateral attempt to change the status quo” in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ It is evident that these discussions and actions reflect the growing concerns among Quad countries regarding China’s activities.

Terrestrial conflicts between these Asian giants have intensified, impacting the overall regional dynamics and power struggles in the Indo-Pacific. Recent incidents, including military confrontations at Dokhlam (2017), Galwan Valley (2020), and clashes in the Taiwan Sector (2022), have had enduring effects on the region. These rivalries have extended beyond land borders and are actively playing out in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific.¹²

China’s persistent militarization of its naval fleet in the Indo-Pacific has raised concerns among regional stakeholders. With 85 percent of China’s oil imports passing through the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca, this maritime route is vital to both China’s and India’s economic and security interests.¹³ China’s ambitious Maritime Silk Road initiative, covering the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea, along with efforts to influence Bay of Bengal littoral states through the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor (BCIM) initiative, have heightened tensions.¹⁴

China’s role as a major military equipment supplier in South Asia has notable implications for regional security dynamics. A recent example is Bangladesh’s inauguration of a six-slot submarine named BNS *Sheikh Hasina* in Cox’s Bazaar. China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy managed the submarine project. This development is of particular concern to India, as it represents an enhancement of Bangladesh’s naval capabilities with Chinese support.¹⁵

Furthermore, China’s deployment of the dual-use DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile is a matter of strategic significance. This missile system has the capability for both conventional and nuclear strikes and has a range of approximately

¹¹ Keshav Padmanbhan, “PM Modi, G7 & Quad Outline Strong Stance against China. Beijing Lodges ‘Stern Representations,’” *The Print*, 21 May 2023, <https://theprint.in/>.

¹² Sameer P. Lalwani, Daniel Markey, and Vikram J. Singh, “Another Clash on the India-China Border Underscores Risk of Militarization,” *United States Institute of Peace*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.usip.org/>.

¹³ Chien-peng Chung, “What Are the Strategic and Economic Implications for South Asia of China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative?,” *Pacific Review* 31, no. 3 (2018): 315–32, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁴ Mohd Aminul Karim and Faria Islam, “Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor: Challenges and Prospects,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 30, no.2 (June 2018): 283–302, <https://digitalarchive.worldfishcenter.org/>.

¹⁵ Seshadri Chari “China’s Arms Game with Bangladesh Getting Dangerous. BNS Sheikh Hasina Is Just a Start,” *The Print*, 7 April 2023, <https://theprint.in/>.

4,023 kilometers. It can conduct precision strikes on surface combatants far from the Chinese coast, posing a potential threat to a wide area.

The missile's range encompasses the central region and the entire eastern coast of India, as well as key strategic points like the Straits of Malacca and Guam in the Pacific Ocean. These capabilities underscore China's efforts to extend its influence and project power across a vast expanse, which has implications for regional security dynamics and strategic considerations, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁶

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to significant infrastructure developments with strategic implications in the Indo-Pacific region. One notable project is the construction of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, which commenced in 2017. However, Sri Lanka faced challenges in making payments for the port, ultimately resulting in the port being handed over to China on a 99-year lease. The geostrategic location of the Hambantota port is of particular concern due to its proximity to the main sea lane of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in the Indian Ocean, linking the Straits of Malacca to China.¹⁷ While the port is currently used for commercial purposes, there are concerns that it could serve military or naval purposes in the future, potentially impacting regional dynamics.

China's involvement in the MSR also includes the construction of the largest deepwater seaport at Gwadar in Pakistan. In contrast, India has pursued its strategic interests in the region by establishing the Chabahar Port in Iran, situated on the Gulf of Oman. This project is part of an India–Iran–Afghanistan partnership and is aimed at containing Chinese expansion in the region.¹⁸

Furthermore, India has undertaken several initiatives, such as Project Mausam in 2014 and Sagarmala in 2019, to enhance its maritime presence and influence in the Indian Ocean region. India has also engaged in institutional forums like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to assert its position and mitigate China's growing dominance in the maritime domain.¹⁹ These developments reflect the complex and evolving geopolitical compe-

¹⁶ Thangavel K. Balasubramaniam and Ashok Kumar Murugesan, "China's Rising Missile and Naval Capabilities in the Indo-Pacific Region," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 98–111, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

¹⁷ Anu Anwar, "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward," in *Hindsight, Insight, Foresight, Thinking About Security in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Alexander L. Vuving (Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2020), 161–78, <https://dkiapcss.edu/>.

¹⁸ Sankalp Gurjar, "The Iran Challenge: Unraveling India's Foreign Policy Dilemma," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 5 (July–August 2023): 47–60, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

¹⁹ Rudra Prasad Pradhan, Chhavi Rathi, and Suraj Gupta. "Sagarmala & India's Maritime Big Push Approach: Seaports as India's Geo-economic Gateways & Neighbourhood Maritime Lessons," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 3 (2022) 1–21, <https://doi.org/>; and Premesha Saha, "The ASEAN, PIF, and

tition in the Indo-Pacific, with India and China actively pursuing strategic interests through infrastructure projects and regional engagement.

China has been actively working on its BRI since 2013, aimed at connecting smaller South Asian countries. Within this initiative, the China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC) plays a significant role and aligns with China's vision of regional leadership. It also serves to limit India's influence in the region. China's involvement in South Asia has included not only economic but also military assistance to neighboring countries of India. This strategy appears to be an attempt to contain India within its own region while building strategic partnerships with India's neighbors. India has expressed skepticism about the BRI from its inception, and recent expansions, such as the CPEC project in Afghanistan, have raised concerns about India's sovereignty and security. This concern arises because parts of the connectivity project pass through the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, which is under the illegal occupation of Pakistan.²⁰

India maintained a strong presence and influence in Afghanistan before the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, often referred to as "Taliban 2.0." India had invested significantly in various development projects in Afghanistan, including infrastructure, education, and capacity-building initiatives. This presence was part of India's broader strategy to enhance its regional influence and promote stability in Afghanistan.

With the expansion of China's BRI into Afghanistan, it is plausible that China may seek to establish a more significant presence in the country. The BRI focuses on infrastructure development and connectivity projects, and Afghanistan's strategic location in South Asia makes it an attractive target for Chinese investment and influence. This expansion could include the construction of critical infrastructure and potentially a base or facility to support China's regional interests.

The evolving situation in Afghanistan, including political developments and security concerns, will play a crucial role in shaping China's engagement in the country. It is essential to monitor these developments to understand the extent of China's involvement in Afghanistan and its potential impact on regional dynamics and geopolitics.

These developments in the realms of land and maritime geopolitics significantly shape the strategies and programs of India and China in the domain of outer space. China's increasing militarization of space aligns with Xi Jinping's "Grand Strategy,"

IORA Drive the Agenda of the Quad Leaders' Meeting in Hiroshima," *Observer Research Foundation*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

²⁰ Press Trust of India, "Pakistan, China agree to extend CPEC Afghanistan; Stress on Combating Terrorism," *Economic Times*, 9 May 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

as the country launches satellites in both low Earth orbit (LEO) and geosynchronous orbit (GEO) in substantial numbers.²¹ This reflects China's substantial stake in making the space domain congested and contested.²² The Indo-Pacific region stands as one of the most contested and challenged areas globally, with India and China holding significant stakes in its dynamics. Due to geographical proximity, historical ties, and cultural affiliations, South Asian countries have often found themselves caught in regional rivalries. Both India and China are actively seeking to enhance their regional power and dominance through their space capabilities. The status of outer space as a global commons has been compromised by the arms race, leading to astropolitical rivalries.²³

Intensely, both Asian powers have developed counterspace technologies, raising concerns about the potential for space warfare. The importance of space technologies is rapidly growing, extending beyond state actors to include various players. The most concerning aspect of space technologies is their capacity to change the dynamics of warfare. This has become even more apparent following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where Starlink satellite services played a critical role in enabling the Ukrainian military to maintain control.²⁴

In conclusion, this study focuses on the two prominent space actors in Asia, China and India, which have become increasingly adversarial across various fronts. Their rivalry has expanded from the maritime and geopolitical dimensions into the realm of outer space.²⁵ Both countries have integrated hard-power and soft-power strategies into their space programs, which influence regional orders and power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia. The absence of space cooperation between these Asian giants presents challenges for smaller countries aspiring to develop their space capabilities.

Space technology plays a pivotal role in both hard- and soft-power strategies for countries.²⁶ Nations utilize space diplomacy, offer space technological cooperation, and provide data-sharing opportunities to aspiring and nonpacefaring

²¹ Namrata Goswami, "China's Grand Strategy in Outer Space: To Establish Compelling Standards of Behavior," *Space Review*, 5 August 2019, <https://www.thespacereview.com/>.

²² Kevin Pollpeter, "China's Role in Making Outer-space More Congested, Contested, and Competitive," China Aerospace Studies Institute, October 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

²³ Julie Michelle Klinger, "Critical Geopolitics of Outer Space," *Geopolitics* 26, no. 3 (4 November 2020): 661–65, <https://doi.org/>; and Pražák, "Dual-use Conundrum."

²⁴ Timothy Goines, Jeffrey Biller, and Jeremy Grunert, "The Russia-Ukraine War and the Space Domain," *Articles of War* (blog), 14 March 2022, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/>.

²⁵ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Space Security in the Indo-Pacific," *Air and Space Law* 48, Special Issue (2023): 59–74, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁶ Pinar Bilgin and Berivan Eliş, "Hard Power, Soft Power: Toward a More Realistic Power Analysis," *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 2 (2008): 5–20, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

states as tools to advance their geopolitical interests and assert their influence on the world stage. Both China and India have harnessed space technology to bolster their positions in the region.

China, in particular, has demonstrated a strong commitment to developing counterspace capabilities as part of its national security strategy.²⁷ The militarization of space by China represents a significant manifestation of its hard-power strategy. China's ambitions in space are intimately linked with its terrestrial politics and broader grand strategy. The goal is clear: China aspires to become a global and regional leader by establishing dominance in space affairs. Moreover, the Chinese government is actively promoting its "Space Silk Road" policy on a global scale, extending its influence not only in Asia but also in Africa and other regions.

India, in response to China's actions in the South China Sea and its stance on Taiwan, is undergoing a notable shift in its space strategy.²⁸ This shift is characterized by a heightened focus on space capabilities and technology. India recognizes that outer space is not an isolated frontier; rather, it is intricately connected to global politics and the prevailing world order. As such, it acknowledges the increasing importance of planetary capabilities and space powers in shaping the dynamics of international relations.

In this evolving landscape, the militarization of space and the pursuit of space superiority are integral components of a nation's broader geopolitical ambitions. As both China and India invest in space technologies and capabilities, the implications of their actions extend beyond the cosmos, influencing the global balance of power and order.

India, too, is emerging as a major player in the Indo-Pacific region's space arena. The country initiated its space journey in the early 1960s, with the aim of utilizing space-based technologies for socio-economic development. Over the years, India has made significant strides in space technology. It launched its first satellite in 1963 and subsequently developed its first indigenous satellite, RohiniRS-1, in the 1980s. India's military has achieved indigenous missile defense and long-range ballistic missile capabilities, with the potential for direct-ascent antisatellite (DA-ASAT) capabilities. In 2019, India demonstrated its ASAT capability by destroying one of its satellites. India has also established a space situational awareness (SSA) program to monitor space security threats. This program enhances India's ability to protect its space assets.

²⁷ Weeden and Samson, eds., *Global Counterspace Capabilities*.

²⁸ Harsh V. Pant and Suyash Desai, "India Must Make the Most of China-Taiwan Conflict—Change LAC Status Quo, Fight Beijing Better," *The Print*, 2023, <https://theprint.in/>.

India's ASAT test was undoubtedly a response to China's ASAT capabilities. Prime Minister Modi emphasized the significance of this achievement, highlighting India's capacity to defend not only on land, water, and air but also in space. Interestingly, India's pursuit of indigenous satellite technology began after the 1962 war, indicating its awareness of China's intentions in the realm of military space capabilities. In response to China's announcement of sending a human into orbit in 2003, India launched its first lunar mission, Chandrayaan-1, in 2008. Although the second lunar mission in 2019 faced technical challenges resulting in the lander's crash on the Moon's southern hemisphere, India did not waver in its space ambitions. On 14 July 2023, India launched its third lunar mission, Chandrayaan-3, which achieved a successful landing on the lunar south pole. This milestone not only represents a significant scientific accomplishment for India but also a strategic victory in the lunar competition. India stands as the fourth lunar-capable nation, uniquely distinguished by its ability to achieve a soft landing on the lunar pole's dark side. The success of the Chandrayaan-3 mission has far-reaching implications for lunar resource endeavors. While India is a relatively new entrant in lunar exploration compared to established players like the United States, Russia, and China, it has outperformed all in reaching the elusive south pole. Following Russia's setback in the Luna-25 mission, India has unmistakably emerged as the world's rising lunar power.²⁹

The evolving nature of the world order has reintroduced outer space as the "ultimate high ground."³⁰ The conflict between Russia and Ukraine provides a telling example of how terrestrial conflicts can extend into space. Initially, the Russian government successfully jammed Ukrainian and European satellite communications (SATCOM) terminals.³¹ However, Ukraine received crucial space technological support from its allies, including the European Union and the United States, with Starlink's contribution significantly altering the dynamics of the conflict.

China, following Russia's lead, also criticized SpaceX's involvement in military activities and announced its intent to counter such participation. These develop-

²⁹ "Chandrayaan 2," Indian Space Research Organization, Department of Space, 22 July 2019, <https://www.isro.gov.in/>; Chethan Kumar, "Chandrayaan-3 Launch on July 14; August 23-24 Preferred Landing Dates," *Times of India*, 6 July 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>; Michael Kugelman, "India's Moon Landing Is a Big Geopolitical Step," *Foreign Policy*, August 23 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Amitabh Sinha, "Russia's First Moon Mission in Decades Fails as Luna-25 Crashes into Lunar Surface; All Eyes on Chandrayaan-3 Now," *Indian Express*, 23 August 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/>.

³⁰ Gregory J. Meyer and Francis P. Stallings. "Is Space the Ultimate High Ground?," *Proceedings of SPIE* 4, no. 8044 (May 2011): 184–91, <https://doi.org/>.

³¹ Kartik Bommakanti, "Starlink and Ukrainian Military Performance: Implications for India," *Observer Research Foundation*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

ments underscore the interconnectedness of terrestrial disputes and space activities, raising the possibility that China and India's disputed territorial issues may spill over into space-related conflicts.

In the broader context of the Indo-Pacific region, power rivalries have assumed critical importance. The United States has long held a dominant position in the region, while China and India are emerging as significant actors. The current power struggle has created a trilemma equation involving the United States, China, and India, shaping the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific area. This strategic competition extends to China's rivalry with Quad countries, casting a shadow over the small countries of South Asia. These power dynamics continue to evolve and have far-reaching implications for the region and beyond.

Race for Commercialization

Increasing private-actor involvement in space exploration has ushered in a new, exploitation-driven space race.³² China, despite being an authoritarian state, exercises complete control over its private actors and actively promotes commercialization in space. Chinese private space companies are engaged in the development of reusable rockets, satellite and sensing technologies, and advanced rocketry systems. For instance, China's commercial space industry achieved a milestone with the successful launch of its CERES-1 rocket in 2020, capable of carrying 770 pounds of payload into LEO.³³ China is strategically bolstering its private space industries to counter the dominance of US commercial actors in space. The growth of China's private space market gained momentum after 2016, with the Institute for Defence Analyses reporting the existence of 78 commercial space companies. In China's commercial space sector, mixed-ownership enterprises like Zhuhai Orbital, Expace, and OK-Space provide services such as remote sensing, launch capabilities, and communication services. Many of these private actors have the potential to serve both civilian and military purposes, aligning with China's emphasis on *civil-military integration*, denoting the leveraging of dual-use technologies, policies, and organizations for military advantage.³⁴

³² Pekkanen, "Governing the New Space Race"; and James Clay Moltz, "The Changing Dynamics of Twenty-first-century Space Power," *Strategic Security Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2019):15–43, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

³³ Andrew Jones, "Chinese Rocket Firm Galactic Energy Succeeds with First Orbital Launch, Secures Funding," *Space News*, 7 November 2020, <https://spacenews.com/>.

³⁴ Irina Liu et al., *Evaluation of China's Commercial Space Sector* (Washington, DC: Institute for Defense Analyses, September 2019), <https://newspaceconomy.ca/>.

India has also enthusiastically entered the fray, recently unveiling its space policy on April 20, 2023. The country's policy prioritizes the commercialization of launch and space-related activities for civilian purposes. This shift began in 2019 with the establishment of "New Space India Limited Company."³⁵ India draws inspiration from the United States' *National Space Policy* and the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act (CSLCA) of 2015.³⁶ India currently leads the way with forward-looking private space companies such as Agnikul Cosmos, Skyroot Aerospace, and Pixxel. In 2022, Skyroot Aerospace achieved a significant milestone by launching its first private rocket. Moreover, the company has set ambitious goals, pledging to launch its second satellite by 2023, with a strategic plan to conduct a minimum of two rocket launches annually starting in 2024.³⁷

India currently contributes 2 percent to the global space market and has ambitious plans to increase this contribution to 9 percent by 2023.³⁸ In line with this vision, Sreedhara Panicker Somanath, chairman, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), reports that 100 startup companies have registered with ISRO, with 10 private space companies actively engaged in rocket and satellite development.³⁹ The Indian government's decision to remove Goods & Services Tax (GST) barriers for satellite launches by private actors has provided a significant boost to the Indian private space industry.⁴⁰ India joined the Artemis Accord on 21 June 2023, further solidifying its strategic ties and commitment to enhancing space cooperation with the United States in the endeavor to return humans to the Moon by 2025.⁴¹

³⁵ Susmita Mohanty, "NewSpace India and Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre: A Fledgling and Critical Partnership," *New Space* 10, no. 1 (March 2022): 3–13, <http://doi.org/>.

³⁶ P.J. Blount and Christian J. Robison, "One Small Step: The Impact of the US Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act of 2015 on the Exploitation of Resources in Outer Space," *North Carolina Journal of Law & Technology* 18, no. 2 (2016): 160–86, <https://scholarship.law.unc.edu/>.

³⁷ Nivedita Bhattacharjee, "India's First Private Rocket Company Looks to Slash Satellite Costs," *Reuters*, 26 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>; Rishika Sadam, "India's Skyrooot Expects to Double Rocket Launches amid Chandrayaan-3's Success," *Reuters*, 29 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

³⁸ "Enhancing the Private Participation in Space Activities," Indian Space Research Organisation, March 2023, <https://static.pib.gov.in/>.

³⁹ "About 100 Start-ups Registered with ISRO, says Chairman S Somanath," *Business Standard*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.business-standard.com/>.

⁴⁰ Press Trust of India, "Space Startups, Industry Bodies Welcome GST Exemption for Satellite Launch Services," *Economic Times*, 12 July 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

⁴¹ "The Republic of India Signs the Artemis Accord" (press release, US Department of State, 24 June 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

The Economic Implications of Space Militarization and Resource Exploitation

The availability of rare-earth resources is inherently limited, leading countries to look toward new, unowned territories such as the Moon or Mars as potential sources of these valuable materials. Namrata Goswami and Peter Garretson have already outlined how space could become a contested domain among space powers, primarily driven by resource competition.⁴² Examining current trade war dynamics, it becomes evident that rare-earth elements (REE) have played a pivotal role in the trade tensions between the United States and China. The United States heavily relies on China for REE supplies, with approximately 80 percent of such imports originating from China. These REEs are crucial in the manufacturing of cell phones, military equipment, and batteries for electric cars, underscoring their strategic importance. In response to US sanctions, China imposed export restrictions on gallium and germanium starting from 1 August 2023, with germanium being a vital component in computer chip production.⁴³ China has justified these sanctions as measures to safeguard its national interests.⁴⁴

This section delves into the connection between space militarization and resource exploitation, exploring its implications. The trajectory of militarization in space is no longer solely focused on protecting space assets or countering adversaries in space; it has expanded to include resource acquisition. Historical precedents of expansionism highlight how major powers have consistently sought to colonize or control specific regions of the world to secure access to vital energy resources. Classical geopolitics theories like Rimland and Heartland have long emphasized the significance of geography and natural resources in shaping global power dynamics.

Both the United States and China have ambitious lunar exploration plans, with the United States aiming to establish a permanent Moon base by 2030 and launching the Artemis Accord in 2020, garnering support from 21 countries, including India. China has also declared its intent to establish a nuclear-powered facility on the Moon by 2028.⁴⁵ India is actively pursuing lunar exploration, and if its third Moon mission proves successful, it will join the ranks of lunar-capable nations.

⁴² Namrata Goswami and Peter A. Garretson. *Scramble for the Skies: The Great Power Competition to Control the Resources of Outer Space* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

⁴³ Archie Hunter and Alfred Cang, "China Restricts Export of Chipmaking Metals in Clash with US," *Bloomberg*, 3 July 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

⁴⁴ Mai Nguyen, "China's Rare Earths Dominance in Focus after It Limits Germanium and Gallium Exports," *Reuters*, 5 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁴⁵ Sakshi Tiwari, "China Could Set Up 'Moon Base' By 2028; Lunar Station Likely to Be Powered by Nuclear Energy—Chief Designer," *EurAsian Times*, 23 November 2023, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

These initiatives are accompanied by legal changes that potentially conflict with existing space laws and treaty clauses.

For example, Article 1 and Article 2 of the Outer Space Treaty (OST) clash with the US SPACE Act of 2015, which provides for unfettered exploitation of space resources, and Luxembourg's Law on the Exploration and Use of Space Resources (2017), which pertains to the right to mine extraterrestrial property. These discrepancies challenge the credibility of established space norms. Consequently, there exists a potential for conflict as multiple countries vie for lunar and Martian resources, with the first nation capable of exploiting and occupying these space resources likely gaining a significant advantage in this emerging frontier.

China's Space Strategy and Space Silk Road Policy: Execution in South Asia

China initiated its space program in the 1950s and gradually evolved into a prominent spacefaring nation, achieving this status through advancements in military technology. The nation has set its sights on becoming a global leader in space exploration by 2045. However, China faced exclusion from the International Space Station in 2011, prompting the development of its first independent Tian-gong space station, completed in 2022.⁴⁶ China's ambitious plan to establish itself as a major space power by 2030 is evident in various initiatives, including the Mars mission launched in 2021 and plans for a crewed lunar mission by 2036. China also laid the foundation for its space endeavors with the establishment of the Space Systems Framework (SSF) in 2015, signifying its intent to maintain control over other space actors' activities.⁴⁷

China's space strategy can be delineated into two distinct aspects: a soft-power strategy and an offensive hard-power strategy. On one front, China is diligently building its space-related hard-power capabilities, with a rapid expansion of its space expansionism efforts encompassing celestial and celestial body exploration. Simultaneously, China seeks global popularity through its space-cooperation policy.

Many countries may initially perceive China's space initiatives as science and technological cooperation, but these endeavors carry long-term implications, particularly when considering regional dynamics within the Indo-Pacific. China established the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO) in 2008 to foster collaboration with Asia-Pacific nations in areas such as data sharing, disaster monitoring, ground infrastructure, and connectivity. Notably, two South

⁴⁶ Andrew Jones, "Tiangong Is China's Space Station in Low Earth Orbit," *Space.com*, 24 August 2021, <https://www.space.com/>.

⁴⁷ Larry M. Wortzel, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Space Warfare," *Astropolitics* 6, no. 2 (2008): 112–37, <https://doi.org/>.

Asian nations, Bangladesh and Pakistan, are primary members of APSCO.⁴⁸ China further extended its space cooperation under the global BRI by launching the Space Information Corridor (SIC) project in 2016, aimed at enhancing satellite applications and ground systems among member states.⁴⁹ China sells space-related data and technological support to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Additionally, China has entered into memoranda of understanding with the national space agencies of 46 countries and four international organizations as of 2022.⁵⁰ Furthermore, China has proposed joint research endeavors with Russia focused on the Moon and deep space, with plans to establish the International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) by 2035.⁵¹

According to China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the nation is actively providing space services and data sharing with numerous countries in Asia and Africa through these initiatives.⁵² China's deployment of the Beidou satellite (BDS) system, serving as a global navigation satellite system provider, enables the People's Republic of China (PRC) to exert influence over third-world countries and control satellite navigation service markets. Since 2020, China has been engaged in negotiations with several small South Asian nations, including Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, to encourage the adoption of the BDS navigation system. Initially, Bangladesh and Nepal showed optimism regarding the BDS system, leading China to invite Nepali officials to Beijing for Beidou system training.⁵³ Furthermore, China launched Sri Lanka's inaugural satellite, Supreme Sat I, in 2012, which serves as a communication satellite. However, it is important to note that most South Asian states rely on US-based navigation systems, such as GPS, for their navigation needs.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO), "About APSCO," n.d., <http://www.apsco.int/>.

⁴⁹ Mingyan Nie, "Asian Space Cooperation and Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization: An Appraisal of Critical Legal Challenges in the Belt and Road Space Initiative Context," *Space Policy* 47 (February 2019): 224–31, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵⁰ David H. Millner, Stephen Maksim, and Marissa Huhmann "BeiDou: China's GPS Challenger Takes Its Place on the World Stage," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 105, no. 2 (2022): 23–31, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

⁵¹ Deng Xiaci, "Scientist Reveals Key Objectives for Lunar Station Project Co-proposed by China, Russia," *Global Times*, 22 March 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

⁵² "China Regional Snapshot: Space," Foreign Affairs Committee, 14 November 2022, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>; and "The Beidou Satellite Network and the 'Space Silk Road' in Eurasia," Jamestown Foundation China Brief, July 2020, https://jamestown.org/program/the-beidou-satellite-network-and-the-space-silk-road-in-eurasia/?mc_cid=3629b3ce05&mc_eid=5debcfd568;

⁵³ Ananth Krisnan, "China's Home-grown Beidou Satellite System Eyes Global Footprint," *The Hindu*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

⁵⁴ Deccan Herald News Service, "China launches Sri Lanka's first Satellite," *Deccan Herald*, 2012, <https://www.deccanherald.com/>.

China's Offensive Hard-Power Strategy: Counterspace Capabilities

Acquiring counterspace power is vital for safeguarding space assets and can also be employed to restrict an adversary's access to space or disrupt and disable their space infrastructure. In this pursuit, China stands at the forefront, actively advancing its counterspace capabilities with global dominance in mind. The implications of China's expanding space military assets, encompassing both conventional and nuclear capabilities, loom large over the Indo-Pacific region. An examination of China's space military doctrine reveals that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) draws inspiration from the successful utilization of space technologies in conflicts like the First Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Major General Cai, a prominent advocate for integrated space power within the PLA, asserts that "control of portions of outer space is a natural extension of other forms of territorial control, such as sea or air control."⁵⁵

China's extensive megaconstellation project in LEO and its competitive stance against other spacefaring nations and private entities raise genuine concerns, not only for the realm of space but also for Earth's environment. China has developed sophisticated space technologies capable of conducting radiofrequency jamming against communication satellites in LEO. Moreover, it has actively pursued the creation of a ground-based ASAT missile system designed to target satellites in LEO. Additionally, China possesses ASAT weapons with the capacity to destroy satellites in GEO. According to the 2022 report from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), "PRC is using its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) satellite fleet for both military and civilian purposes, including remote sensing and mapping, terrestrial and maritime surveillance, and intelligence collection."⁵⁶ These developments underscore China's commitment to advancing its space-related military capabilities and assertive posture in the global space arena.

India's Space Policy Doctrine: A Reflection of Regional Rivalry

When comparing India and China's space programs, policies, and achievements, it is undeniable that India lags behind China in terms of space development. However, India's approach to space power is unique in many respects. India has set an example by establishing space infrastructure and conducting space missions with a focus on cost-effectiveness and sustainability. Notably, India became the first Asian nation to successfully reach the Mars orbit on its maiden attempt. India has set ambitious goals, including plans to build its own

⁵⁵ Wortzel, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Space Warfare."

⁵⁶ "Challenges to Security in Space," Defence Intelligence Agency.

space station by 2030.⁵⁷ Following the Chandrayaan-3 mission, India is gearing up for the Gaganyaan mission, slated for end of 2024, which aims to launch a human spaceflight into LEO.⁵⁸

India's prominence in the global space arena is evident in its extensive international collaborations, boasting over 230 space agreements with 60 countries and five international organizations. India also achieved a world record by launching 104 satellites in a single mission in 2017.⁵⁹ The nation's space policy is primarily guided by the objectives of the ISRO, and it explicitly states that "Non-Governmental Entities (NGEs) shall be allowed to undertake end-to-end activities in the space sector through the establishment and operation of space objects, ground-based assets and related services, such as communication, remote sensing, navigation, etc."⁶⁰

However, India's current threat perception in outer space is largely influenced by China's substantial investment in counterspace capabilities. Additionally, China's assistance to Pakistan in developing kinetic and nonkinetic space weaponry further complicates the regional dynamics. In response, India has intensified efforts to bolster its surveillance and intelligence capabilities using space-based assets to enhance national security. It is worth noting that India currently possesses a rudimentary satellite navigational system, which proved insufficient for monitoring events like the deadly clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LOAC) in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh in 2020.⁶¹ In contrast, China maintains a complex satellite constellation in the LEO and medium-Earth orbit (MEO), providing a significant advantage in the space arena.

Recognizing the evolving military dimension of space activities, India has taken steps toward the establishment of an integrated space force. In 2019, India established the Defence Space Agency (DSA) and the Defence Space Research Organisation (DSRO) to conduct integrated space warfare exercises and develop SSA. DSRO is tasked with the development of space warfare-oriented weapons systems

⁵⁷ Ashmita Rana and Yogesh Joshi, "India-China Space Race: The Role of Private Sector" (working paper, IAS Working Papers, National University of Singapore, 27 December 2021), <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/>.

⁵⁸ Sharmila Kuthur, "India to Launches Test of Gaganyaan Crew Capsule's Emergency Escape System This Year," Space.com, 19 September 2023, <https://www.space.com/>.

⁵⁹ Prabhjote Gill, "India Has Signed 250 Documents on Space Cooperation with 59 Countries, Says ISRO Chief K Sivan," *Business Insider*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.in/>; and "ISRO Sends 104 Satellites in One Go, Breaks Russia's Record," *Economic Times*, 15 February 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

⁶⁰ Adithya A. Variath and Khooshi Mukhi, "Indian Space Policy 2023: India's Space Diplomacy in the Global South," *The Geopolitics*, 27 May 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/>.

⁶¹ Anushka Saxena, "India's Space Policy and Counter-Space Capabilities," *Strategic Analysis* 47, no. 2 (2023): 146–58, <https://doi.org/>.

and technologies for India.⁶² Furthermore, India is actively utilizing the Quad as a platform for space cooperation among member countries. The Quad nations expanded their partnership in space, cybersecurity, and emerging technologies in 2021. A new working group was formed to facilitate the exchange of satellite data for climate change, disaster management, and preparedness. The Quad countries also committed to enhancing space-related capacity building and the advancement of space technologies and applications. These efforts highlight India's commitment to advancing its space capabilities and fostering regional and international cooperation in the space domain.⁶³

Status of Small Countries' Space Programs: Why India–China Space Competition Is Anxiety for These Countries

The interests of aspiring spacefaring states have become intertwined with national interests and civil-military complexities.⁶⁴ This section of the paper has highlighted the impact of the India–China race over outer space and analyzed how the given situation can increase the possibility of war in space between space actors and what could be the immediate effect of it for South Asia and in a wide frame in the Indo-Pacific. India's increasing investment in counterspace capacities is a sign of preparing itself for a future war in space.

The South Asian region has already experienced tensions and conflicts, primarily between India and Pakistan, which have hindered the development of strong economic integration due to mutual distrust. Additionally, China has played a significant role as an extraregional influencer in the region. In response to China's growing influence, India and its Indo-Pacific allies have been promoting the Indo-Pacific strategy to counterbalance China's regional dominance. Notably, Bangladesh recently expressed its support for the Indo-Pacific cooperation policy and unveiled its *Indo-Pacific Outlook* (IPO) in April 2023, emphasizing the peaceful use of space and the maritime domain. Bangladesh's engagement with the Indo-Pacific represents a partial victory for the Indo-Pacific alliance, particularly India.⁶⁵

⁶² Saxena, "India's Space Policy and Counter-Space Capabilities."

⁶³ "Quad Leaders' Summit" (fact sheet, The White House, 24 September 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>; and Mandeep Sing Rai, "Revisiting QUAD's Ambition in the Indo-Pacific Leveraging Space and Cyber Domain," *arXiv preprint arXiv:2209.04609*, 28 September 2022, <https://arxiv.org/>.

⁶⁴ Pekkanen, "Governing the New Space Race."

⁶⁵ Monoar Alim Chowdhury, "Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook: Tilting, Rebalancing, or Else?," *The Geopolitics*, 24 May 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/>.

India holds a prominent position as a major space power among the eight countries with space capabilities, while the other South Asian states are aspiring to develop their own space programs. India's role in space cooperation extends to both the global and regional scales. Initially, India took regional space-cooperation initiatives in 2017 by offering the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Satellite, aimed at fostering connectivity throughout the region using space-based satellites and services.⁶⁶ The agenda of building the SAARC satellite was building connectivity throughout the region through space satellites and services. However, this initiative faced challenges due to Pakistan's objections, resulting in a failure to overcome terrestrial conflicts and realize the potential for orbital cooperation.⁶⁷ Despite initial skepticism from other regional states about sharing a single satellite, India's successful space diplomacy and historical ties with its neighbors partly led to the successful launch of the rebranded South Asia Satellite, which primarily serves communication purposes and supports various applications, including internet connectivity, direct-to-home television, tele-education, telemedicine, disaster management, meteorological applications, fishing and agricultural advisory services, and natural resource mapping, among others.⁶⁸ Subsequently, many regional countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, launched their own satellites or nanosatellites. Even the Maldives initiated a space research program, with India's private companies playing essential roles in assisting these efforts. India directly assisted Bhutan in launching its first nanosatellite, and it also collaborated with Maldives in its space endeavors.⁶⁹

In contrast, Pakistan, another South Asian state that began its space program in 1962, has faced challenges and setbacks, including political, economic, and technological limitations. Pakistan is the only South Asian country that has sought direct assistance from China for its space program.⁷⁰ However, it is challenging for smaller countries in the region to engage in collaboration or seek direct support from Beijing due to the competitive dynamics between China and India in the region.

⁶⁶ K V Venkatasubramanian, "South Asian Satellite to Boost Regional Communication," Special Service and Features, Press Information Bureau Government of India, 7 May 2017, <https://pib.gov.in/>.

⁶⁷ Ajey Lele, "Satellite for SAARC: Pakistan's Missed Opportunity," Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 19 April 2016, <https://www.idsa.in/>.

⁶⁸ Shounak Set, "India's Regional Diplomacy Reaches Outer Space," Carnegie India, 3 July 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>; and Farjana Sharmin, "Why South Asia Needs Regional Cooperation on Space Policy?," *South-South Research Initiative*, 8 November 2022, <https://www.ssrinitiative.org/>.

⁶⁹ Ajey Lele, "Space Programs, Policies, and Diplomacy in South Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of South Asia*, ed. Sumit Ganguly and Frank O'Donnell (New York: Routledge, 2022), 454–69.

⁷⁰ Mohammad Ali Zafar and Ayesha Zafar, "Devising National Space Policy In Pakistan," *Aether: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* 1, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 49–62, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

Looking at South Asia, there are various regional and subregional initiatives such as the SAARC and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which have committed to promoting cooperation in scientific innovation and technical collaboration. BIMSTEC has even launched a Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) among member states in 2022, aimed at coordinating and strengthening cooperation in the field of space technology applications.⁷¹ Unfortunately, these regional initiatives have been hampered by the geopolitical rivalries between India and Pakistan, as well as India and China, which have hindered integrated space cooperation in South Asia.

Legal Loopholes: Analyzing the Existing Space Governance and Treaties, and Possibilities of Cooperation

This section underscores the argument that existing space governance has significant gaps and limitations. While the OST of 1967 prohibits the deployment of weapons of mass destruction and nuclear weapons in space, it does not restrict the deployment of conventional weapons. Consequently, four countries have conducted ASAT tests, resulting in a proliferation of space debris. Notably, both China and India refused to sign a recent UN resolution aimed at banning destructive direct-ascent ASAT missile tests.⁷²

The proposal for banning such destructive tests in space was initially introduced by the United States, a major ally and strategic partner of India. However, India chose to adopt an absentia policy in this matter. China's direct opposition to and vote against the UN resolution did not come as a surprise. Therefore, it is evident that both countries prioritize national security through counterspace capabilities. Unfortunately, this mind-set is likely to lead to an increase in the number of ASATs in space.

⁷¹ "Cabinet Approves Memorandum of Association (MOA) by India for Technology Transfer Centre at Colombo, Sri Lanka" (press release, Government of India, 14 June 2022), <https://pib.gov.in/>.

⁷² Jeff Foust, "More Countries Encouraged to Commit to Halt Destructive ASAT Tests," *Space News*, 15 June 2023, <https://spacenews.com/>.

Table 1. Number of debris created by space actors up to February 2022

Russia	7,032
United States	5,216
China	3,854
France	520
Japan	117
India	114
European Space Agency	60
United Kingdom	1

Source: Anna Fleck, Countries Creating the Most Space Debris," Statista, 22 September 2022, <https://www.statista.com/>.

States are no longer the sole actors creating debris. Private actors now bear equal responsibility for rendering the space environment vulnerable. According to a 2022 Australian Space Agency report, a SpaceX capsule piece dropped in Australia.⁷³ Existing international space laws do not explicitly address the debris problem. However, the 1967 OST and the 1972 Liability Convention, which ensures consultations and compensation for damage caused by space objects, could apply to tackling space debris. But the irony is that in 1981, the Soviet Union only agreed to pay Canada USD 3 million for the 1978 disintegration of its Cosmos 954 satellite over Canadian territory.⁷⁴ This remains the last example of any spacefaring state agreeing to pay compensation to date.⁷⁵

In the case of India–China space cooperation, regional power competition is the primary barrier. Although India and China signed a 2014 Memorandum of Understanding to cooperate in keeping space peaceful, it went nowhere.⁷⁶ Ongoing astropolitical rivalries reduce chances for space cooperation. India recently joining the Artemis Accords further complicates lunar competition and space politics. Thus, no bilateral possibility exists currently to build space cooperation between the two Asian space giants.

⁷³ "Space Debris Australia: Piece of SpaceX Capsule Crashes to Earth in Field," *BBC News*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

⁷⁴ "Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Object," United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, General Assembly 26th session, 1971, <https://www.unoosa.org/>.

⁷⁵ "Disintegration of COSMOS 954 Over Canadian Territory in 1978," United Nations, 2 April 1981, <https://www.unoosa.org/>.

⁷⁶ "Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Object," United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs.

Conclusion

This study draws attention to the growing outer-space militarization and resource exploitation, showing major Indo-Pacific space powers like the United States, China, and India drive this through geopolitical threats and security dilemmas. Various sections underline the economic motivations for space competitions and militarization for resource exploitation, briefly investigating the financial incentives. Additionally, the study discusses near-earth orbit environmental aspects. Thus, the article examines how major space-power actions and interests bear responsibility for the fragile space environment and pollution. It also addresses how ambiguous space laws and less binding treaties cannot make all stakeholders behave responsibly. Moreover, the article shows how these global and regional space rivalries create complex barriers for space newcomers, sharing South Asia's experience and analyzing how small aspirants get caught between India and China.

In conclusion, the study suggests a vital need for reforms or new laws, plus data transparency, to keep the domain safe, secure, and sustainable for all. It advocates promoting astro-environmental consciousness. ♣

Most. Farjana Sharmin

Ms. Sharmin is a doctoral student in the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences, South Asian University, New Delhi, India.

Securing the Digital Seabed

Countering China's Underwater Ambitions

RAGHVENDRA KUMAR

Abstract

China's Digital Silk Road provides Beijing with a potent instrument to disrupt undersea cables and gain an advantage in the Indo-Pacific. Submarine fiber-optic cables are critical infrastructure yet vulnerable to sabotage. This paper examines how the planned Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) cable from China could become a new flashpoint in the Western Indian Ocean. The cable has strategic implications, allowing China to project power and leverage its technological edge. Its landing sites in Pakistan and Djibouti would anchor Chinese naval assets in key chokepoints. The civil-military fusion strategy also facilitates surveillance and espionage via the cables. To counter such threats, India and allies must secure submarine cables through monitoring, contingency planning, and multilateral cooperation. Investing in alternative "democratic digital networks" can also mitigate China's ambitions. Ultimately, submarine cables are emerging as a domain of geopolitical competition requiring policies that safeguard their resilience.

The Indian Ocean is becoming a major theater of geopolitical contest for strategic dominance in the wider Indo-Pacific. The Western Indian Ocean (WIO), in particular, has emerged as the strategic center stage for great-power games. This region comprises the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and critical straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, Hormuz, and Suez Canal. It is the key entry point for major powers and plays a vital role in geostrategic calculations given its transit route significance for trade, energy security, and submarine data cables. The WIO's cables are intricately linked to Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics and rivalries among regional nations. As the hub connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa, the WIO's critical technology infrastructure for undersea data cables is essential in shaping power dynamics. The evolving security dynamics necessitate examining cable protection and security as an ongoing interest. This article highlights Indian and global efforts to secure critical technologies infrastructure as national security strategy. It examines cable geosecurity dynamics in the WIO's "great game" and India's counterstrategies to contain China's technology push for geopolitical gains.

Submarine Data Cables

Submarine cables and pipelines constitute critical infrastructure for transporting energy (including gas, oil, and electricity) and telecommunications. *Submarine data cables*, defined as “means of communication laid on the seabed between two terminal points,”¹ can be categorized into two types: power cables, responsible for transmitting energy, and data cables, facilitating the transmission of Internet, voice, and data.² In the realm of promoting telecommunications and international communications, the concept of freedom of the seas takes center stage, with the installation of underwater data cables emerging as a pivotal component. These submarine data cables are strategically placed on the ocean floor, connecting land-based stations, and play a vital role in carrying voice and data traffic worldwide, serving multiple purposes.

In the modern era, these data cables have become the linchpin of the global economy and a cornerstone of national security strategy. The growing dependence of societies on the Internet for daily life underscores the necessity for a comprehensive understanding of the framework underpinning the security of these critical electronic communication systems. Presently, fiber-optic cable-based systems are increasingly preferred for day-to-day data transmission, offering not only cost-efficiency but also significantly faster data and voice transfer compared to satellite alternatives. Their applications extend to various domains, encompassing marine scientific data collection, underwater oceanographic research, digital mapping of oil and gas exploration sites, among others.³

The Information and Communication Technology Revolution and Modern-day Conflict

The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution, post–Cold War, has assumed a role that can potentially exacerbate modern-day conflicts. The concept of *hybrid warfare*, characterized by the smart and innovative utilization of

¹ Lionel Carter et al., *Submarine Cables and the Oceans: Connecting the World* (Cambridge, UK: United Nations Environment Programme, 2009).

² Tara Davenport, “The Installation of Submarine Power Cables under UNCLOS: Legal and Policy Issues,” *German Yearbook of International Law* 56 (2013): 107–48.

³ Edward J. Malecki and Hu Wei, “A Wired World: The Evolving Geography of Submarine Cables and the Shift to Asia,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 2 (2009): 360–82, <https://doi.org/>; Tara Davenport, “Submarine Communications Cables and Science: A New Frontier in Ocean Governance?,” in *Science Technology, and New Challenges to Ocean Law*, ed. Harry N. Scheiber and Moon-Sang Kwon (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 209–52; and Emily Waltz, “Offshore Wind May Power the Future,” *Scientific American*, 20 October 2008, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/>.

advanced technologies, has gained prominence. Historically, the control of information and communication systems has been leveraged for political and strategic gains, involving disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and other manipulative tactics to influence political landscapes and even topple governments. In the contemporary context, the widespread reach of ICT has amplified the capacity of malevolent actors and states to sway larger populations to serve their vested interests.⁴

The notion of hybrid warfare has gained substantial traction, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ongoing uncertainties surrounding projects like the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2, involving multi-billion-dollar natural gas pipelines through the Baltic Sea, have fueled conspiracy theories regarding the vulnerability of undersea critical infrastructure. This infrastructure is seen as potential attack sites for malevolent actors seeking to exploit vulnerabilities in nation-states related to energy, power, and information.⁵

The Significance of Submarine Data Cables

In today's interconnected world, the Internet and e-communications rely heavily on submarine data cables. These undersea cables facilitate the transmission of vast amounts of data, Internet traffic, and voice across oceans and nations, serving as the backbone of the contemporary global landscape.⁶ The inception of long-distance undersea cable communication dates to the nineteenth century when the first undersea data cable, used for telegraphy, was laid in 1850. This copper-based telegraph wire connected the United Kingdom and France beneath the English Channel. Subsequently, the first successful transatlantic cable was established in 1866, marking significant milestones in long-distance communication technology.⁷

The evolution of undersea cables has seen them become more advanced and extensive, spanning over a million kilometers across the ocean floor, linking continents, islands, and nation-states. In today's world characterized by "complex interdependence," submarine data cables have emerged as one of the most critical infrastructures, raising concerns about potential anthropogenic and natural threats that could disrupt communication networks, thereby impacting economies ranging from single states to entire continents. Consequently, there is a pressing need for

⁴ Ofer Fridman, Vitaly Kabernik, James C. Pearce, eds. *Hybrid Conflicts and Information Warfare: New Labels, Old Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2018), 1.

⁵ "White House Says Blog Post on Nord Stream Explosion 'Utterly False,'" *Reuters*, 8 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁶ Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 1–25.

⁷ Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Digital Silk Road: China's Quest to Wire the World and Win the Future* (New York: Harper Business, 2021).

a comprehensive evaluation of the governance architecture governing the laying, protection, and security of these vital undersea data cable infrastructures.

Authoritarian Regimes and Control over Data Cables

Information and communication pathways are pivotal for the global community, often described as a “powerful tool, for liberation or repression, depending on who controls it.”⁸ In this context, it is imperative to examine the role of authoritarian regimes such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in exerting overarching control over the undersea data cable industry. This control is pursued through a civil-military fusion strategy, where the civil sector collaborates with the military sector to realize the Chinese dream of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by 2049.

The PRC’s Digital Silk Road (DSR), announced in 2015 as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), underscores the clear linkage between digital connectivity and Beijing’s geopolitical and geostrategic ambitions of establishing a Sino-centric global order. To this end, the PRC is making substantial investments through both private and state-owned firms in the submarine data cable sector and its supporting infrastructure. The civil-military fusion approach facilitates the global expansion of these companies while aligning them with China’s grand geopolitical objectives. A pertinent example discussed in this paper is the planned Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) submarine data cable project by the PRC, which holds the potential to become a significant geopolitical flashpoint in the WIO region. The strategic advantage gained by the PRC in the region could have far-reaching implications for regional security architecture, a matter of critical concern for India and its interests.

Securitization of Submarine Data Cables

India and the world rely heavily on the intricate network of submarine cables crisscrossing the seabed. These cables serve as strategic communication chokepoints in the global information highway, rendering them critical assets for global security. Responsible for carrying nearly 97 percent of worldwide Internet traffic, these submarine cables represent a tangible form of transnational connectivity that remains inadequately explored within the global geopolitical and geosecurity discourse.⁹ The absence of a clearly defined international governance framework has

⁸ Hillman, *The Digital Silk Road*.

⁹ James Dean et al., *Threats to Undersea Cable Communications* (Washington, DC: Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program, 28 September 2017), <https://www.hsdl.org/>.

given rise to security concerns, rendering these cables susceptible to sabotage and espionage, both in times of peace and war. These cables can grant nation-states a significant geopolitical and geostrategic advantage in international affairs. As of 2023, approximately 529 cable systems (totaling approximately 1.3 million kilometers in length) and 1,444 landing stations are operational or under construction.¹⁰

Submarine cables stand out as the swiftest, most cost-effective, and reliable means for global data transmission. In an era where the world's reliance on digital technology encompasses civilian communication, commerce, agriculture, healthcare, military logistics, and financial transactions, these subaquatic cables encased in steel and plastic have become indispensable to national security. Any disruption to these cables could paralyze the affected region and push the world to the brink of a 'new great depression.'¹¹ An illustrative incident occurred in January 2022 when a volcanic eruption severed the sole fiber-optic cable connecting Tonga to the rest of the world—the Tonga Cable to Fiji. This event left Tonga in a state of information isolation, resulting in severe economic losses and hindering the prompt and effective coordination of international humanitarian assistance. This episode underscored the heightened security imperative surrounding these cables, which are pivotal for global connectivity.¹²

Viewed from the perspective that nearly all governments worldwide utilize these cables to facilitate external and domestic communication, the significance of submarine cables in diplomacy, military communications, and trade and commerce cannot be overstated. These cables facilitate the transmission of transactions worth up to 10 trillion USD per day, primarily through private entities, as government-owned satellite usage for classified data remains limited. Consequently, the heavy reliance on these critical infrastructure components by government and military agencies can have catastrophic repercussions on a state's security and its ability to respond to emerging threats. A case in point is the 2008 incident when a submarine cable between Egypt and Italy ruptured, resulting in a substantial decline in US unmanned drone flights to Iraq.¹³ Thus, the question of ownership, construction, operation, and control of these critical infrastructures has become more relevant than ever before.

¹⁰ "Submarine Cable Frequently Asked Questions," *TeleGeography*, 2023, <https://www2.telegeography.com/>.

¹¹ James Rickards, *The New Great Depression: Winners and Losers in a Post-Pandemic World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2021).

¹² Winston Qiu, "Tonga Cables Cut after Volcanic Eruption, at Least Four Weeks to Restore," *Submarine Cable Networks*, 19 January 2022, <https://www.submarinenetworks.com/>.

¹³ Michael Sechrist, "Cyberspace in Deep Water: Protecting Undersea Communications Cables by Creating an International Public-Private Partnership" (policy analysis exercise, Harvard Kennedy School of Government, 23 March 2010), <https://www.belfercenter.org/>.

The private sector holds a monopoly over the planning, production, deployment, and maintenance of these submarine cables. Presently, SubCom of the United States of America, Alcatel Submarine Network of France, NEC of Japan, and Huawei Marine Networks of China rank as the four largest suppliers, owners, and builders of submarine cables globally.¹⁴ China's share in the global submarine cable sector rose to 11.4 percent in 2019, with China now aiming to expand its share to 20 percent between 2025 and 2030.¹⁵

Recently, the critical nature of the submarine cable communication network has come to the fore in the security considerations of the Western strategic community. Concerns have arisen about Russia potentially leveraging these undersea cables to disrupt their communication linkages with the world, thereby crippling their economies and other facets of daily life in retaliation for their support to Ukraine in the ongoing conflict. Heightened concerns stem from increased Russian submarine activity in proximity to these undersea cables. Britain's Admiral Tony Radakin remarked, "Undersea cables that transmit Internet data are 'the world's real information system,' and added that any attempt to damage them could be considered an 'act of war.'"¹⁶ Consequently, the possibility of submarine cable sabotage in times of peace or conflict has accentuated vulnerabilities, risk factors, and disruption indicators within the global submarine cable network and supporting infrastructure, including the undersea cables in the WIO.

Against the backdrop of the escalating technological rivalry between India and China, especially in the realms of espionage and data acquisition, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the pervasive role of submarine cables in these intensifying geopolitical frictions. China's DSR strategy emerges as a potent instrument that could be wielded to potentially disrupt, sabotage, or clandestinely gather intelligence from undersea cables. These cables serve as the linchpin of global communication networks and are critical to the strategic interests of both nations. Deliberate manipulation or compromise of undersea cables could provide China with a distinct geopolitical advantage in the ongoing competition or future conflicts with India in the region.

¹⁴ Colin Wall and Pierre Morcos, "Invisible and Vital: Undersea Cables and Transatlantic Security," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 11 June 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>.

¹⁵ Helene Fouquet, "China's 7,500-Mile Undersea Cable to Europe Fuels Internet Feud," *Bloomberg*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

¹⁶ PA Media, "UK Military Chief Warns of Russian Threat to Vital Undersea Cables," *The Guardian*, 8 January 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

Digital Silk Road: China's Underwater Expansion and Digital Warfare Strategy

Announced in 2015 as a digital component of the BRI, the PRC's DSR plan aims to construct a Sino-centric digital infrastructure. Its objectives include exporting Beijing's digital capabilities, promoting Chinese technology businesses, and gaining access to vast data repositories. The PRC envisions the DSR expanding its digital influence across the wider Indo-Pacific region by investing in critical information and digital infrastructure, including undersea cables, fiber-optic networks, fifth-generation (5G) networks, and data centers abroad.¹⁷

Consequently, there has been a notable increase in Beijing's engagement with African, Latin American, and West Asian states, particularly in digital infrastructure development. This engagement presents significant opportunities. As a subset of the BRI, the DSR strategically supports the PRC's aspiration for national rejuvenation by 2049. It achieves this through financing, constructing, and developing infrastructure in Indo-Pacific countries. A prime example is the extensive involvement of Chinese multinational corporation (MNC) Huawei in the development of critical information infrastructure across many African nations, with particular attention drawn to the "Safe Cities" program. Analysts have raised concerns, suspecting Beijing of employing its MNCs as state agents to surveil and exert authoritarian control over digital information flow to serve the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) interests in resource-rich African regions.¹⁸

More than 150 countries have signed cooperation agreements related to China's BRI.¹⁹ Beijing intends to employ the DSR as a potent instrument to advance its expansionist policies and employ economic coercion through a skillfully designed civil-military fusion strategy.

China continues to enhance its unconventional capabilities to gain an advantage in the digital warfare landscape. The CCP invests in modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, enabling it to expand naval assets underwater. This expansion is aimed at effectively disrupting adversary communication lines in digital warfare. China's preparations are oriented toward asymmetric conflict, focusing on operating in "gray zones" rather than engaging in full-scale

¹⁷ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

¹⁸ Bulelani Jili, "A Technological Fix: The Adoption of Chinese Public Security Systems," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 20 January 2023, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/>.

¹⁹ Xue Gong, "The Belt and Road Initiative Is Still China's 'Gala' but Without as Much Luster," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 March 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

wars.²⁰ This digital warfare strategy promises substantial results with minimal investment in resources.

In this context, Beijing's DSR seeks to establish a Sino-centric global digital order by expanding and exporting Chinese technology through state-controlled and private corporations.²¹ This strategy grants the PRC access to extensive data repositories. In 1999, the PRC introduced its 'Go Out' or 'Going Global' strategy, incentivizing state-owned and private corporations to invest and expand globally.²² Beijing provided incentives and subsidized loans to technology firms to expand to strategic regions worldwide.²³ Additionally, China enacted multiple laws mandating Chinese firms to "support, assist, and cooperate in government's intelligence and national security efforts."²⁴

One such law is the National Intelligence Law of 2017, obligating all organizations and citizens to cooperate with state intelligence work and maintain the secrecy of national intelligence work. This grants the CCP extraordinary powers to engage in sabotage, espionage, hacking, and surveillance of an adversary's communication networks, enabling the collection of sensitive economic, diplomatic, and military information required to pursue its strategic goals.²⁵ This threat to US communication networks was acknowledged in the 2019 *Worldwide Threat Assessment* report, where the Director of National Intelligence warned that "China presents a persistent cyber-espionage threat and a growing attack threat to our core military and critical infrastructure systems."²⁶

With the planned PEACE submarine cable becoming operational, China's expansion in undersea infrastructure and digital authoritarianism will receive a significant boost. The CCP harnesses cutting-edge communications technology to strengthen its control domestically and expand its influence abroad. The PEACE

²⁰ Peter Layton, "Bringing the Grey Zone into Focus," *The Interpreter*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

²¹ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2020).

²² Nargiza Salidjanova, *Going Out: An Overview of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment* (Washington, DC: U.S.–China Economic & Security Review Commission, 30 March 2011), <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

²³ Hongying Wang, "A Deeper Look at China's "Going Out" Policy," Centre for International Governance Innovation, 8 March 2016, <https://www.cigionline.org/>; and Salidjanova, *Going Out*.

²⁴ National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic, Art. 7 (adopted 27 June 2017), <http://cs.brown.edu/>. Also, see other relevant Chinese laws obligating citizens and organizations to assist in "national security" efforts, including laws on Counterespionage (2014), National Security (2015), Counterterrorism (2015), and Cybersecurity (2016).

²⁵ 4 National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic, Art. 7.

²⁶ Statement of Daniel R. Coats, Director of National Intelligence, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Statement for the Record to the Select Committee on Intelligence, 116th Cong. 5, Sess. 1 (29 January 2019), <https://www.dni.gov/>.

cable, privately owned and invested in by Peace Cable International Network Co., Limited (a subsidiary of China's HENGTONG Group) and supplied by HMN Tech (formerly Huawei Marine Networks), will grant China a vital advantage in the region.²⁷ The project comprises three segments. Initially, a submarine cable will extend from Pakistan to France, passing through the Red Sea and Suez Canal, ultimately landing in France. Another branch of the PEACE cable will traverse Eastern Africa, connecting Kenya and Seychelles, and continue to the Maldives before finally reaching Singapore. The third and final leg of the PEACE cable will stretch toward South Africa, providing connectivity to the Southern African Development Community (SADC), East Africa, West Asia, and Europe, thus expanding the Chinese digital footprint. This strategic expansion positions China to assert itself both geopolitically and geoeconomically, potentially challenging the dominance of the United States and India in the region.

China currently possesses key infrastructure assets in areas of significant geopolitical importance, including the port of Gwadar, Pakistan, operated by China Overseas Ports Holding Company; Djibouti (China's first overseas military base); and Egypt (Beijing's largest trading partner in the region). These assets are strategically vital to Beijing's geopolitical ambitions, as they facilitate its trade and energy imports through key chokepoints adjoining these states. Thus, China and Huawei, the project implementer, have strategically selected nations of significant geostrategic importance as intermediary locations to further their objectives and strategic activities.

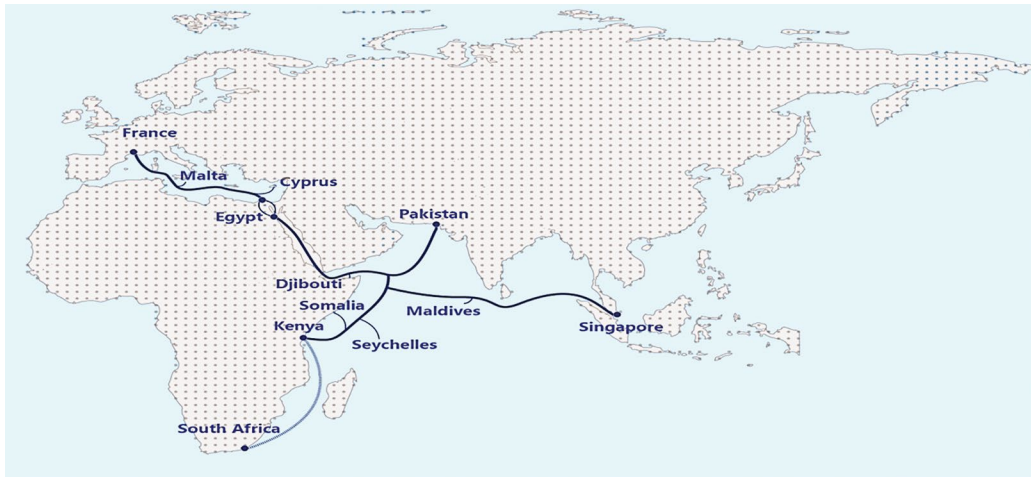


Fig 1. PEACE: A 15,000-km-long network connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. (Source: Peace Cable International Network Co., Limited <http://www.peacecable.net/>.)

²⁷ "PEACE," *Submarine Cable Networks* (website), n.d., <https://www.submarinenetworks.com/>.

With the PEACE cable, China establishes a permanent presence in the strategic chokepoints of these critical infrastructures. Landing stations in Pakistan and Djibouti provide the PLA Navy with a strategic advantage, enabling permanent stationing in the WIO region and facilitating the collection of strategic information for both above and undersea operations in these key chokepoints. Chinese investments in digital infrastructure, fiber-optic cables, business partnerships, and technical expertise within these pivotal nations will amplify Beijing's influence as these economies transition to digital platforms. China's growing economic and soft-power influence, driven by infrastructure and digital initiatives, has the potential to displace India from its traditionally dominant position in its extended maritime neighborhood. As Beijing shifts its focus to the WIO and the wider Indo-Pacific, countries like Pakistan, Djibouti, and Egypt, with their significant digital intersections and vital water passages, may increasingly align with China's sphere of influence. Submarine cables landing in mainland China or facilities financed by China's BRI loans grant the PRC the leverage to conduct extensive geopolitical propaganda campaigns, aiming to deny opponents the strategic advantage of space and technology in ongoing great-power competition.

UNDERSEA CABLE CHOKE POINTS AFFECTING ASIA & MIDDLE EAST

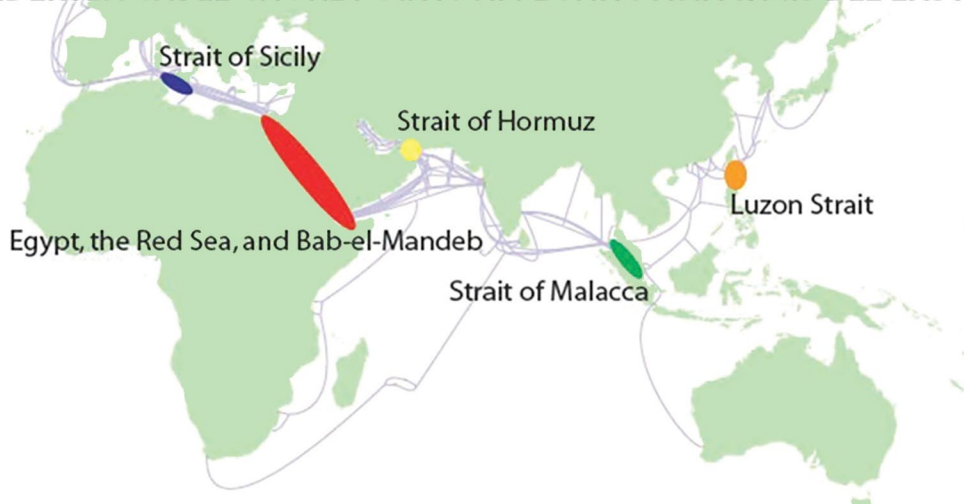


Figure 2. Undersea cable chokepoints affecting Asia and the Middle East. (Source: "Arctic Submarine Fiber-optic Cable Line Polar Express," *Morsviazputnik* (website), 2020, <https://www.marsat.ru/>.)

The Security Challenge: Sabotage and Espionage

Submarine cables represent critical infrastructure susceptible to sabotage and espionage, including physical damage. Any disruption of these cables could have

devastating global repercussions. Sabotaging these cables can be viewed as a strategic maneuver to weaken an adversary prior to the outbreak of kinetic warfare.²⁸ States or state-sponsored nonstate actors often employ specially equipped submarines and techniques to tap or completely sever undersea cables, as exemplified in 2013 when three individuals equipped with specialized scuba gear and fishing boats attempted to cut the SEA-ME-WE 4 undersea cable. This incident disrupted communication traffic between Europe and Egypt, underscoring the vulnerability of these vital assets.²⁹

Another critical infrastructure at risk of sabotage is the cable landing stations, where undersea cables connect to terrestrial digital communication networks. The convergence of multiple cables at these stations makes them prime targets during conflicts. Additionally, natural threats like shark attacks, earthquakes, and tsunamis pose a risk of disruption. However, what concerns the strategic community most is the deliberate threat to these crucial assets. Chinese fishing fleets, under the guise of human error, could intentionally damage these cables, or specialized units of the PLA Navy might undertake missions to disrupt communication flow.

Recent events have underscored the potential for undersea cables to become embroiled in conflicts involving China and Taiwan. In February 2023, Chinese maritime vessels severed two communication cables linking Taiwan with its Matsu islands, causing Internet connectivity disruptions for the island's residents. The "unintended" targeting of these cables near China's coast could be interpreted as a calculated maneuver to demonstrate China's capability to disrupt communication and potentially isolate Taiwan.³⁰ These incidents highlight the significance of undersea cables as tools for leveraging power in modern conflicts.

In contrast, espionage does not necessarily entail damage or disruption to undersea cables but is executed covertly to gain access to data flowing through these cables, either underwater or at designated landing or data centers. This requires specialized training and techniques. The PLA's Science and Engineering University provides tailored training in advanced digital warfare and research related to defense technology and military equipment.³¹ China is rapidly closing the gap with the US and Russia in this domain. Russia, for instance, possesses the AGS, a small

²⁸ Jon R. Lindsay and Lucas Kello, "Correspondence: A Cyber Disagreement," *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014): 181–92, <https://direct.mit.edu/>.

²⁹ Charles Arthur, "Undersea Internet Cables off Egypt Disrupted as Navy Arrests Three," *The Guardian*, 28 March 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

³⁰ Wen Lii, "After Chinese Vessels Cut Matsu Internet Cables, Taiwan Seeks to Improve Its Communications Resilience," *The Diplomat*, 15 April 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

³¹ Thomas J. Bickford, "Professional Military Education in the Chinese People's Liberation Army: A Preliminary Assessment of Problems and Prospects," in *A Poverty of Riches: New Challenges and Opportunities in*

nuclear-powered minisubmarine capable of tapping fiber-optic cables in challenging underwater environments.³² The United States has also conducted cable-tapping operations, notably during the Cold War when the submarine USS *Halibut* intercepted sensitive information from a military cable passing through the Sea of Okhotsk to the Kamchatka Peninsula in the eastern Soviet Union. This operation, codenamed Ivy Bells, continued for a decade and utilized three specially modified submarines.³³ The ability to tap and gather intelligence provides significant advantages to a nation's military. Tactics of sabotage and espionage can be employed simultaneously, as demonstrated by Britain during World War I when it severed most of Germany's undersea telegraph networks, leaving one cable intact, which was subsequently tapped to gather vital intelligence during the war.³⁴

The DSR is envisioned as a response to unconventional warfare, providing the PLA with command and control over the world's strategic communication gateways. Investments in these infrastructures aim to furnish the PRC with intelligence, military battlefield information, and geopolitical advantages far beyond its strike zones. The digital database enhances the PLA's operational flexibility and responsiveness in both conventional and unconventional warfare scenarios. The PLA regards digital warfare as an integral component of modern warfare, with an emphasis on "suppressing, degrading, disrupting, or deceiving enemy electronic equipment."³⁵ The US Department of Defense 2020 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* clearly states that:

China has publicly identified cyberspace as a critical domain for national security and declared its intent to expedite the development of its cyber forces. The PRC presents significant, persistent cyber espionage and attack threats to military and critical infrastructure systems. China seeks to create disruptive and destructive effects—from denial-of-service attacks to physical disruptions of critical infrastructure—to shape decision-making and disrupt military operations in the initial stages of a conflict by targeting and exploiting perceived weaknesses of militarily superior adversaries. . . . Authoritative PLA sources call for the coordinated employment of space,

PLA Research, ed. James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N. D. Yang (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), 17, <https://www.rand.org/>.

³² H I Sutton, "How Russian Spy Submarines Can Interfere with Undersea Internet Cables," *Forbes*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/>.

³³ Sherry Sontag, Christopher Drew, and Annette Lawrence Drew, *Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

³⁴ Garrett Hinck, "Cutting the Cord: The Legal Regime Protecting Undersea Cables," *Lawfare* (blog), 21 November 2017, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/>.

³⁵ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2020).

cyber, and electronic warfare (EW) as strategic weapons to “paralyze the enemy’s operational system of systems” and “sabotage the enemy’s war command system of systems” early in a conflict. Increasingly, the PLA considers cyber capabilities a critical component in its overall integrated strategic deterrence posture, alongside space and nuclear deterrence.³⁶

Strategic Response and India’s Options

This article considers a matrix of potential strategic responses, taking into account the implications of the DSR on the geopolitical and geosecurity landscape in India’s extended maritime neighborhood. The absence of a singular or coordinated strategy for governing and securing submarine cables demands immediate attention. India possesses unrivaled demographic, economic, and geographical advantages, positioning New Delhi to emerge as a prominent global player in submarine cable networks. However, capitalizing on this substantial potential necessitates the Indian government’s establishment of policies and regulations that foster investment, aligning with its rapidly growing digital economy.

Assuming the pivotal role of a global and regional hub for submarine data cable networks, India can serve as a strategic countermeasure to China’s ambitions and enhance its digital prowess on the global stage. To achieve comprehensive and holistic security for undersea data cable systems, a combination of operational strategies and a robust safeguarding approach is imperative. This approach encompasses offshore patrolling, the establishment of cable protection zones, and the implementation of a well-defined security audit framework to counteract digital warfare threats.

As India rapidly grows its digital economy, it has compelling reasons to maintain vigilance regarding potential threats to undersea cables. Recognizing the vital importance of safeguarding its national prosperity and security, India should contemplate adopting innovative policy solutions reminiscent of the cable protection zones (CPZ) established by Australia and New Zealand. These CPZs would delineate restricted areas within India’s sovereign waters, where activities such as anchoring, bottom trawling, and specific types of fishing would face prohibitions to prevent cable damage. To ensure compliance, India could impose substantial fines on violators, mirroring the stringent framework outlined in Australia’s Telecommunications Act of 1997.³⁷ Furthermore, ships operating within these zones

³⁶ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (2020), 83

³⁷ Telecommunications and Other Legislation Amendment (Protection of Submarine Cables and Other Measures) Act 2005. <https://www.legislation.gov.au/>.

should be mandated to transmit their positions to the Indian Coast Guard for continuous monitoring, utilizing coastal radar, surveillance aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, and surface patrols.

Steps taken, such as the creation of the tri-service Cyber Defense Agency in 2018 and the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) recommendations on Licensing Framework and Regulatory Mechanism for Submarine Cable Landing in India, demonstrate India's commitment in the right direction.³⁸ The recent TRAI legislation, which proposes designating undersea cables as critical information infrastructure eligible for protection by the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC), enhances their security and shields against potential cyberthreats, strengthening their safeguarding. Nevertheless, addressing this transnational security challenge calls for a more comprehensive response.

Like-minded nation-states should collaborate to provide a democratic digital network alternative to China's autocratic offerings. Initiatives by the Quad group of countries, including India, Japan, Australia, and the United States, alongside other like-minded powers such as the European Union, should aim to challenge China's dominant position in this technological domain. Positive steps in this direction are already evident, with efforts to develop regulatory frameworks for the subsea cable market and the formation of the Working Group on Critical and Emerging Technologies showcasing intent to collaborate in this strategic field.³⁹

The Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience, with a focus on enhancing Indo-Pacific cable systems through the expertise of Quad nations, prioritizes regional infrastructure and represents a welcome decision. Its aim is to unite public and private sector stakeholders to rectify infrastructure deficiencies and synchronize future advancements, a mission that will assume a pivotal role in forging a democratic and open communication route for the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, thereby ensuring heightened connectivity and resilience. Initiatives like Australia's Indo-Pacific Cable Connectivity and Resilience Program and the United States' offer of assistance through the CABLES program are likely to yield positive results in containing China's expansionism in the digital domain.⁴⁰

To ensure the robust protection and sustained growth of undersea cable infrastructure in the WIO and beyond, New Delhi must harness India's rapidly expand-

³⁸ "TRAI releases recommendations on 'Licensing Framework and Regulatory Mechanism for Submarine Cable Landing in India'" (press release, Ministry of Communications [India], 20 June 2023), <https://pib.gov.in/>.

³⁹ Elizabeth Roche, "Quad Can Pool Resources to Prevent China from Dominating Global Tech," *Live Mint*, 28 June 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/>. Also see, "Quad Summit" (fact sheet, The White House, 12 March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁴⁰ "Quad Leaders' Summit Fact Sheet" (fact sheet, The White House, 20 May 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

ing digital economy, its strategic location as a global connectivity hub, its abundant technical expertise in the tech industry, its rising global influence, and ongoing efforts to expand connectivity. In this context, the launch of the transcontinental and transoceanic India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) during the recently concluded G-20 summit in New Delhi represents a bold geo-economic initiative of unprecedented scale since China unveiled its BRI in 2013.⁴¹ The IMEC unites capable partner nations to pool resources, reshape supply chains, production networks, and spheres of influence under the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) initiative, reducing overreliance on China in global trade and critical infrastructure. The corridor encompasses a comprehensive scope, including a rail link, an electricity cable, a hydrogen pipeline, and a high-speed data cable. Unlike the opaque and nontransparent nature of the BRI, the IMEC prioritizes viability and draws funding from multiple sources, particularly through public-private partnerships, fostering a technological ecosystem characterized by resilience, integrity, openness, trust, and security, reinforcing democratic principles and human rights. Through the IMEC, India leverages its strategic position to collaborate with friendly foreign nations, countering China’s influence and offering a democratic alternative to the global community. Together, like-minded countries organize and mobilize to ensure technologies align with, rather than undermine, democratic principles, institutions, and societies.

In the context of undersea cables spanning diverse territorial waters and subject to varying national policies and regulations, the release of the “ASEAN Guidelines for Strengthening Resilience and Repair of Submarine Cables” in 2019 serves as a notable precedent.⁴² Drawing inspiration from the ASEAN initiative, India can take a leadership role in advocating for the development of a similar guideline within the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), streamlining and simplifying the permit application process for cable repair. Furthermore, by leveraging the collaborative potential of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), India can foster cooperative mechanisms aimed at enhancing the safety and security of submarine cables. The region’s multilateral maritime mechanisms, exemplified by IORA, hold promise in addressing nontraditional security threats, especially in light of recent efforts to address maritime security concerns. IONS, serving as a forum for naval professionals from 35 member states, provides a strategic platform

⁴¹ “Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) & India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)” (press release, Ministry of External Affairs [India], 9 September 2023), <https://www.mea.gov.in/>.

⁴² “ASEAN Guidelines for Strengthening Resilience and Repair of Submarine Cables,” ASEAN, n.d., <https://asean.org/>.

for knowledge exchange and consensus-building on maritime security matters in the Indian Ocean, making it an ideal avenue for collaborative submarine cable protection initiatives.

Additional strategies should involve restricting the transmission of sensitive and critical data through privately owned submarine cables. Moreover, prioritizing national capacity enhancement and investing in military modernization for securing these vital undersea cable networks must take precedence. Regular risk assessments and monitoring of these cable projects should be integrated into states' defensive and offensive strategies. Hence, it is imperative for India to expedite its efforts in developing and integrating autonomous unmanned systems, particularly unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV), into its naval operations. The delayed construction and procurement of high endurance autonomous underwater vehicles (HEAUV) underscore the urgent need for enhancing undersea domain awareness capabilities. While domestic production is desirable, immediate reliance on UUV imports is critical to bridge the capacity gap. Collaborative endeavors involving private companies, research and development projects, and an inclusive approach that engages all stakeholders will be pivotal in accelerating UUV technology advancement, crucial for underwater warfare. The approved flagship project for extra-large unmanned underwater vehicles (XLUUV) should be vigorously pursued, with the prototype slated for completion by 2025.⁴³ These XLUUVs, designed for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, antisubmarine, surface, and mine warfare, will significantly enhance India's underwater domain awareness (UDA) capabilities, aligning with the evolving security landscape of naval operations in the Indian Ocean region.

Given that a significant majority of these cables are owned, operated, and managed by private firms, ensuring the private sector's commitment to national security becomes an essential aspect of policy planning. Encouraging public-private partnership models in this sector can mitigate risks associated with sabotage and espionage. Equally important is the development of a contingency plan to address disruptions promptly.

Lastly, India should engage with the international community and unite like-minded states to establish a comprehensive international legal framework for securing these critical infrastructures.

⁴³ Government of India, "Invitation for Expression of Interest (EOI): Indigenous Development of High Endurance Autonomous Underwater Vehicle—Anti-Submarine Warfare Project HEAUY-ASW," Make in India Defence, 24 March 2023, <https://www.makeinindiadefence.gov.in/>.

Conclusion

As we delve into the depths of the world's oceans, an inconspicuous yet significant battle for global supremacy is underway. China's digital warfare strategy is crystallizing through initiatives like the PEACE cable and its establishment of undersea bases for submarine cables in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. The Western and Indian strategic communities are acutely aware of China's growing capacity and capability to extend its digital dominance across the globe.

The global community's increasing reliance on China's technologies has far-reaching implications for geopolitics, economies, and global security. China's planned PEACE cables are forging deep connections into the East African and West Asian regions, posing threats to national, regional, and global security.

Given the constraints India faces, it becomes imperative to embark on a coordinated effort to develop critical infrastructure that can match China's potential. The DSR, designed to facilitate China's ascent to superpower status with unconventional strategies, demands counterstrategies to curtail China's rise.

In the depths of the undersea world, the stage is set for a battle of digital supremacy. How nations respond to this challenge will shape the future of global information networks and the balance of power in the digital age. The undersea cables, often hidden from view but fundamental to our interconnected world, have become the battleground where the struggle for dominance plays out. 🌐

Raghvendra Kumar

Mr. Kumar (ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6872-3681) is an independent researcher and analyst specializing in Indian Ocean geopolitics and maritime affairs. He has recently submitted his doctoral thesis, "China's Engagement with Western Indian Ocean Island States of Africa: Implications for India," to the Department of African Studies at the University of Delhi, India. Previously he worked as an associate fellow at the Africa's Maritime Geostrategies (AMG) Cluster, of the esteemed National Maritime Foundation (NMF), Delhi, enhancing his expertise in maritime geostrategies. Prior to his tenure at the NMF, Mr. Kumar taught undergraduate students at the Department of Political Science, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. His areas of interest include but are not limited to Africa in the Indian Ocean, India and China in Indian Ocean geopolitics, maritime security studies, and nontraditional security challenges. He can be reached at raghvendrakumar2007@gmail.com.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Prof. Christian Bueger for his invaluable feedback and insightful remarks on this article. His expertise and guidance have greatly enriched the quality of this work.

China's Authoritarian Grip

How China Reinforces Social Control, Cultivates a Climate of Fear, and Minimizes Dissent

LCDR JORDAN J. FOLEY, JAGC, US NAVY

Abstract

Roughly one-quarter of the world's people and Internet users live under governments that engage in heavy censorship. A large portion live behind "The Great Firewall" of China, which places strategic importance on Internet control. The Internet can serve counterhegemonic purposes, as numerous groups in civil society use it to connect isolated populations, unite women's movements, and enable human rights and political minority activists. However, China sees Internet censorship as crucial for national security and social stability. Through legal research, translating Chinese sources, and drawing on personal experiences in China, this paper argues that Chinese domestic censorship poses an international threat.

In 2012, I completed a Personnel Exchange Program (PEP) with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) at the Lüshun Naval Base in Dalian, China. My experience serving alongside both PLA soldiers and sailors has informed many of my views about the People's Republic of China's (PRC) military build-up and increasingly aggressive behavior toward US military operations. During this PEP, we completed naval drills, military training, and team-building exercises. For one exercise, I was on a team with four British and Australian naval officers for a 10-kilometer (km) "ruck run." Our team took off and ran the 10-km course as designed, weaving through the hills and coastline of the Bohai Straits. The rules were: (1) follow the path and (2) do not lessen your weight. After the 10-km, we approached the finish line only to find the PLA team had finished and won without us ever seeing them pass. After a brief confrontation, it was revealed that the PLA members had dropped much of their weight and took a shortcut, essentially halving the course to 5 km. When I called out one of the PLA officers, rather than admitting they cheated or denying more furiously, he simply said, "You could have done that too and you didn't. You lost." That reaction and statement to what I considered blatant cheating should be an important lesson not just for bravado competitions like a ruck run, but it should inform how the United States and its allies and partners approach the PRC in the coming decades. From the Chinese mind-set, it is not cheating—it is competing.

Chinese conceptions of the rules-based international order are not aligned with a free and open world. This disregard for individual freedoms is most pronounced in China's domestic Internet-control mechanisms. "The Great Firewall" system began in 2006 and now extends beyond the Internet to include digital identification cards with microchips containing personal data that allow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to recognize faces and voices of its 1.3 billion-plus inhabitants. China's government-led program of Internet development serves as a model for other authoritarian states elsewhere. The Great Firewall is the envy of authoritarian regimes worldwide, and versions have been exported to Cuba, Iran, and Belarus.¹

The reluctance of some Western countries to stand up for ideals that have done so much to achieve human rights and correct the hardships of an imperfect world could be caused by China's economic and political power.² However, the desire to stand up to China is growing and must be encouraged.³ In early 2020, India amended its foreign direct investment policy to enforce tougher scrutiny on Chinese investors. That same month, an Indian app developer created a top trending program called "Remove China Apps," which was downloaded more than 5 million times. It enabled users to detect and easily delete apps developed by Chinese firms.⁴ The desire to promote a free and open Internet is prevalent in interest groups as well. For example, the Falun Gong religious movement, using programmers in the United States., developed censorship-circumventing software called "Freagate," which it offered to dissidents elsewhere, particularly in Iran.⁵

The relationship between Chinese censorship and free Internet advocates forms a continual change of strategies and tactics. As one Chinese netizen put it, "It is like a water flow—if you block one direction, it flows to other directions, or overflows."⁶ As the Internet increasingly becomes an arena of conflict, much like the open seas, the United States must show that freedom of navigation on the web is for all humankind.⁷ The world's democracies must, as President Ronald Reagan

¹ Barney Warf, "Geographies of Global Internet Censorship," *GeoJournal*, 23 November 2010, <http://geography.fullerton.edu/>.

² George F. Kennan, "George F. Kennan on Organizing Political Warfare," 30 April 1948, Wilson Center Digital Archive: International History Declassified, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/>.

³ Mike Gallagher, "The Lost Art of Ideological Warfare," *Ronald Reagan Institute*, 2019, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/>.

⁴ Manish Singh, "Google Pulls 'Remove China Apps' from Play Store," *Tech Crunch*, 2 June 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/>.

⁵ Warf, "Geographies of Global Internet Censorship."

⁶ Warf, "Geographies of Global Internet Censorship."

⁷ Andrew Kassoy, Bart Houlahan, and Jay Coen Gilbert, "Impact Governance and Management: Fulfilling the Promise of Capitalism to Achieve a Shared and Durable Prosperity," Brookings Institute, 1 July 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

said, “be worthy of freedom and determined not only to remain so but to help others gain their freedom as well.”⁸

The Great Firewall

The CCP’s mandate to govern 1.35 billion people is founded on its promise to restore the country to a prime position in the regional and global order. The CCP cannot do that without control of the Internet. China’s concept of *Internet sovereignty* is a belief in each country’s right to stop unwanted information at its borders. This is a fundamental tenant of CCP social control.⁹ Beijing expends resources and manpower on a massive scale to ensure content censorship and preventing dissemination of “moral pollution.”¹⁰ China, with nearly 700 million users operating behind The Great Firewall, is strangling its Internet in its desire to maintain political and social control.¹¹

The CCP has a vested interest in the continuous development of information warfare (IW) capabilities directed at domestic content. State-run news media outlets actively seek to influence Western perceptions, while the CCP contends that Western media outlets not only exhibit bias but also participate in a coordinated international effort to tarnish China’s reputation.¹² If a free and open Internet is increasingly recognized as a human right, then the Chinese Internet, intentionally designed to suppress its people, unequivocally violates this principle. Far from serving as a platform for the free exchange of ideas, China’s Internet reinforces social control, fosters a climate of fear, and suppresses dissent. While China’s initial justification for imposing censorship was rooted in concerns over public morality, particularly regarding issues like pornography and gambling, in recent times, the primary rationale has shifted toward combating terrorism.¹³ These deliberately vague notions of national security have contributed to the ongoing situation in Xinjiang, China’s western province predominantly inhabited by ethnic Uighur Muslims.

⁸ Gallagher, “The Lost Art of Ideological Warfare.”

⁹ Beina Xu and Eleanor Albert, “Media Censorship in China,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 February 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

¹⁰ Simon Denyer, “China’s Scary Lesson to the World: Censoring the Internet Works,” *Washington Post*, 23 May 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

¹¹ Derek E. Bambauer et al., *Internet Filtering in China in 2004–2005: A Country Study* (Toronto: OpenNet Initiative, 2005), <https://opennet.net/>.

¹² Xu and Albert, “Media Censorship in China.”

¹³ Zunyou Zhou, “China’s Comprehensive Counter-Terrorism Law,” *The Diplomat*, 23 January 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

A comprehensive understanding of the history of the Internet in China is essential. Equally vital is an appreciation of the CCP's intricate relationship with the Internet. Unlike democratic nations, the Chinese Internet exists in relative isolation from the rest of the world.¹⁴ Since its introduction in 1994, the CCP's paramount concern has been the potential political instability that the Internet could precipitate.¹⁵ In 2000, to exert control over information accessibility, the Party initiated a surveillance system capable of accessing the digital records of every citizen.¹⁶ This project primarily focused on individual user surveillance and later became known as "The Great Firewall." Its success hinged on three primary methods: Internet Protocol (IP) blocking, IP address misdirection, and data filtering. Importantly, every action undertaken by the CCP to control the Internet is deemed legal within the framework of Chinese domestic law.¹⁷

The effectiveness of "The Great Firewall" does not solely stem from its technological prowess but also from the culture of self-censorship pervasive in China. Chinese companies bear responsibility for the content hosted on their websites and are held liable if they fail to report and remove content conflicting with the CCP's narrative. These companies are required to engage in self-regulation characterized by a commitment to "patriotic observance of law, equitableness, trustworthiness and honesty."¹⁸

Even US corporations are opting for self-censorship to safeguard the substantial profits derived from their engagements with China. In July 2020, Apple made the decision to remove thousands of games from its Chinese App Store in response to a policy mandating that all paid games or games featuring in-app purchases must be licensed by Chinese regulators. Apple provided no specific guidance to app developers regarding content that contravened Chinese regulations; instead, there was an abrupt and sweeping removal. Amid this purge, Apple also withdrew the popular iOS and Android podcast client, *Pocket Casts*, from the Chinese App Store.¹⁹ The Cyberspace Administration of China determined that *Pocket Casts*

¹⁴ Warf, "Geographies of Global Internet Censorship."

¹⁵ "Endeavors to Spur the Development and Application of the Internet," in *The Internet in China* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 8 June 2010), <http://www.china.org.cn/>.

¹⁶ Ping Punyakumpol, "The Great Firewall of China: Background," *TorFox*, 11 June 2011, <https://cs.stanford.edu/>.

¹⁷ Marty Hu, "The Great Firewall of China, A Technical Perspective," *TorFox*, 30 May 2011, <https://cs.stanford.edu/>.

¹⁸ "Public Pledge of Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry," *China Services Info*, 26 December 2018, <https://govt.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

¹⁹ Jon Porter, "Apple Closes Chinese App Store Loophole, Causing Thousands of Games to Be Removed," *The Verge*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/>.

could potentially provide access to content considered illegal within the country and thus demanded its removal. This marked the second prominent podcast app removal from China's App Store.

Impacts on US Tech Companies

Even previously exploited loopholes by banned game developers are being closed not by the CCP but by the US platforms through which these games are distributed. Profit-driven enterprises, such as Rockstar Games, had previously relied on these loopholes to sell titles from the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise within the nation. However, in February 2020, Apple initiated reminders to developers that obtaining licenses was a requisite, lest their games face prohibition and removal. Android app stores have similarly enforced this licensing prerequisite for publication.²⁰

Public platforms bear ultimate responsibility for the content they host.²¹ The Public Pledge of Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry mandates that Chinese tech companies actively monitor their websites and eliminate any prohibited material. Chinese Cybersecurity Law governs publicly accessible information and is legitimized by the Chinese legal doctrine of cyberspace sovereignty.²²

In the international arena, the principle of sovereignty may appear incongruent with cyberspace. Traditionally, violations of sovereignty pertain to physical acts within the territory of other states. Sovereignty is a concrete, territorial concept, while cyberspace establishes connections between states that seem ethereal in nature. Yet, these two concepts coexist. States and the international community are striving to harmonize the ideals of an unimpeded flow of information in cyberspace with a state's authoritative control over cyber activities within its borders.²³ An increasing number of states, such as China, staunchly advocate for sovereignty over an open and unrestricted cyberspace. For liberal democracies, countering this trend is of paramount importance.

Sovereignty violations can be grounded in two distinct criteria: "(1) the degree of infringement upon the target state's territorial integrity; and (2) whether there

²⁰ Porter, "Apple Closes Chinese App Store Loophole."

²¹ Porter, "Apple Closes Chinese App Store Loophole."

²² See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace," 1 March 2017, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

²³ Catherine Lotrionte, "State Sovereignty and Self-Defense in Cyberspace: A Normative Framework for Balancing Legal Rights," *Emory International Law Review* 26, no. 2 (2012): 825–919, <https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/>.

has been an interference with or usurpation of inherently governmental functions.”²⁴ The Tallinn Manual 2.0 working group has argued that remote cyberoperations leading to tangible consequences, such as the replacement of hard drives, qualify as such violations. However, the classification becomes less clear when misinformation directed into another state’s borders triggers a physical response, such as rioting and looting.

Censorship and Gaming Companies

Article 12 of China’s Cybersecurity Law serves as the basis for addressing violations where technology is used to “incite subversion of national security . . . [or] disseminate violent, obscene, or sexual information.”²⁵ Consequences for such violations may range from the removal of an application to heightened content regulation or temporary bans on specific characters or gameplay within China. Notably, China’s cybersecurity regulations place a significant focus on technology companies referred to as *network operators*.²⁶ The Cybersecurity Law specifically defines *network operators* as “network owners, managers, and Internet service providers.”²⁷

For network operators operating within industries deemed “critical infrastructure,” additional regulations come into play.²⁸ Article 21 of the Cybersecurity Law mandates that these network operators must adhere to a tiered cybersecurity protection system. To engage in business within China, companies must implement technical measures for monitoring and recording network activities, as well as providing technical support for Chinese investigations.²⁹ Companies within this designation must also store personal information and other “important data” within the borders of the PRC. The term *important data* refers to data, as determined by the CCP, closely linked to national security, economic development, and public interest. Leaking or misuse of such data after it is transferred outside of China can have severe consequences. Companies classified as network operators handling

²⁴ Michael N. Schmitt and Liis Vihul, eds., *Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), rule 4, para. 10.

²⁵ “Translation: Cybersecurity Law of the People’s Republic of China (Effective June 1 2017), trans. Rogier Creemers, Paul Triolo, and Graham Webster, *New America*, 29 June 2018, art. 12, <https://www.newamerica.org/>.

²⁶ Punyakumpol, “The Great Firewall of China.”

²⁷ “Translation: Cybersecurity Law,” art. 76.

²⁸ “Translation: Cybersecurity Law,” art. 21.

²⁹ “New Chinese Cybersecurity and Data Privacy Requirements,” Jones Day, December 2020, <https://www.jonesday.com/>.

important data under the Cybersecurity Law face heightened scrutiny, placing them in a category subject to the most rigorous oversight.

Even Chinese network operators in noncritical industries must secure prior consent from individuals when transferring data across borders. Furthermore, they must demonstrate that such data export is essential for routine business operations or contractual obligations.³⁰ Additionally, these data exports must align with relevant treaties and pass a security assessment conducted by the network operator.³¹ The mandatory security assessment evaluates the suitability and risk management of the data export plans. If the assessment yields a high-risk outcome, personal information and important data cannot be exported, and the results of the assessment must be retained and reported.³²

Cybersecurity Law and Data Localization

Territorial integrity and inviolability stand as bedrock principles in international law. For cyberespionage conducted within another state's borders to be considered lawful, it would necessitate a customary exception to the general principle of territorial integrity and inviolability. Given that the potential political fallout may outweigh the benefits gained from such operations, sovereignty-violating cyber campaigns might only be pursued as a last-resort measure, with a full understanding of the potential reactions they may trigger.

China's perspective on cyber sovereignty encompasses both the technology and the actual data transmitted and stored across the Internet.³³ China views ownership over data and information networks as a key to ensuring both a secure Internet and national security. This perspective is exemplified by President Xi Jinping's statement that "without cybersecurity, there is no national security." Consequently, China's approach to cyber governance is closely tied to national security concerns. The Chinese National Security Law, enacted in July 2015, grants the CCP substantial authority to implement a robust cybersecurity framework.³⁴

³⁰ "Translation: Cybersecurity Law," art. 16.

³¹ "Translation: Cybersecurity Law," art. 17.

³² Qian Tong and Wang Xintong, "In Depth: How China Is Tightening Controls Over Cross-Border Data Transfers," *Caixin Global*, 14 June 2023, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/>.

³³ Adam Segal, "China's Internet Conference: Xi Jinping's Message to Washington," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), 16 December 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/>; and Emilio Iasiello, "China's Cyber Initiatives Counter International Pressure," *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 1 (2017): 1–16, <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/>.

³⁴ See: "National Security Law of the People's Republic of China," trans. China Law Translate, 1 July 2015, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/>.

Although it may appear that the Internet transcends borders, it is not entirely borderless; traditional concepts of sovereignty remain applicable *cybersovereignty*. China's Great Firewall serves as a regulatory mechanism governing the country's domestic network and cyber infrastructure to enforce its concept of cybersovereignty. In this view, state boundaries delineate not only the confines of the state's corresponding cyberspace but also any internal effects of cyberoperations are perceived as a challenge to sovereignty by the CCP.³⁵ The CCP regards a free and open Internet as a threat to China's sovereignty.³⁶

Online privacy protection in China remains a complex landscape, comprised of a myriad of laws, regulations, and judicial interpretations.³⁷ A significant milestone occurred with the enactment of the Cybersecurity Law in 2016, marking the first direct legal protection of "personal information."³⁸ This legislation lays out precise requirements for entities involved in the collection, retention, and processing of such information. An especially critical mandate, particularly for international corporations operating within China, pertains to data localization.³⁹ Nations asserting strong cybersecurity sovereignty, such as China and Russia, often mandate that data gathered within their borders must be stored within the country. Data localization grants China enhanced control over online content through its jurisdictional authority over the stored data.

US Law and Actions in Cyberspace

The Department of Defense (DOD) defines *cyberspace* as a global domain within the information environment that comprises the interdependent network of information technology infrastructures and resident data. This includes the Internet, telecommunications networks, computer systems, and embedded processors and controllers.⁴⁰ In September 2018, the White House released a national cyber strategy consisting of four pillars, one of which aimed to promote the extension of the key principles of an "open, interoperable, reliable, and secure internet." When

³⁵ Jyh-An Lee, "Hacking into China's Cybersecurity Law," *Wake Forest Law Review* 53, no. 1 (2018): 57–104, <https://www.wakeforestlawreview.com/>.

³⁶ "Translation: Cybersecurity Law," art.1.

³⁷ See: Charles Li, Rae Liu, and Arong, "MIIT Issues Provisions Governing Protection of Personal Information of Telecommunications and Internet Users," Han Kun Law Offices, 30 July 2013, <https://www.hankunlaw.com/>.

³⁸ Qi Aimin, Shoo Guosong, and Zheng Wentong, "Assessing China's Cybersecurity Law," *Computer Law & Security Review* 34, no. 6 (December 2018): 1342–54, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/>.

³⁹ Tatevik Sargsyan, "Data Localization and the Role of Infrastructure for Surveillance, Privacy, and Security," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 2221–37, <https://ijoc.org/>.

⁴⁰ Joint Publication 3-12: *Cyberspace Operations*, US Department of Defense, 8 June 2018, <https://irp.fas.org/>.

applied to China, implementing any measures to enhance Internet transparency necessitates an examination of covert action operational law.

This general sense of “covert” aligns closely with, but is slightly broader than, the US statutory definition of *covert action*. According to the National Security Act, *covert action* refers to activities undertaken by the US government (USG) to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad. The intention is that the role of the USG will not be publicly apparent or acknowledged. However, this excludes certain categories of government conduct, such as intelligence gathering and traditional diplomatic, military, or law enforcement activities.⁴¹

Entering China’s cyberspace domain requires a comprehensive legal and ethical analysis. Strategists must also evaluate US domestic, international, and Chinese laws to determine if an action violates any legal principles. If it is found to be contrary to established laws, the United States must then consider whether these challenges can be overcome or if such operations are illegal. Understanding the “facts on the ground” serves as the initial step, but a US cyber operation aimed at identifying vulnerabilities in The Great Firewall of China finds its legal basis in the US Covert Action statute.

The rationale behind categorizing this operation as a *covert action* is that it provides the most suitable legal framework and operational flexibility to achieve the stated policy objective. Under Title 50, U.S. Code, War and National Defense, Section 3093 (‘50 U.S.C. 3093’), a covert action requires a presidential finding and notification to the Intelligence Committee. This section enables the president to authorize a covert action if it is deemed necessary to support identifiable foreign policy objectives of the United States and is crucial for national security.

The FY2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) mandated notification of the use of cyberweapons and quarterly cyberoperations briefings to the Congressional Armed Services Committees. Although the Obama administration’s classified Presidential Policy Directive 20 (PPD-20) governed US cyberoperations policy, it did not grant new authorities. According to former officials, PPD-20 mandated interagency approval for significant cyberoperations. In September 2018, the White House acknowledged its replacement with new guidance, the National Security Presidential Memorandum 13 (NSPM-13), which grants greater authority to the commander of US Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM).⁴² The current

⁴¹ Alexandra H. Perina, “Black Holes and Open Secrets: The Impact of Covert Action on International Law,” *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 53, no. 3 (2015): 507–83, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/>.

⁴² Catherine A. Theohary and John W. Rollins, “Defense Primer: Cyberwarfare and Cyberterrorism: In Brief,” CRS Report, 9 December 2022, <https://fas.org/>.

authority structure authorizes covert actions to secure US interests by conducting military and foreign intelligence operations in cyberspace.

The president has the authority to designate which department, agency, or entity of the USG will participate in the covert action. The sponsorship of a covert action is hidden, not the act itself. Whereas for clandestine acts, the act itself—for example, intercepting a phone call—must remain concealed.⁴³ Additional levels of secrecy can also hinder effective policy implementation, sometimes with dramatic national security consequences.⁴⁴

When nonconsensual cyberoperations below the threshold of a prohibited intervention violate international law, it is a question that must be resolved through the practice and *opinio juris* of states. It must develop over time and in response to the needs of states to effectively defend themselves and provide security for their citizens.⁴⁵ Meeting international legal standards in this context may present challenges.

International Law and Cybersovereignty

States are increasingly employing cyberspace as a new avenue for traditional statecraft at a rapid pace. Activities that bolster national security, such as espionage, and low-cost, asymmetric offensive operations, can now be exclusively executed within cyberspace. International law, through both custom and treaties, establishes clear prohibitions against unlawful uses of force and intervenes in certain state-to-state interactions.⁴⁶

The law of war governs the conduct of armed hostilities, encompassing all international laws that bind the United States, including treaties, international agreements to which the United States is a party, and applicable customary international law. Furthermore, DOD policy extends the fundamental principles of the law of war to cyberspace operations. International law neither inherently forbids covert conduct nor exempts it from legal scrutiny.⁴⁷ However, a covert action in cyberspace may potentially violate international law, including principles related

⁴³ Joseph B. Berger III, “Covert Action: Title 10, Title 50, and the Chain of Command,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2012): 32–39, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

⁴⁴ Perina, “Black Holes and Open Secrets.”

⁴⁵ Brian J. Egan, “International Law and Stability in Cyberspace,” *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 35, no. 1 (2017), <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/>.

⁴⁶ Egan, “International Law and Stability in Cyberspace.”

⁴⁷ Egan, “International Law and Stability in Cyberspace.”

to sovereignty and noninterference.⁴⁸ Notably, sovereignty alone does not preclude cyber activities when they remain below the threshold of intervention.

The challenges of disentangling the political, legal, and moral aspects of covert actions in cyberspace are formidable. Firstly, the lawfulness of state conduct under international law does not depend on the internal and often unknowable political motives.⁴⁹ In other words, a political motive, such as preventing atrocities, does not absolve an act if it is inherently unlawful. Secondly, it remains unclear whether a nonconsensual cyberoperation falls below the threshold of prohibited intervention or breaches international law. The lawfulness of covert actions in cyberspace varies depending on interpretation, as observed through an examination of US domestic, international, and Chinese law. Thirdly, sovereignty alone might not prevent cyberoperations, and the criteria for unlawful intervention or use of force are stringent. Nevertheless, sovereignty remains an unresolved issue in cyberspace.

Perhaps the most operationally relevant legal issue within the cyberenvironment pertains to identifying criteria for determining when cyberoperations directed against a state violate its sovereignty. The Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations (“Tallinn Manual”) addresses this issue, asserting that a “State must not conduct cyber operations that violate the sovereignty of another State.” This rule represents a significant red line between lawful and internationally wrongful conduct based on “(1) the degree of infringement upon the target state’s territorial integrity; and (2) whether there has been an interference with or usurpation of inherently governmental functions.”⁵⁰ The Tallinn Manual cites the *Island of Palmas* arbitral award, which sets forth the authoritative crux of sovereignty, holding, “[s]overeignty in the relations between states signifies independence. Independence in regard to a portion of the globe is the right to exercise therein, to the exclusion of any other State, the functions of a State.”⁵¹ This categorization includes some actions that are coercive, such as acts manipulating the choice of a political, economic, social, and cultural system, as well as the formulation of foreign policy.⁵²

While the nonintervention rule is firmly established in customary international law, there exists limited state practice or *opinio juris* on its applicability to cyber activities. An illustrative example of a violation of the principle of nonintervention

⁴⁸ Ashley Deeks, “An International Legal Framework for Surveillance,” *Virginia Journal of International Law* 55, no. 2 (2015): 291–368, <https://www.ilsa.org/>.

⁴⁹ *Nicaragua v. United States of America*, Military and Paramilitary Activities, Judgement of 27 June 1986, Merits, International Court of Justice, <https://www.icj-cij.org/>.

⁵⁰ Schmitt and Vihul, *Tallinn Manual 2.0*, Rule 4, “Violation of Sovereignty.”

⁵¹ *Island of Palmas* (Neth. v. U.S.), 2 R.I.A.A. 829, 838 (Perm. Ct. Arb. 1928).

⁵² *Nicaragua v. United States of America*.

through cyber activities occurs when State A coercively interferes in the internal political process of State B by digitally altering the recorded votes, affecting State B's election results. Determining whether a nonconsensual cyberoperation falls below the threshold of prohibited intervention or constitutes a violation of international law is a matter that requires resolution through the evolving practice of states, responding over time to the need to defend themselves and ensure security for their citizens.

Setting aside the issue of sovereignty, any disregard for another state's territorial integrity and inviolability constitutes an internationally wrongful act. Activities such as aerial trespass, unconsented-to actions in the territorial sea and on land, the causation of radioactive pollution in national airspace, and the exercise of enforcement jurisdiction abroad all violate the territorial integrity and inviolability of another state.⁵³ However, the bar for unlawful intervention or use of force remains high. For instance, activities like minesweeping operations in another state's territorial sea and excavation of channels and the establishment of a military presence on a state's territory constitute violations of sovereignty, but they do not necessarily constitute unlawful interventions or uses of force.⁵⁴ Covert actions in cyberspace aimed at breaching The Great Firewall may potentially violate sovereignty and are likely to contravene the Chinese perspective. Nonetheless, sovereignty does not necessarily prohibit cyber activities when they remain below the threshold of nonintervention.

Certain states hesitate to categorically affirm sovereignty as a principle that unconditionally prohibits specific types of cyberoperations.⁵⁵ While sovereignty primarily functions to safeguard territorial integrity and inviolability, even a stronger Chinese stance in favor of nonintervention might not be adequate to bar these cyber activities. The legality of such actions hinges on whether they are construed as interventions. While certain cyberoperations clearly constitute interventions, such as the aforementioned infiltration of electoral processes, it remains unclear whether providing open channels of communication would be universally

⁵³ Egan, "International Law and Stability in Cyberspace."

⁵⁴ *Corfu Channel (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland v. Albania)*, Merits, 1949, International Court of Justice, rep. 4, 35 (9 April 1949); and *Certain Activities Carried Out by Nicaragua in the Border Area (Costa Rica v. Nicaragua)* and *Construction of a Road in Costa Rica along the San Juan River (Costa Rica v. Nicaragua)*, International Court of Justice, (16 December 2015), <https://www.icj-cij.org/>.

⁵⁵ *Corfu Channel (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland v. Albania)*, Merits, 1949, International Court of Justice, rep. 4, 35 (9 April 1949); and *Certain Activities Carried Out by Nicaragua in the Border Area (Costa Rica v. Nicaragua)* and *Construction of a Road in Costa Rica along the San Juan River (Costa Rica v. Nicaragua)*, International Court of Justice, (16 December 2015), <https://www.icj-cij.org/>.

interpreted as an intervention, especially if the objective is to expose potential human rights violations.

Conclusion

The Chinese government operates the world's most intrusive mass surveillance system, yet consistently denies the international community meaningful access to it. China views the Internet through the lens of national security and sovereignty, differing significantly from the Western model that envisions citizens' privacy rights in opposition to, rather than derived from, government authority.⁵⁶ Even several years after the implementation of the Chinese Cybersecurity Law, many of its implications remain uncertain, but the potential of a technologically empowered totalitarian regime raises concerns for the future.

If the United States fails to underscore the ideological dimension in its competition with China, it risks overlooking a critical lesson from President Reagan's Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union.⁵⁷ Internet censorship should be regarded as a facet of a multifaceted network of contested relationships in cyberspace. The Internet serves as an arena of conflict that can advance various counterhegemonic causes, including human rights advocacy and ethnic or political movements in opposition to governments. In contemporary society, the Internet connects once-isolated and invisible populations. A free Internet empowers women's movements, amplifies the voices of human rights activists, and provides a platform for political minorities to promote their agendas.

It is essential to recognize that the Chinese people are not synonymous with the CCP. The populace can be influenced to support a free and open Internet in this ideological struggle. Clear strategic objectives must underpin effective policy. To paraphrase the war theorist Carl von Clausewitz, embarking on a conflict without a well-defined objective is folly. The United States must aim to deter strict domestic Internet controls, which all too often conceal persecution and ongoing atrocities. Atrocity prevention is a matter of national security, crucial for establishing democratic security and stability worldwide. In countries like Myanmar, where efforts are made to prosecute and silence minority populations, the United States should make it abundantly clear that the level of sophistication and resources required to prevent information leaks and international intervention renders such actions not worth the cost. Challenging China's stranglehold on Internet freedom

⁵⁶ Adrian Shahbaz, Allie Funk, and Andrea Hackl, *User Privacy or Cyber Sovereignty?: Assessing the Human Rights Implications of Data Localization*, Special Report 2020 (Washington, DC: Freedom House, July 2020), <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

⁵⁷ Gallagher, "The Lost Art of Ideological Warfare."

is a formidable task, as few other nations wield such comprehensive dominion over the web. However, unless the United States leads a multipronged effort to dismantle China's grip on the freedoms of its people, we run the risk of authoritarianism spreading into other regions of the Indo-Pacific and beyond. 🌐

LCDR Jordan J. Foley, JAGC, US Navy

Lieutenant Commander Foley is an active-duty naval officer serving as the Department Head for Maritime Law in the Office of the Navy Judge Advocate General at the Pentagon. Foley is a former submarine and space cadre officer and is an experienced national security operator. Foley has lived in China on three separate occasions, including one Navy-to-Navy exchange with the PLA Navy.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the firm or its clients, the Department of Defense (DOD), or the US government. The appearance of external hyperlinks does not constitute DOD endorsement of the linked website or information contained therein. The DOD does not exercise any editorial, security, or other control over the information you may find at these locations. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.

China's Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands

Wider Implications for Geopolitics in the South Pacific

JOSEPH HAMMOND

Abstract

This article explores the leaked security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands, which has significant implications for the geopolitical landscape of the South Pacific region. China's first-known bilateral security arrangement in the area enables potential deployment of its forces near vital shipping lanes, raising concerns about a future Chinese military base. The agreement's leaked details reveal provisions for Chinese personnel to assist in maintaining social order and providing humanitarian aid. Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have expressed apprehension, with Washington reopening the US embassy in the Solomon Islands and negotiating exclusive military use rights with other nations. This move by Beijing expands China's maritime strategic presence and bolsters its hard power in the region, while also enhancing its soft power through similar agreements with other Pacific Island nations. The establishment of Chinese naval bases in the Solomon Islands would be a significant development with far-reaching implications for the Indo-Pacific. Urgent proactive measures are needed to mitigate potential conflicts and uphold regional stability.

The leaked security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands in April 2022 had a seismic impact on the geopolitics of the Pacific Islands states and Oceania, comparable to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Europe that same year. This bilateral security arrangement represents communist China's first-known agreement in the region, granting Beijing the option to station Chinese forces near vital shipping lanes, just 1,200 nautical miles from Australia. China's involvement in illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the region heightens the agreement's significance.

Leaked excerpts indicate the agreement allows the Solomon Islands to request Chinese assistance, including police, armed forces, and other law enforcement, raising concerns about a potential Chinese military base on these strategically located islands.¹ The implications have generated widespread apprehension across

¹ Daniel Hurst, "Security agreement with China 'initialled' by both countries, Solomon Islands says," *The Guardian*, 31 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

the Pacific. Notably, the Solomon Islands recently switched recognition from Taiwan to China after substantial Chinese investment, holding significance as four of the remaining 14 countries recognizing Taiwan reside in the South Pacific, including Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Nauru. In response to China's geopolitical maneuvers, opposed nations have acted swiftly.

As Oren Gruenbaum pointed out, then–New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was gravely concerned, while David Panuelo, president of the Federated States of Micronesia, said he feared the pact could put Pacific islands “at the epicentre of a future confrontation” between China and the US. Australia's Lt Gen Greg Bilton admitted that Chinese warships in the Solomon Islands would “change the calculus” for Australia's military. The US Pacific Fleet commander, ADM Samuel Paparo, warned of “potential of conflict within our region within a couple of years because of the incredible unpredictability of events.”² The recent reopening of the US embassy in the Solomon Islands after 30 years and subsequent negotiations with Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands for exclusive military use rights amplified US concerns, further heightened when the Solomon Islands refused a port call by a US Coast Guard vessel in summer 2022.

As the region's most prominent Commonwealth member, Australia responded strongly, with then–Minister of Defence Peter Dutton stating the period resembled the 1930s, stressing speaking up early to prevent consequences. This diverse Commonwealth region includes vibrant economies like Australia and New Zealand, Pitcairn Islands, the sole British Overseas Territory in the Pacific Ocean, and states leading Commonwealth climate change and blue economy initiatives.

The security agreement enabled China to expand its maritime strategic presence in the Pacific for the first time, potentially establishing its second overseas military base after Djibouti. The pact carries major ramifications for China's regional hard power, economic and military, while offering soft power advantages through similar agreements with other Pacific Island countries. A key Chinese objective is breaking the maritime encirclement of island chains to expand its Indo-Pacific presence. While no finalized agreement on Chinese naval bases in the Solomon Islands has been reached, such a development would represent the most significant Chinese move in the Pacific region since the turn of the millennium.

² Oren Gruenbaum, “Solomon Islands' security pact with China sends shockwaves across Pacific,” *Eye on the Commonwealth*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.commonwealthroundtable.co.uk/>.

The Commonwealth Approach

Given the agreement's wide-ranging implications, examining key Commonwealth countries' responses proves instructive. While covering every nation falls outside this article's scope, certain aspects bear highlighting. Commonwealth members like Australia and the United Kingdom raised concerns about growing Chinese presence in the South Pacific and Oceania. In June 2022, the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative aimed to address these concerns and contain Chinese expansion in the Pacific. The Partners in the Blue Pacific, comprising Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan, focuses on development assistance, committing more than USD 2 billion, and fostering partnerships with Pacific countries on climate change, connectivity, maritime security, health, prosperity, and education. The group held its inaugural ministerial meeting at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022.³

However, China appears willing to match or exceed the Partners in the Blue Pacific's financial commitments. For instance, a Chinese state-owned company undertakes a project expanding the Honiara port in the Solomon Islands, funded by the Asian Development Bank as part of a larger USD 170-million infrastructure initiative. This project alone represents 20 percent of the Partners in the Blue Pacific's total pledged budget.⁴

Australia's strong response to the Solomon Islands agreement stems from its significant engagement in the region, particularly in efforts to stabilize the islands following the civil war of the 1990s and early 2000s.⁵ In September 2022, Australia's foreign minister, Penny Wong, highlighted Canberra's "commitment to establish an Australia-Pacific Defence School and to double the aerial surveillance component of the Pacific Maritime Security Program to help tackle illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing."⁶

In November 2022, the United Kingdom's minister for the Indo-Pacific, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, made her first overseas visit to Vanuatu and Australia,

³ "Readout of The Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) Ministerial" (briefing transcript, US Department of State, 22 September 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁴ Kirsty Needham, "China firm wins Solomon Islands port project as Australia watches on," *Reuters*, 22 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁵ Reuters, "US Coast Guard vessel unable to enter Solomon Islands port to refuel while patrolling for illegal fishing in the South Pacific," *ABC News* (Australia), 26 August 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

⁶ Penny Wong, "Speech to the Pacific Way Conference, Papeete, French Polynesia" (transcript, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 October 2022), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>.

including participation in a meeting of the Pacific Community. This visit signaled London's renewed efforts to engage with the forum as a "metropolitan" member.⁷

Pacific Islands Forum Actions

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is a regional intergovernmental organization where Commonwealth of Nations members play significant roles. The United Kingdom, for instance, is one of five dialogue partners within the forum. Notably, the Commonwealth of Nations Secretariat has been an observer since 2006.

Despite limited integration in terms of security, through the auspices of the PIF members have participated in annual meetings with global partners since 1989. China's direct engagement with the Solomon Islands follows its efforts to strengthen the region's security architecture, exemplified by the 2018 Boe Declaration.

At its 51st meeting in Fiji in July 2022, the forum introduced the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, focusing on seven areas including political leadership, climate change, and peace and security. The region experiences a regionalization process driven by economic interdependence, political exchanges, and institutional development.⁸

The concept of a "rules-based order" mentioned in the forum's document poses a challenge to China's influence in the region. However, it is the responsibility of regional groupings like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and other Indo-Pacific countries to take further steps in this direction, capitalizing on the strength of collective action. Here is the relevant passage from the document in full: "The regional security environment is becoming increasingly crowded and complex due to multifaceted security challenges and a dynamic geopolitical environment. The established rules-based order for peace and security as set out in the Boe Declaration faces increasing pressure, and the Pacific region is not immune."⁹

Notably, during her visit, US Vice President Kamala Harris addressed the forum, announcing new embassies in Kiribati and Tonga, both Commonwealth members. Growing momentum among member states to strengthen the organization as an institution aligns with such US support, particularly responding to China's agreement with the Solomon Islands.

⁷ Anne-Marie Trevelyan, "2022 Speech to the 12th Conference of the Pacific Community in Vanuatu" (transcript, UKPOL, 25 November 2022), <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/>.

⁸ "Commonwealth Secretariat," Pacific Islands Forum, n.d., <https://www.forumsec.org/>.

⁹ *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022), <https://www.forumsec.org/>.

Between Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands: Bougainville and Beyond

The Solomon Islands agreement holds special significance amid the intriguing Melanesian geopolitics, specifically the New Guinea Islands Region encompassing the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville Island, one of Papua New Guinea's (PNG) four regions. Despite lying northwest of the Solomon Islands geographically, Bougainville is an autonomous PNG region, aiming for full independence by 2027. In 2019, with support from the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, an independence referendum occurred, with the majority voting to establish Bougainville as the world's newest country.¹⁰ Oceania has witnessed significant conflicts, including tribal fighting in Highland communities and the Bougainville conflict, making PNG the most conflict-affected nation in the region since World War II.

Bougainville's pursuit of independence could potentially spark similar aspirations and conflicts in other peripheral areas—such as New Britain and New Ireland—within the Bismarck Archipelago of PNG. Beijing seems to have incorporated this strategy into China's approach in the Oceanic region, aiming to create a fragmented and weakened area that would bolster its own influence. If Bougainville becomes independent, other islands might follow suit, resembling the situation of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent emergence of vulnerable “mini-states.” China could leverage these circumstances to gain the support of newly independent islands.

China has been actively intensifying its efforts to win over leaders in the region, not only to counter the influence of countries like the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan but also to outmaneuver other competing actors. If China succeeds in establishing a military base in the Solomon Islands, there would be little to impede it from developing a similar facility in Bougainville or any other future independent state in the region. Chinese geopolitical strategies in the region, as observed elsewhere, appear to be part of a long-term political plan.

For instance, in Bougainville, China has sought to cultivate General Sam Kaouna, a prominent contender for the position of Bougainville's first president in the event of independence. Kaouna has presented a Chinese plan involving a USD 1 billion fund to support the transition to independence, along with offers to invest in mining, tourism, and agriculture.¹¹ However, not all islands in the region are easily swayed by China's influence. For instance, the island of Malaita has developed

¹⁰ Brian Harding and Camilla Pohle-Anderson, “The Next Five Years Are Crucial for Bougainville's Independence Bid,” United States Institute of Peace, 12 August 2022, <https://www.usip.org/>.

¹¹ “Does China have a master plan for the future of Bougainville?,” *60 Minutes Australia*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/>; and Joshua McDonald, “Australia, China, and Bougainville's Choices,” *The Diplomat*, 21 December 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

strong ties with Taiwan in recent years, indicating a complex and diverse landscape of allegiances in the region.

New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji

The Melanesian region includes New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji—the latter two being Commonwealth members. Each has taken a different tack regarding the Sino-Solomon agreement.

Although New Caledonia opted to remain under French sovereignty in a recent referendum, its regional neighbors have disregarded the outcome, expressing concerns about the potential colonization of the area by China, as emphasized by a member of the French National Assembly representing New Caledonia. Still, the prospects of New Caledonia gaining independence seem unlikely, and it is essential to acknowledge France's presence in the region and its close monitoring of developments. China's agreement with the Solomon Islands serves as a signal to the independence movement in New Caledonia, suggesting that China might be willing to assume a similar role in the event of New Caledonia's independence, although such a scenario remains improbable.

Ni-Vanuatu leaders have welcomed the Solomon Islands agreement. However, in December 2022, Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong signed a security pact during a bipartisan visit to Vanuatu in December. The agreement aims to strengthen Australia's security ties with Vanuatu by facilitating the deployment of Australian military personnel for disaster response, formalizing defense talks, and enhancing cooperation on various security areas. This move is seen as a strategic victory for Australia in countering China's influence in the region. However, concerns have arisen that the pact may face challenges in Vanuatu's parliament, with opposition parliamentarians and some ministers pushing to delay or amend it. Internal divisions within Vanuatu's government also contribute to the uncertainty. The ratification process is expected to be slow, and there is little indication that it will be completed in the near future. The agreement also awaits ratification by Australia's parliament, with bipartisan support expected.¹²

Fiji appears to maintain a balancing act between China and the United States. With a population of 900,000; the second-largest economy, valued at USD 9.1 billion; and the third-largest land size in the region, Fiji serves as a regional hub and hosts numerous international and regional organizations. Since Fiji closed its

¹² Stephen Dziedzic, "Fears domestic Vanuatu politics could foil important security pact with Australia," *ABC News* (Australia), 4 May 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

trade and tourism office in Taipei in May 2017, China has deepened its bilateral law enforcement and military cooperation, including the deployment of its first military attaché to Fiji in January 2021.¹³ On the other hand, the United States has provided USD 118 million in COVID-19 aid for Pacific Islands, and there are reports of the Pentagon proposing a USD 27 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative to bolster US military presence in the Pacific and counter China's influence.¹⁴ Fiji could potentially be a significant recipient of this aid.

In addition to military and political concerns, the economic situation factors into China's involvement in the Melanesian islands. The Asian Development Bank is the primary creditor for countries such as Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, accounting for approximately 38 percent of their external debt, followed by China (22 percent), the World Bank (13 percent), and Australia and Japan (6 percent).¹⁵ Depending on how China leverages this financial power, it could either facilitate its expansion in the region or make missteps and errors.

Conclusion: American Reengagement with a Vital Region

In terms of the United States, both the Biden administration and its predecessor, the Trump administration, have largely adopted the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" model introduced by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. However, the implications of this model for the countries of the South Pacific remain unclear. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the United States has been caught off guard by China's unprecedented actions in the Solomon Islands. The Trump administration had minimal engagement in the South Pacific, and the Biden administration has been attempting to catch up. Some analysts argue that while Pacific Islands would prefer to integrate with democratic partners, they may be forced to rely on China due to perceived neglect by Washington. Therefore, the role of the United States will be crucial. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's 2022 visit to Fiji and Vice President Harris' speech at the Pacific Island Forum demonstrate how the Biden administration plans to develop mutually beneficial relationships in the future. This includes not only establishing new embassies but also implementing a new national strategy for the Pacific. For instance, the United States may support independence

¹³ "Fiji closes Taiwan office, holds talks with Beijing," *Radio New Zealand*, 19 May 2017, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/>.

¹⁴ Aaron Mehta, "Davidson defends \$27B price tag for Pacific fund," *Defense News*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

¹⁵ Keshmeer Makun "The Pacific has a spiralling debt problem – and this is what governments can do about it," *ABC News* (Australia), 9 July 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

movements in the islands of Papua New Guinea if it believes that such support would hinder Chinese objectives.

In July 2022, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and US Ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy visited the Solomon Islands. The visit ostensibly commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal. Both women have personal connections to the islands, as their family members fought there during World War II. Caroline Kennedy, in particular, is well known for the story of PT Boat 109, which was commanded by her father, John F. Kennedy. Lesser known is the fact that Solomon Islanders and an Australian Coastwatcher played crucial roles in the future US president's rescue. US Ambassador Caroline Kennedy and son Jack returned the following year to recreate JFK's famous 2.4-mile swim to safety during this conflict.¹⁶ Crucially, much of the Solomon Islands remains contaminated with unexploded ordinance from the conflict. The United States should commit itself to the full removal of this material from the Solomon Islands.

While the United States discusses other defense matters less explicitly, it strives to contribute to regional integration and support citizens' rights. Such a high-level visit to commemorations of a battle that is unfamiliar to most Americans would not have occurred without the attention brought to the region by the Solomon Islands agreement.

The United States is also likely to act against IUU fishing in the South Pacific. Fishing is an existential issue for many nations in the subregion. In 2022, the United States issued a memorandum to combat IUU fishing, which the US Coast Guard considers the top global maritime security threat, surpassing piracy. China, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, is notorious for violating the exclusive economic zones of its neighboring countries. It is essential to raise awareness of these facts and launch a global campaign against Chinese violations not only in terms of the environment but also in relation to other global factors, as the ramifications will extend far into the future, even after the Solomon Islands agreement has been signed.

Lastly, the partnership deal between the United States and Pacific Island leaders, established during the historic US-Pacific Island Country Summit held in Washington, DC, in September 2022, has helped rebalance the geopolitical equilibrium in the Pacific Island region. This deal includes the Solomon Islands, which had appeared to be tilting toward becoming a Chinese outpost in the Pacific. During the summit, Washington announced more than USD 810 million in ex-

¹⁶ Stephen M. Lepore, "JFK's daughter Caroline and grandson Jack recreate his heroic swim off the Solomon Islands to save himself and his stranded US Navy PT-109 crew after they were capsized by a Japanese destroyer 80 years ago," *Daily Mail*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/>.

panded programs aimed at improving the lives of Pacific Islanders, including more than USD 130 million in new investments to support climate resilience and the development of sustainable blue economies in the Pacific Islands.¹⁷ This is particularly significant considering that climate change is increasingly becoming the defining challenge for the future development of not only the region but the entire globe, given its relationship with energy and resource security.

The effectiveness of Washington's new support remains to be seen, and it may require the assistance of its allies, particularly Japan and Australia within the new Quad framework, to effectively counter Chinese expansion in the Pacific, which regrettably appears to only be in its early stages. Additionally, the United States should explore new partnerships, including with the Commonwealth of Nations, where there are shared interests, such as addressing IUU fishing. Furthermore, the United States must be prepared to engage in long-term peace-building efforts in the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, and other areas to prevent a situation where Chinese influence leads to a destabilized subregion. ✪

Joseph Hammond

Mr. Hammond is a former Fulbright fellow and journalist who has reported extensively from Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East. He is a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

¹⁷ "Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership" (fact sheet, The White House, 29 September 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

The Nuclear Revolution

Fact of Fiction?

LT COL ELIJAH S. PORTER, USAF

Abstract

For nearly eight decades, nuclear weapons have played a vital role in achieving peace and security through deterrence policies. Simultaneously, they shielded aggressors from third-party intervention, contributing to conflict. This contradiction raises questions about nuclear weapons' true impact on international affairs. Some scholars view nuclear weapons as transformative in statecraft, fostering optimism about security, while others remain skeptical. Thus, this article asks: How revolutionary were nuclear weapons? Further inquiries persist. To what extent does this revolution affect global competition? Can the nuclear revolution's principles adapt to evolving security contexts, and to what extent? This article explores the nuclear revolution's key aspects, examines the contemporary security landscape, and offers conclusions. It argues that the nuclear revolution has validity but acknowledges the complexity of the situation. The evolving security environment introduces more uncertainty than the nuclear revolution suggests.

Many scholars argue the advent of nuclear weapons has caused a revolution in statecraft. In 1955, Winston Churchill observed that, with the hydrogen bomb, “the entire foundation of human affairs was revolutionized, and mankind placed in a situation both measureless and laden with doom.”¹ Robert Jervis, a nuclear deterrence theory expert, authored a comprehensive book on the subject, contending that “nuclear weapons have drastically altered statecraft.”² Writing toward the end of the Cold War, he suggested that nuclear weapons could elucidate various contradictions evident during decades of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. These contradictions include the following:

- states possess military might, yet struggle to protect themselves;
- there is no war between great powers, yet states fear total destruction;
- threats are inherently suicidal;

¹ As quoted in footnote 19 in Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 7.

² Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 2.

- threats promise devastation without serious provocation;
- and the levels of military arms vary greatly, yet the status quo remains the same.³

According to the nuclear revolution perspective, these contradictions result from the influence of nuclear weapons. Two key points underscore the impact of nuclear weapons on these contradictions. Firstly, nuclear weapons have reshaped statecraft by rendering superior military power ineffective. States cannot reliably use their military superiority to impose their will on other nuclear-armed states. Nuclear weapons serve as a great equalizer in the military balance. Kenneth Waltz notes that “nuclear weapons negate the advantages of conventional superiority because escalation in the use of conventional force risks receiving a nuclear strike.”⁴ Regardless of a military power’s sophistication, the overwhelming destructive potential of a few nuclear weapons negates its advantages. The mere possibility of nuclear retaliation is sufficient to deter superior military forces. In essence, nuclear weapons create mutual vulnerability irrespective of military strength. This was the rationale behind the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) strategy during the Cold War when confronted with the Soviet Union’s superior conventional military force. NATO exploited the Soviet Union’s vulnerability to nuclear attacks, relying on the threat of nuclear retaliation to deter Soviet aggression. This strategy also offered the advantages of being more cost-effective and domestically acceptable compared to maintaining a massive standing military force in Europe to match the Soviet Union.

Nuclear weapons offer a second explanation for the aforementioned contradictions by reshaping statecraft, fostering cooperation among nuclear-armed states. The looming threat of total destruction encourages these states to set aside their conflicting interests. A step in this direction was witnessed in November 2022 when China’s President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden engaged in discussions about global and regional challenges. Both leaders concurred that “nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won.”⁵ While China did not provide specific comments on the Ukraine conflict or US concerns about North Korea’s “provocative behavior,” the United States successfully garnered support to ease tensions among nuclear-armed states, including Russia, North Korea, and the

³ Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 2.

⁴ Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*, 3rd ed. (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 32.

⁵ “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China” (press release, The White House, 14 November 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>).

United States. This statement may also bolster cooperation by reinforcing norms against nuclear use, as discussed later.

China's recent nuclear arms buildup and provocative actions in the vicinity of Taiwan and the South China Sea have heightened the urgency of cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the United States. China has embarked on the construction of numerous silos for intercontinental ballistic missiles, adding at least 300 as of 2022.⁶ Chinese aircraft have probed Taiwan's air defenses, and they have flown in proximity to US planes in the South China Sea.⁷ President Biden met with President Xi in November 2023 to ease tensions.⁸ There are also plans for nuclear arms control discussions involving lower-level government officials. One US government official hopes that these talks will eventually lead to practical measures to manage strategic risks and engage in a "conversation on mutual restraint in terms of behavior or even capabilities."⁹ All discussions and tensions must proceed with the looming prospect that a misstep or miscalculation related to China's nuclear buildup, Taiwan, or the South China Sea could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. However, the nuclear revolution argues that the risk of nuclear war acts as a motivator for these discussions. Cooperation becomes imperative for survival, as the alternative could result in annihilation.

According to Jervis, there are several implications of this supposed impact on statecraft.¹⁰ First, the likelihood of peace increases among major powers, as military victory is no longer feasible due to the threat of escalating to total nuclear war. Second, the status quo is more likely to persist, as disrupting it could lead to unpredictable nuclear conflict. Third, once the status quo is established, crises will be infrequent, typically occurring at the peripheral interests of superpowers without disturbing the overall equilibrium. Fourth, the requirements for credible threats are minimal, as "Even a slight chance that a provocation could lead to nuclear war will be sufficient to deter all but the most highly motivated adversaries."¹¹ Some

⁶ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 2023), 66, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁷ Amy Chang Chien and Chris Buckley, "China Sends Record Number of Military Planes Near Taiwan," *New York Times*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>; and "Department of Defense Releases Declassified Images, Videos of Coercive and Risky PLA Operational Behavior" (press release, Department of Defense, 17 October 2023), <https://www.defense.gov/>.

⁸ Ellen Nakashima, "White House planning face-to-face meeting with Xi Jinping in California," *Washington Post*, 6 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁹ As quoted in Michael R Gordon, "China, U.S. to Meet for Rare Nuclear Arms-Control Talks," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

¹⁰ Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 23-45.

¹¹ Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 38.

argue that the mere presence of nuclear weapons serves as a deterrent.¹² Consequently, nuclear-armed states are more inclined to compromise to avoid escalation. Finally, the link between military balance and political outcomes becomes tenuous, with military forces having little impact on potential political results. For instance, a more powerful military may acquiesce to the political objectives of a weaker power out of fear of nuclear use.

In summary, the nuclear revolution has transformed the way states interact. States must exercise caution, as situations could escalate to total nuclear war with no victor. Mutual vulnerability has weakened the connection between military forces and political outcomes, enabling political success regardless of military strength.

The Myth or Failure of the Nuclear Revolution

Some scholars, however, cast doubt on the validity of the nuclear revolution, labeling it a myth or a failure.¹³ In essence, they argue that nuclear weapons have not altered the way states interact. They contend that the principal drivers in relations between even nuclear-armed states remain power politics and competition, just as they were before the nuclear era.

Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press express criticism of the nuclear revolution's assertion that mutual vulnerability is an inherent reality, not just a policy choice. They assert that the theory of the nuclear revolution is fundamentally flawed.¹⁴ This theory is purportedly erroneous because nuclear weapons have not brought about sufficient change in statecraft between nuclear-armed states to dissuade them from engaging in intense competitive behaviors. Nuclear-armed states still form potent alliances, participate in arms races, vie for control of strategic territories, and closely monitor shifts in the global balance of power.¹⁵ China is actively modernizing its nuclear forces with new long-range bombers and submarines, while also reorganizing its military to enhance "stronger deterrent, coercive, and joint warfighting capabilities."¹⁶ All these actions indicate that states either disregard or reject mutual vulnerability as a factual constraint and instead seek ways to overcome the stalemate imposed by nuclear weapons.

¹² Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan: 1973), 412, as cited in Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (September 1990), 738, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

¹³ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 120–24; and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 247.

¹⁴ Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 5.

¹⁵ Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 1.

¹⁶ James M. Smith and Paul J. Bolt, eds., *China's Strategic Arsenal* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 180.

The notion of the nuclear revolution may be viewed as a myth if states have not reached a stalemate. It can take some time for a state to develop nuclear capabilities to stabilize a relationship. Moreover, this stability of the stalemate can be reversed. In other words, once it is achieved, state behavior can lead to a perceived advantage. States fear that others may gain an advantage, prompting them to seek an advantage themselves. In short, power politics still persist in the nuclear age. While the Soviet Union officially claimed a stalemate in Europe due to the risk of automatic nuclear escalation in the event of war, in practice, “the Soviet Union prepared for it, investing hugely, as did NATO, in weaponry that made no sense if war in Europe was bound to go nuclear.”¹⁷ Stalemate did not appear to limit the growth of arsenals, as both the Soviets and Americans continued to develop nuclear weapons throughout the Cold War.

Intense competition persists for primarily four reasons. First, creating a stalemate can be challenging. It may take a considerable amount of time for a state to develop nuclear capabilities to establish a stable relationship. Some states may lack the necessary resources or technical expertise to build forces that lead to mutual vulnerability, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles. Building the required forces for a survivable nuclear deterrent simply takes time.

Second, the stability of a stalemate is not set in stone and can be reversed or escaped. In other words, once achieved, state behavior can lead to military advantage or the perception of advantage. The idea that military superiority is irrelevant is false, as a state could develop technology that creates the perception it has escaped mutual vulnerability. A state may also be motivated to seek an escape from the stalemate if they believe an adversary is attempting to do the same. This could explain why Russia frequently criticizes US missile defense systems and modernizes its own forces, even though the United States has attempted to allay fears that its missile defense systems can defend against Russian nuclear weapons. Russia is likely concerned about the future potential of US missile defense systems rather than the current low number of US interceptors. Russia uses the issue of US missile defense to justify updates to its nuclear arsenal and the development of new nuclear capabilities, such as the nuclear-powered torpedo. Moreover, even if nuclear-armed states could not reverse a stalemate, there remains an incentive to seek military advantage to gain peacetime political benefits.¹⁸

Third, intense competition endures because states may aim to deter major conventional attacks using their nuclear forces. Presently, states like Russia, China, and North Korea rely on nuclear weapons to compensate for weak conventional

¹⁷ Thomas Schelling, “The Thirtieth Year,” *Daedalus* 120, no. 1 (Winter 1991), 30, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

¹⁸ Green, *The Revolution that Failed*, 247–49.

forces.¹⁹ However, this strategy presents a challenge due to the “stability-instability” paradox.²⁰ This paradox posits that while nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood of strategic-level attacks (the stability aspect), they simultaneously increase the likelihood of lower-level attacks, such as conventional ones (the instability aspect). To deter conventional attacks with nuclear weapons, a state purportedly needs to develop a nuclear force capable of credibly engaging at lower levels without immediately resorting to strategic nuclear weapons. In other words, states seek a nuclear force consisting of tactical nuclear weapons to deter conventional attacks. Attempts to deter conventional attacks with nuclear weapons create the perception that a state might break the stalemate, thereby fueling competition. States may build nuclear forces with a wide array of flexible and adaptable options to more credibly threaten the possibility of nuclear escalation. In response, the conventionally superior state will seek ways to counter the other state’s flexible and adaptable nuclear arsenal.

Finally, competition may persist in the nuclear era due to varying strengths and weaknesses among individual states in nuclear competition and cooperation.²¹ This is evident in the differing advantages between the United States and the Soviet Union during the latter part of the Cold War. The United States had advantages in producing high-quality nuclear forces owing to its economic and technological comparative edge. Conversely, the Soviet Union had an advantage in the numerical production of nuclear forces due to its superior resource extraction capacity. The Soviet Union did not grapple with potential political or environmental concerns due to the command economy nature of the Soviet state, allowing them to force high rates of resource extraction. In contrast, the open, democratic system in the United States hindered such extraction. These disparities in comparative advantages, as described, could lead states to view competitive behavior as beneficial. As states focus on their comparative advantage, they could gain political benefits in alignment with their national interests.

In summary, nuclear weapons do not deliver the stability and peace promised by the nuclear revolution. The expected mutual vulnerability, which should encourage caution, does not yield as much caution as anticipated. Caution remains minimal as states vie for advantages.

¹⁹ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Return of Nuclear Escalation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 24 October 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

²⁰ Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 94–97.

²¹ Green, *The Revolution that Failed*, 248.

The New Security Environment

A critique of the theory of the nuclear revolution is that it assumes a bipolar relationship between two superpowers, as seen during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, since the fall of the Soviet Union, the security environment has evolved away from a bipolar world, introducing different complexities. Vipin Narang and Scott Sagan argue that “the theories derived from the Cold War superpower nuclear balance are not applicable to the emerging nuclear landscape.”²² In essence, Cold War logic does not align with the emerging nuclear landscape.

The nuclear revolution promises stability derived from mutual vulnerability, yet it may not be applicable between emerging nuclear powers and their adversaries. Stability may only exist in the context of the United States and Russia. The distinction arises from the fact that emerging states may not draw the same conclusions about the impact of vulnerability, or they may lack the capabilities to create conditions of vulnerability with their adversaries. Emerging states may also question the survivability of their arsenals due to advancements in counterforce technology and the limited number of weapons in their arsenals, which increases the risk of adversaries rendering their nuclear threats meaningless.²³ This situation might lead states to seek advantages through arms races or to fear losing the option to use nuclear weapons during crises. China’s nuclear expansion, often seen as directed at the United States, may also create tensions with India. As China enhances the quantity and responsiveness of its nuclear arsenal, India may become more uncertain about its ability to retaliate. India has always maintained a weaker nuclear force compared to China’s arsenal, and India’s modernization efforts are likely driven by competition with Pakistan. However, India’s intentions and Chinese perceptions may not always align.²⁴ As both China and Pakistan modernize their nuclear arsenals independently, future opportunities and circumstances may change strategies and influence calculations of stability. Assessments of vulnerability may differ once each country has pursued increased nuclear capabilities.

Another reason the nuclear revolution may not apply in the new security environment is that the stakes are different from the Cold War era. During the Cold War, stability may have existed because the stakes were not high enough to risk nuclear

²² Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 3.

²³ Narang and Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror*, 4.

²⁴ Debak Das, “China’s Missile Silos and the Sino-Indian Nuclear Competition,” *War on the Rocks*, 13 October 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

war.²⁵ The United States and the Soviet Union established different spheres of influence and generally respected those interests. While nuclear weapons may have encouraged cooperation, the two superpowers did not engage in activities that required nuclear threats. Differences in economic and political systems, along with geographical distances, may have contributed to keeping their interests separate. Ultimately, the stakes may not have been high enough to resort to the use of nuclear weapons.

In today's security environment, stakes may be higher between emerging nuclear-armed states and other nuclear-armed states. Consequently, nuclear-armed states may accept more risk today than during the Cold War, and there is a greater potential for vital interests to clash. Evidence of this possibility can be seen in the tension between India and Pakistan. Shortly after conducting nuclear tests, the long-standing dispute over Kashmir erupted into armed conflict in 1999 (the Kargil conflict). In 2019, India became the first nuclear-armed state to use "airpower directly on the undisputed sovereign territory" of another nuclear-armed state when it conducted an airstrike on Balakot, Pakistan.²⁶ Both incidents could have escalated to nuclear conflict as each side sought to defend territorial interests. Further evidence of higher risk tolerance and potential for interests to clash can be observed in the tension between China and the United States over Taiwan. Taiwan is at the center of a territorial dispute with high stakes on both sides. China claims Taiwan is already part of China's sovereign territory, while the United States has consistently committed to defending Taiwan as a de facto independent state. While a departure from long-standing US policy, President Biden has recently affirmed the United States would "get militarily involved to defend Taiwan if it comes to that."²⁷ In such a high-stakes battle for Taiwan, nuclear stability during a conflict becomes uncertain. China could argue that its no-first-use policy does not apply in the case of Taiwan, as China considers reunification an internal matter, or China might resort to nuclear weapons in the face of conventional defeat at the hands of the United States. Furthermore, China might use nuclear weapons with the legitimacy of party rule on the line. To prevent South Korea and Japan from acquiring nuclear weapons, the United States might want to avoid tarnishing its reputation for defending allies and partners. China and the United States may be more willing to accept risk today regarding Taiwan, thus increasing the likelihood of nuclear escalation.

²⁵ Narang and Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror*, 5.

²⁶ Narang and Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror*, 76.

²⁷ Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Peter Baker, "Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese Attack," *New York Times*, 23 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

Another concerning aspect of the emerging landscape and its impact on stability is the potential disregard for a nuclear “taboo” by nuclear-armed states. There has been an international norm against the use of nuclear weapons based on their devastating power. Throughout the nuclear era, nuclear-armed states have refrained from using nuclear weapons in tense situations, such as the Korean War, the end of French rule in Vietnam (where the French requested the use of US nuclear weapons), the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-1955, the Cuban missile crisis, the Sino-Soviet Border conflict of 1969, and others. However, the nuclear taboo is facing significant challenges due to “renewed major power rivalry, bellicose rhetoric, fading memories of Hiroshima, and increasing reliance on nuclear weapons in the nuclear states’ military doctrines.”²⁸ Frequent nuclear threats from new nuclear powers like North Korea and Pakistan have raised doubts about the longevity of the tradition of non-use that developed between the United States and the Soviet Union. Recent nuclear threats from Russia during the conflict in Ukraine also cast doubt on the durability of the taboo as Russia expresses its desire to keep Western powers out of the conflict. Pressure against the nuclear taboo also emanates from the United States. President Donald Trump’s “over-the-top” rhetoric in response to North Korean nuclear capabilities and the American public’s not overly strong opposition to the use of nuclear weapons challenge the nuclear taboo.²⁹ Given these circumstances, the nuclear revolution no longer appears as revolutionary in statecraft—its ability to induce caution through nuclear weapons is under pressure as states build arsenals to gain an advantage in potential nuclear warfare and make increasingly aggressive threats to emphasize the importance of specific national interests. By moving away from the nuclear taboo, states are using nuclear weapons as another means of gaining advantage in power politics.

Finally, another change in the security environment that raises questions about stability is the internal characteristics of emerging nuclear-armed states. Narang and Sagan characterize India and Pakistan as “de facto praetorian” regimes, indicating that their militaries wield excessive or abusive influence over political decisions.³⁰ Military organizations may have goals and objectives separate from the overall state-level goal of maintaining security, potentially leading to nuclear escalation. For example, a military organization may prioritize the role of nuclear weapons in decision-making to secure more resources. North Korea exemplifies another concerning type of regime, considered a personal dictatorship. This type

²⁸ Nina Tannenwald, “How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?,” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 2018), 103, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁹ Tannenwald, “How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?,” 90.

³⁰ Narang and Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror*, 7.

of regime may present “different kinds of threats and challenges for nuclear stability.”³¹ Leaders in personal dictatorships may have fewer organizational constraints and significant latitude to indulge in psychological issues like narcissism, paranoia, pride, and shame. Such regimes may foster poor learning environments due to the inclination of personalistic leaders to “surround themselves with sycophants, privileging loyalty or competence.”³² Personal beliefs and perceptions can exert a significant influence on decision making.³³ In an environment with few organizational restraints, uncertainty is amplified. Consequently, personal dictatorships introduce uncertainty when assessing the functioning of deterrence. For instance, a personalistic leader may escalate a conflict based on pride or shame rather than considering the potential for destruction.

In summary, the addition of more nuclear-armed states introduces uncertainties into the functioning of deterrence. States may question the existence of a stalemate or their ability to achieve mutual vulnerability, leading them to seek ways to attain military superiority. The nuclear taboo faces pressure as more states view nuclear weapons as a competitive source for gaining an advantage. The internal characteristics of emerging nuclear-armed states create greater potential for escalation than was perceived during the Cold War era.

The Truth about Nuclear Weapons in the Current Security Environment

The questions persist: To what degree did the introduction of nuclear weapons represent a revolution, if at all? To what extent does the nuclear revolution impact competition? Do the concepts of the nuclear revolution remain valid in light of potential shifts in the security environment, or is the situation evolving, and to what extent?

Extent of the Nuclear Revolution

The introduction of nuclear weapons was indeed groundbreaking, yet not as profoundly revolutionary as the term *revolution* suggests. The specter of nuclear war persisted throughout the Cold War, notwithstanding the concept of mutual vulnerability. The end of the Cold War may have come about without a catastrophic escalation by sheer chance. The Cuban missile crisis, a highly charged situation

³¹ Narang and Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror*, 40.

³² Narang and Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror*, 40.

³³ Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 40-45.

with numerous opportunities for miscalculation and misinterpretation of intentions, underscores that tension endured between nuclear-armed states, and the staleness of the standoff may not have been as robust as anticipated. This likelihood becomes even more pronounced in the present day with an increasing number of states possessing nuclear weapons. An evaluation by Patrick Morgan, an expert in deterrence theory, may retain relevance today when he stated, “deterrence theory cannot now, and will not in the future, resolve the difficulties, in the abstract and in practice, that we regularly encounter with deterrence.”³⁴

Conversely, states cannot disregard the caution that nuclear weapons instill. The fact remains that no state has employed nuclear weapons since 1945, despite numerous opportunities to do so. With more nuclear-armed states emerging and the potential for tense situations on the rise, these opportunities will likely increase.

The reality about nuclear weapons today is that they continue to be significant. Nuclear weapons both promote caution and retain value as tools for gaining advantage. The lesson for the United States is that nuclear weapons still hold importance because others employ them to seek advantages in competition. Therefore, the United States should not seek complete disarmament but rather modernize its nuclear arsenal to adapt to the evolving capabilities of adversaries.

Nuclear Revolution’s Influence on Competition

The nuclear revolution has not completely eliminated competition, but it has imposed significant constraints. Nuclear weapons constrain the conduct of warfare, even while permitting the possibility of conflict. These constraints are evident in the relationship between Russia and the United States and its allies during the invasion of Ukraine. Russia’s possession of a nuclear arsenal has facilitated the invasion of Ukraine by dissuading other states from becoming more directly involved in the conflict. Without Russia’s nuclear weapons, the United States and its allies might have intervened more directly in the conflict rather than resorting to indirect measures like sanctions and the provision of military equipment. The fear of Russia’s nuclear arsenal has restrained the escalation between major military powers. Similar restraint is also observed in the conflict between India and Pakistan. Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal is postured to deter conventional attacks but was not used in response to India’s air attacks in 2019, despite the option to employ them as a deterrent against further conventional aggression.

The fear of nuclear escalation provides states with a compelling reason to pursue peace or, at the very least, limit conflict. States pursue their interests while being

³⁴ Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 43.

mindful of the opposing side's interests. In this context, the desire to avoid escalation creates incentives for cooperation.

However, concluding that the nuclear revolution completely reshaped the international system away from anarchy and competition may be an overstatement. States still compete to gain advantages even under the shadow of nuclear war. The reality is that states cannot exert dominance as they could before the existence of nuclear weapons.

The United States should leverage the fear of escalation to establish safeguards through arms control agreements. Arms control should serve as a tool not only to manage the competition in nuclear modernization but also to create confidence-building measures that enhance transparency and discourage force structures that could provide a first-strike advantage, particularly in Sino-US talks.

Nuclear Revolution in Today's Security Environment

The evolving security landscape diminishes the absolute validity of the nuclear revolution, but its core arguments are not entirely invalidated. Mutual vulnerability remains a crucial restraining factor. Nuclear weapons, with their immense destructive potential, continue to promote caution, even with a limited number of weapons. However, the new security environment is growing in complexity as arsenals expand, and states learn to employ their nuclear capabilities for political advantage, both in times of peace and in potential conflicts. The specter of nuclear war persists, as does the presence of power politics and competition.

Looking ahead, decision-makers must consider the dynamics among all nuclear-armed states, not just a select few. There can be a tendency to concentrate solely on the interactions between the United States, Russia, and China, but such a narrow focus underestimates the intricate nature of international relations. The challenge lies in the fact that these three countries are not the only ones influencing nuclear arsenals. A prime example is the interplay among India, Pakistan, and China. Any changes in India's arsenal could trigger shifts in the postures of Pakistan or China. Modifications in China's posture, in turn, could impact the actions of Russia or the United States regarding their nuclear postures. What's even more concerning is the potential for misperceptions to drive alterations in nuclear postures. Even if India were to maintain its posture, a perceived change by China could produce similar consequences.

Moreover, the dynamic among all nuclear-armed states is not confined solely to these states. The actions of competitive non-nuclear-armed states could influence the dynamics of nuclear-armed states. For instance, provocative actions by Saudi Arabia or Turkey could persuade Iran that it needs nuclear weapons, which would alter the dynamics among existing nuclear-armed states. The United States might

adjust its posture in response, further affecting its relations with others. The new security environment is fraught with complexities, and it does not conform to the simplified expectations of the nuclear revolution theory.

To navigate this intricate environment, the United States should strive to mitigate uncertainties. Implementing damage limitation capabilities like active missile defense can safeguard the United States against states seeking military advantage through nuclear weapons. Active missile defense is indispensable because relying solely on deterrence through offensive weapons is insufficient. As mentioned, the pressure on the nuclear taboo is substantial, and the internal restraint in emerging states is too uncertain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the introduction of nuclear weapons did indeed alter international relations, but perhaps not to the extent envisioned by the theory of the nuclear revolution. These weapons have instilled a level of restraint among states, reducing the likelihood of large-scale conflicts. However, the pursuit of strategic advantages persists, both in peacetime and in the potential scenarios of future conflicts. The evolving nuclear landscape presents formidable challenges as emerging nuclear states may exhibit less restraint, creating difficulties for established nuclear powers in maintaining the effectiveness of their deterrence policies. In an increasingly uncertain world, it remains imperative for states to maintain effective deterrence policies to avert catastrophic consequences.

Considering these challenges, the United States should pursue a multifaceted approach. Nuclear modernization is essential to ensure credible responses to evolving threats. Simultaneously, the pursuit of arms control agreements is crucial to manage competition and enhance transparency among nuclear-armed states. Furthermore, the adoption of damage-limiting capabilities can help reduce uncertainty in the new security environment. By combining these measures, the United States can navigate the complexities of the contemporary nuclear landscape and contribute to a more stable and secure world. 🌟

Lt Col Elijah S. Porter, USAF

Lieutenant Colonel Porter is an intercontinental ballistic missile operator in the US Air Force and currently a doctoral candidate in defense and strategic studies at Missouri State University. He holds a master's degree in management from Troy University and a bachelor's degree in international relations from Brigham Young University. His research interests include China's nuclear posture and nuclear deterrence strategy.

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAS

REVISTA PROFESIONAL DE LA FUERZA AÉREA DE EUA
REVISTA PROFISSIONAL DA FORÇA AÉREA DOS EUA
CONTINENTE AMERICANO

We're going digital!

In keeping up with modern times, we are moving forward with digital only publication starting with our next edition in December, please enjoy our last hardcopy version. You can access our online version at:



Journal of the Americas (af.edu)

Para mantenernos al día con los tiempos modernos, a partir de nuestra próxima edición en diciembre estaremos publicando solo en línea, disfrute de nuestra última versión impresa. Puede acceder nuestra versión en línea en:



Revista Profesional - Fuerza Aérea de EUA,
Continente Americano (af.edu)

Para acompanhar os tempos modernos, a partir de nossa próxima edição em dezembro, publicaremos apenas online, aproveite esta última versão impressa. Você pode acessar nossa versão online em:



Revista Profesional - Fuerza Aérea de EUA,
Continente Americano (af.edu)

<https://www.AirUniversity.af.edu/AUPress>



Air University Press

600 Chennault Circle, Bldg 1405, Maxwell AFB, AL 36112-6026 • Comm: (334) 953-2773



AirUnivPress



AUPress



Air_University_Press



company/Air-University-Press/

