The United States and a Resurgent Asia

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The United States has responded to the rapid growth in Chinese wealth and power by doubling down on efforts to sustain American primacy in the Indo-Pacific. The unstated presuppositions driving this American response are that:

- China aspires to dominate its neighbors and to exclude the United States from the emerging Sino-centric order in its region.
- China's dominance of its region would give Beijing human and material resources to threaten not just U.S. hegemony but the United States itself.
- The countries of the region are incapable of balancing and constraining Chinese power and influence, so the United States must do this for them.
- American confrontation with China is essential to the continued sovereign independence of the region's other countries.

In today's Washington, these fearful assumptions are no longer open to empirical examination. They are treated as axiomatic. This has led to U.S. policies that center on sustaining a bilateral Sino-American military balance based on U.S. technological superiority and forward deployments, without regard either to Chinese intentions or to the economic, political, or military capabilities of other countries in the region. In advocating such policies, most in Washington benchmark the past seventy-five years of U.S. primacy in the Indo-Pacific and ignore the prior history of the region and U.S. relations with it.

Over the more than two centuries of U.S. independence, America's engagement with the Indo-Pacific has gone through at least three previous phases.

- First. British mercantilism long barred its American colonies from trading directly with East or South Asia, which together then accounted for well over half of the world's economic activity. Not surprisingly, immediately after Britain accepted the independence of the United States in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, our infant republic began a seven-decade-long effort to gain access to Indo-Pacific markets. This drive culminated in Commodore Perry's coercive opening of Japan in 1853 and the inauguration of the Yangtze River Patrol in 1854.
- Second. From the 1840s and 1850s on, the United States insisted that all extraterritorial privileges gained by European imperialists in East Asia should also be enjoyed by Americans. In 1898, we seized the Philippines from Spain, thereby acquiring our own colonial foothold in the region. Until World War II, our policies and activities in Asia were driven by the patronizing assumptions of white racial superiority characteristic of Euro-American colonialism. These attitudes found blatant domestic expression in the Oriental Exclusion Acts. India, Indonesia, and the other major countries of the Indo-Pacific were subjugated and without a voice of their own. Among Asian societies, only a rapidly rising Japan had the international standing to object. It did so vehemently.
- Third. In 1941, exactly a century after China's humiliation in the Opium War of

1839-1842, the Japanese forcibly expelled European and American imperialists from the Asia-Pacific, dealing a mortal rebuke to their racism but imposing its own. When the United States then defeated Japan in 1945, America filled the resulting regional power vacuum. This ushered in a six-decade-long era of unchallenged American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Communist China, North Korea, North Vietnam and nonaligned but pro-Soviet India aside, the countries of the Indo-Pacific region almost all aligned themselves with the United States against the now-defunct USSR and its client states. Those who accepted American tutelage and protection prospered. Those who fought the United States also did so once they reconciled themselves to us and made peace with their neighbors.

Despite the near-simultaneous end of the Cold War and the collapse of Sino-American entente in 1989, it has taken three decades to make it obvious to all that U.S. relations with the Indo-Pacific are now in a fourth and unprecedented new phase.

America's Cold War policies of containment sought to isolate and weaken the Chinese but enabled the other peoples of the region to build assertively independent, prosperous, technologically competent, and well-armed nation-states. As our defeat by the Vietnamese and our inability to impose our will on West Asian countries like Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq should have taught us, the nations of the Indo-Pacific are no longer anywhere near as vulnerable to foreign domination as they once were.

The economic, political, and military vacuums America filled after World War II are long gone. Indo-Pacific countries have gained – or regained – the capacity to play independent roles in the regional balance of power. Almost without exception, they have acquired the ability to mount a convincing defense of their national identities and interests, with or without intervention by the United States or any other external power. The United States has no excuse not to begin dealing with them as equals rather than as defeated and defenseless dependents, pawns in a global strategic game, or uppity adversaries.

The Indo-Pacific now accounts for more than three-fifths of the global economy and almost half the world's merchandise trade. It leads the world in outbound foreign investment and is home to five members of the G-20 (the global club of the world's largest economies). Its military modernization and expenditures have advanced at the fastest pace in the world. But the region is one of the few that remains almost entirely at peace. America takes credit for the continuing absence of war in the Indo-Pacific. But a case can be made that this owes more to trends in the region than to the U.S. military presence.

The United States devotes perhaps one-third of its defense budget, or about $250 billion, to the Indo-Pacific. Its justification for this is the threats from China and North Korea. China's defense modernization has been directed mainly at acquiring the ability to defend its *de facto* and claimed borders from U.S. or US-backed challenges to them in Taiwan and the South and East China Seas. Beijing has now matched U.S. military spending in its region. Other Indo-Pacific countries' defense budgets, driven by apprehensions about each other as well as China, are about $190-$200 billion. But, with the notable exception of Taiwan, all are more concerned about Chinese arrogance and overbearing politico-economic bullying that could challenge their national dignity than about conquest or invasion from China. For the most part, they do not see China as a primarily military threat.

There are, of course, exceptions to this. The Taiwan-China imbroglio was an integral element of the Cold War's initial phases, but it was not *per* se the product of it. Its origins lie in a civil war.

The same is true on the Korean Peninsula. In the Taiwan Strait and Korea, ideological divisions, never as strong as Americans imagined them to be, have yielded to contending nationalisms. The ongoing low-intensity conflict between India and Pakistan also conforms to this pattern.

Taiwan's drive for self-determination is pushing the island into an ever-more dangerous confrontation with Chinese nationalism even as the balance of military and economic power shifts inexorably against Taiwan. In the Taiwan Strait, where the legacy of the Chinese civil war lives on, the danger of war is rising. But elsewhere in the region it is not.

Even in Korea, long thought to be the most likely place for war to break out, the North is now on the defensive against an ascendant South. There is *de facto* stalemate. The Sino-Indian border conflict and conflicting island claims between China (both Beijing and Taipei) with Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam persist, but generate only posturing and intermittent, minor skirmishes. None now credibly threatens a major war. In all, ideological differences are more afterthought than determinant.

Most countries in the Indo-Pacific are happy to have American backing in their efforts to stand up to China or North Korea, but none wants the United States to make decisions about its relations with Beijing or Pyongyang for it. No country in the region is prepared to subordinate itself to the United States, China, or any other past or future hegemon. All are determined to preserve their hard-won independence and sovereignty, but few now bank on American help to do so.

Indo-Pacific countries' spending on their militaries is rising, and, with Japan in the lead, they are tentatively beginning to develop consultative security relationships independent of the United States or other external great powers. Constraining China, with or without American backing, does not require the countries of the Indo-Pacific to develop military capabilities comparable to China's, still less to overmatch Chinese power as the United States does. A mixture of accommodation and deterrence would, however, be necessary. China's neighbors have the capability to accomplish both.

The determination of the region's countries to resist China's growing economic and military power provides a potential basis for policy coordination between them. Further investments in their own political economies and military capabilities would supply the essential building blocks for a regionally organized balance of power. The countries of the Indo-Pacific have the capacity to make it plain to Beijing that China would pay an unacceptable political, military, and economic price for attempts to coerce them. American backing for such a message would add weight to it.

India's, Japan's, and South Korea's as well as China's navies now rank among the top ten in the world in terms of offensive capability. So do their air forces. Whatever it may be, the Indo-Pacific region is not a military, economic, or political vacuum. There is every reason for the United States to seek to benefit from its countries' strength and prosperity, to buttress their independence, and to court their support on issues of common interest in other regions of the world. There is no justification other than pride in our past status and role to relieve them of the responsibility to protect their own interests before calling on us to help them. Why should we assume, or they agree, that Americans can always do a better job of promoting their region's continued stability, prosperity and progress than they can? Or that we could be more effective in protecting their interests vis-à-vis a rapidly rising China than they can?

Almost every country in the Indo-Pacific fears that U.S. insistence on maintaining our primacy in the region risks subordinating defiance of Chinese hegemony to Sino-American confrontation

over issues with which such countries are less or not at all concerned. The hub and spoke pattern of U.S. security relationships, unchanged since the Cold War, undercuts the perceived need of Indo-Pacific countries for self-strengthening and shifts the burden of maintaining regional stability and constraining a rising China to the United States alone. This gets in the way of those in the region who might otherwise lead or organize a cooperative effort to accommodate but set limits on China's centrality to their interests.

Attempting to sustain a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific while denying its independent nations a leading role in such a balance is at best delusional. At worst, it is counterproductive. It inhibits rather than encourages initiatives by the region's nations to cooperate with each other to counter challenges to their common interests.

It does not help that the region's contests are not easily measured by the military metrics we Americans habitually apply. There are indeed a few unsettled borders that could lead to skirmishes between claimants, including China and India. But no country other than Pakistan (whose existence and interests are threatened by India but backed by China) now fears military subjugation, dismemberment, or occupation by another regional power. And none sees any advantage in the United States going to war with China on its behalf. The peninsular war between South and North Korea has settled into impasse, with each side deterred from attacking the other by the high likelihood of failure as well as by certain Chinese, American, Russian, and Japanese opposition to any such attempt. The only thing forcing Washington to choose sides or otherwise seek to deter change is our quasi-feudal desire to retain our status as the regional, pistol-packing "godfather."

But great power competition in the Indo-Pacific is now largely economic, rather than military or political. Over the past three decades, Indo-Pacific economies have become increasingly interdependent and centered on China. On average, about three-fifths of their trade is now with each other. The political cultures and governments of the Indo-Pacific share a strong preference for settling disputes through diplomatic dialogue rather than the use of force. All are committed to multilateralism and most are more alarmed than reassured by the intensity and apparent recklessness of America's new attempts to organize global hostility to China.

China is far from the only Indo-Pacific country to have regained wealth and power. Without realizing it is doing so, the United States has provided a substitute for cooperation between China's neighbors to balance its rising power. It is time for Americans to recognize that Asians can, for the most part, defend their own interests on their own, despite their natural desire to avail themselves of whatever U.S. backing they can get without signing onto America's new anti-China agenda or otherwise subordinating their own interests to those of the United States.

Japan has long since more than recovered from the devastation of World War II. It is the world's third largest economy after China and the United States, excelling in precision manufactures, industrial design, and the innovation of advanced technologies. And Japan is cautiously shucking off the restraints on its politico-military power that the United States imposed after its defeat. Japan wants to be "a normal country," not a dependency or satellite of the United States and unable to act independently if it deems this necessary. To fulfill this aspiration, it must develop its own capacity to stand up to China and Russia and to deter North Korea. The Japanese are quietly doing so, while skillfully leveraging the residual but waning American willingness to shoulder major responsibility for their country's defense.

As the United States has retreated from economic and political leadership in the Indo-Pacific – dissociating itself from TPP and other groupings -- Japan has begun to fill the vacuum. It is by

far the largest economy and the *de facto* leader in the revamped eleven-member version of TPP it helped create. Japan is a major regional as well as global foreign investor, and the world's fourth largest trading nation, after China, the United States, and Germany. As regional confidence in the United States has ebbed, trust in Japan has risen.

As this century has advanced, Tokyo has quietly but actively expanded military consultations and cooperation with Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam as well as India and Sri Lanka, among others. Japan now engages, though still modestly, in every aspect of great power international security policy, including military aid, the sale, transfer, or joint development of equipment, training, and exercises, peacekeeping and disaster relief, and routine defense staff coordination talks with countries of strategic interest to it. If the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" has any legs, they seem at least as likely to be Japanese as American.

Meanwhile, Japan's "self-defense forces" have developed an increasing power projection capability. Japan's navy is again one of the world's largest – the second largest in Asia. Tokyo fields a formidable modern air force. The Japanese arsenal includes long-range submarines, heavy transport aircraft, and aircraft carriers that will soon be equipped with fighter bombers, as well as an expanding amphibious landing capability.

Japan's space program has demonstrated missile-relevant precision-targeting capabilities second to none. (Consider the Hayabusa2's remarkable landings on an asteroid.) Japan has the world's largest stockpile of plutonium and the capability to develop both nuclear weapons and their delivery systems on very short notice. China and others in the region are wary of provoking it to do so.

Japanese have embraced pacifism since their country's World War II debacle. They are unable at present to reach a consensus about how their country should position itself internationally. But the Japanese government has refused to be intimidated by China, Korea, or Russia or to cede any ground in its territorial disputes with them. Both the immediate and long-term consequences of attacking Japan are too grave for any of its neighbors to contemplate.

Why should Americans imagine that, with Japan gradually rearming, both its determination and its capacity to defend its interests are likely to diminish rather than grow? It makes no sense to base our Indo-Pacific strategy on the assumption that Japan is as helpless or as incapable of playing a leadership role in its region today as it was after we devastated it and deliberately incapacitated it 75 years ago.

Over the decades, both **Koreas**, South and North, have also consolidated their national identities and strengthened their military capabilities. Each is determined, able to defend itself, and prepared to act on its own to promote its interests as it sees them. The **Republic of Korea** (ROK) – South Korea – began life with twice the population but an economy only half the size of the rival Korean regime in the North. It now boasts the eighth-largest GDP in the world, fifty times bigger than North Korea. The ROK is in many respects a global economic power. It has the world's best educated workforce and is a technological leader in a growing number of fields The ROK armed forces may be the best equipped and most competent conscription-based military in the world. South Korea manufactures a wide variety of its own weapons systems and is a growing exporter of them to markets like the Middle East. Some ROK officers have combat experience, having joined the United States in Vietnam and Iraq. Their North Korean adversaries are tough but malnourished, poorly equipped, and untested.

Chinese forces withdrew from the grossly misnamed "**Democratic People's Republic of**

Korea" (DPRK) in 1958. Over the past quarter century, relations between the two countries have become increasingly transactional and troubled. But, as much as Beijing may detest the Kim Dynasty and its policies, it values the DPRK as a buffer between it and the U.S. forces that yet to leave the ROK. Pyongyang has survived seven decades of American hostility, strategic quarantine, and eagerness for regime change. The DPRK has now built an embryonic but demonstrably effective nuclear deterrent to U.S., ROK, or Japan-based attack on it.

Geography and history cause Koreans, South and North, to take a bitter and apprehensive view of Japan and to be both awed and fearful of China. But, having been invaded by one or the other of these two countries 72 times over the millennia, they are cautious about either provoking or embracing either. The ROK is determined to keep a wary distance from both China and Japan. It will not cooperate with either against the other. Nor, contrary to the expectation of some Americans, will it ever allow U.S. forces to wage war on China. For its part, North Korea is far less wedded to China and its policies than South Korea is to those of its American protectors.

The United States and China deployed troops to Korea in 1950 to ensure that the peninsula could not be used as a corridor or launching point for an attack on either Japan or China. This strategic concern now has no basis. It has been obviated by the emergence of two heavily armed Korean states, each capable of frustrating any such scenario. In effect, the two Koreas have already adopted a position of armed neutrality between Northeast Asia's great powers. Should South and North Korea reconcile, a united Korea can confidently be expected to preserve such neutrality. It certainly will not accept subordination to China.

Far to the South, **Vietnam** has spent its entire 4,000-year history resisting absorption by China, whose ancient dynasties occupied it off and on for one-fourth of those four millennia. Chinese have learned the hard way how tough it is to conquer or control the Vietnamese. So, of course, have Americans.

In the late 1970s, Vietnam sought Soviet support to bring all of Indochina under its control. This provoked China to attack it. At great expense in blood and treasure, the Chinese armed forces succeeded in teaching Vietnam that it could not afford to collude with China's strategic adversaries. Vietnamese have not forgotten that lesson. There are limits on Vietnam's willingness to ally with China's enemies. There are no limits to its determination to defend its independence.

Vietnam, with its 100 million people and one of the world's fastest growing economies, remains a potent obstacle to Chinese domination of either Southeast Asia or the South China Sea. China has inspired Vietnam's economic reforms. Chinese companies have also been major contributors to the country's rapidly growing economy. But Hanoi continues to mount a vigorous defense of its claims in the South China Sea against counterclaims and attempted inroads by Beijing.

To buttress its independence, Vietnam is cultivating multifaceted relationships with India, Japan, Russia, and the United States, while playing an active role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Vietnam will accept aid from others but knows better than to join any great power in confronting Beijing. Hanoi understands just how far to go in accommodating or resisting its huge northern neighbor.

Thailand too is nobody's puppet. The Thai have always unashamedly pursued their own interests. Their reputation for astute maneuver to preserve their independence from greater powers is well deserved. In the 19th century, the Thai successfully played the French in Indochina off against the British in Myanmar. They finessed the Japanese occupation of their neighbors during World War II by first accommodating Japan, then aligning themselves with it,

and finally breaking with it.

With Japan's support, Thailand seized territories in Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Myanmar. As it became apparent that the Japanese were losing the war, Bangkok officially repudiated its entente with Tokyo. Later, the Thai supported the U.S. wars in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. But when North Vietnam defeated South Vietnam and unified the country, Bangkok instantly reconciled with Hanoi.

The Thai now judge that China is rising as the United States declines. Washington's studied disrespect for Thailand's coup-born military governments has further reduced U.S. influence in Bangkok. Thailand is now pursuing a closer relationship with Beijing. But the Thai objective remains continued freedom from all foreign control. They will do whatever they must to protect their sovereignty.

Over the course of the past millennium, **Cambodia** lost most of its territory to Thailand and Vietnam. It remains apprehensively squeezed as a buffer state between these two historically predatory middle-ranking Southeast Asian powers. Phnom Penh has always relied on one or more external great powers to sustain its independence. In ancient times, its main protector was the Indonesian empire of Sri Vijaya. During the French and U.S. wars in Vietnam, it was first China, then the United States. Now it is again China. As has **Laos**, the government has turned to Beijing to bolster its autonomy, grow its economy and protect its neutral position between Thailand and Vietnam.

Myanmar is the hinge that connects East to South Asia. It shares a porous 2,185-kilometer-long border with China but was for long a province of British India. It remains a country that neither China nor India is prepared to cede to the other's sphere of influence. This puts Naypyidaw in a position to balance between the two, something it instinctively does well. While out only for its own interests and uninterested in commitments to other members of ASEAN, the government of Myanmar will not throw its weight in the regional balance to either Beijing or New Delhi, still less to an outside opponent of either.

Myanmar's other great neighbor, **India,** enjoys almost unchallenged dominance in South Asia. Only Pakistan, its independence bolstered by China, denies India a totally free hand in its immediate region. The countries on India's Himalayan borders range from those, like **Bhutan**, where New Delhi exercises undisguised suzerainty, to those, like **Nepal**, where China is seen as an effective counter to Indian arrogance and bullying. Elsewhere in South Asia, countries like **Bangladesh**, the **Maldives**, and **Sri Lanka** are careful to refrain from directly challenging Indian hegemony even as they seek discreet help from China and other countries to dilute it.

Although New Delhi's domineering approach to its smaller neighbors denies it their support against China, India faces no serious competition in its South Asian sphere of influence. If challenged, India would have the option to make serious common cause with countries elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, like Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam. The only real obstacle to this would be India's unwaveringly self-centered tradition of nonalignment, which causes it to reject any form of coalition with other countries.

Singapore, a multiethnic city state squeezed between two assertively Malay neighbors, has a well-justified reputation for independent judgments backed by astute statecraft. Its high living standards and social order, as well as its tradition of economic and financial openness, have made it indispensable to both Indonesia and Malaysia and garnered support for its armed neutrality from all the world's great powers. Though no other nation has an explicit commitment to protect Singapore, all have come to have an interest in its continued independence.

Malaysia remains troubled by tensions between its Malay majority and its relatively wealthy ethnic Chinese minority, whose insurrection against British and Malay rule Beijing once supported. In 1979, Malaysia seized, garrisoned, and built islands out of a few originally uninhabited land features in the South China Sea also claimed by China (both Beijing and Taipei), the Philippines, and Vietnam. The persistent Chinese assertion of a claim to these Malaysian-held islands and their surrounding seas has significantly raised Malaysian nationalists' wariness of China. In response, Kuala Lumpur has stepped up the fortification of its South China Sea outposts. Malaysia has sided with neither the United States nor China in their escalating naval face-off in the adjacent seas. Like everyone else in the region, it is determined both to defend its independence and interests and to avoid entanglement in great power conflict.
By marked contrast, the **Brunei Darussalam** and the **Philippines** – two other Malay ASEAN member states – appear to have decided that their interests would be best served by maintaining cordial and cooperative relations with China and avoiding entanglement with the United States. Despite a late start in opening to each other, China has become Brunei's largest investor and, in many ways, its preferred economic partner.
The Philippines, under its populist President Rodrigo Duterte, seems to want to head in the same direction. Manila is backing away from its longtime reliance on its former American colonial masters, courting expanded relations with China, and reaching out to Japan and other potential patrons. While a post-Duterte government may well seek some measure of rapprochement with the United States, the Philippines seems unlikely to return to anything resembling its previous degree of dependence on America.
Indonesia, the largest of the Malay states, is a regional (and perhaps global) great power in the making. It has the largest Muslim population in the world (about 225 million). Before its subjugation and unification by European colonialism, states in what is now Indonesia played an active role in the offshore balancing of the contending societies in mainland Southeast Asia. Jakarta helped lead the nonaligned movement in the early stages of the Cold War. It is a heavy hitter that seldom comes to bat. But it now seems to be readying itself to take a stand at home plate.
The Sino-Indonesian relationship has been turbulent despite their longstanding common support of a multipolar world order governed by the principles of the United Nations rather than by the United States or any other hegemon. There is no love lost between the two countries. Beijing has recently rekindled Indonesian antipathy to China by encouraging Chinese fishermen to trespass in waters that are, by any reading of international law, Indonesian. The result is intensifying alienation and even confrontation between the two countries.
This gratuitous Chinese confrontation with Indonesia is an "own goal." It reinforces Jakarta's apprehensions about the possible threat to its national dignity and sovereignty posed by China's return to wealth and power. It alarms others in ASEAN and reinforces regional interest in cooperation with external powers (like the United States) to check Chinese bullying. More than any other Chinese action in contemporary Southeast Asia, this dispute over fisheries reveals Beijing's growing tendency to resort to counterproductive intimidation. It is said that hegemony produces its own antibodies. As China throws its weight around in its region, it is validating this aphorism.
China's growing power greatly worries **Australia,** in many ways the Indo-Pacific country most perplexed by regional uncertainties. Protected by Britain before World War II, Australia has since found safety in close association with the United States. Now China is its largest trading

partner. Australians fear either U.S. abandonment or rashly provocative American behavior as they try to work out a satisfactory response to shifting power balances, including – but not limited to – the rise of China. Canberra frets not only about how best to deal with China's growing sway in maritime Eurasia and the South Pacific but also the arrogant bullying Beijing increasingly employs to get its way with weaker countries. Australians are also apprehensive about Indonesia, a giant with its own "middle kingdom syndrome" to their immediate north. Like the Japanese, Australians face hard choices they are reluctant to make. But if exclusive reliance on the United States is no longer perceived as a viable option for Australia, there are many conceivable roles for it in the Indo-Pacific of the future. These range from enlistment in a Japanese-led coalition aimed at balancing China and backed by the United States, to armed neutrality, to Chinese protection from growing Indonesian power, to backstopping Indonesia against China.

Australia's answer for now is to hold onto its alliance with the United States while courting cooperative relations with India and Japan. But keeping all of Australia's eggs in the American basket is not an Indo-Pacific strategy for the longer term. Among other lacunae, such an approach provides no answer to the question of what role a rising Indonesia will play in the region to Australia's North or in checking and balancing Chinese influence elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. And it does not address the possibility of significant changes in the Chinese and U.S. presences in the South Pacific. Australia needs to find an assured place in its own region that is not entirely dependent on support from an external power. The same is true of **New Zealand**.

Sadly, there is today no country that believes the post-World War II American-led order in the Indo-Pacific represents the region's future. All see themselves as facing the need to adjust not just to the rise of China, but also to the likely continuing ebb of U.S. political, economic, and military power. This ebb has been measured by ever-more frequent no-shows at regional gatherings by senior U.S. officials and American withdrawal from regional organizations, even those originally championed by the United States, like TPP. The credibility of the U.S. commitment to remain an active and engaged Indo-Pacific power is belied by U.S. behavior. The weakening of American influence has been underscored by a series of unfortunate events that have discredited the United States as a political and economic model. These include the 2008 financial crisis, repeated gun massacres and incidents of police violence, the U.S. electorate's recent embrace of plutocratic privilege, self-centered populism, and xenophobia, and the catastrophically incompetent U.S. response to natural disasters. The latest of these is the Covid-19 pandemic.

The United States is now perpetually debt dependent. Its government is demonstrating declining competence at home and abroad. It seems improbable to the region's leaders that the United States will long be able to continue to outspend China militarily, overwhelm China's defenses, or dominate China's near seas. There is little confidence in the Indo-Pacific that America can indefinitely counter China's growing influence in its own near abroad.

There is sympathy – but not much regional support – for U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific as Washington defines them. There is very little support for U.S. policies on issues of war and peace. No country is prepared to join the United States in openly backing Taiwanese nationalism against Chinese nationalism. None is willing to join a U.S. fight with China over the rules of the road in the South China Sea or to stand with the U.S. in support of Japan's claims to the East China Sea's Senkaku [Diaoyu] Islands.

The huge Muslim population in the Indo-Pacific has no sympathy for American policies in the Middle East or in the wider Dar al Islam. Almost none in the region sign on to American ideological diatribe about "authoritarianism" versus "democracy." None endorses our repudiation of industrial policy as a path to prosperity. Nor do any Indo-Pacific countries have anything but scorn for the mercantilism and protectionism of recent American trade and investment policy.

It is time to base the defense of U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific on present realities, rather than on their denial or the delusion that past American dominance of the region must or can be sustained. The operative question is not how to maintain U.S. primacy, but how to enlist the strengths of Indo-Pacific countries to guarantee the region's stability, prosperity, and freedom from domination by a hostile great power or combination of great powers.

Basic U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific remain simple and straightforward:

- Denial to any great power of the ability to aggregate the region's human and other resources for use against the United States or its interests.
- Unimpeded access to the region's markets, products, services, financial resources, and scientific and technological innovations.
- Relationships with all the region's countries that predispose them to support rather than oppose U.S. global interests and objectives.
- A stable order that minimizes political, economic, and military demands on the United States.
- Cooperation with the great powers of the region to support both global and regional peace and prosperity.

The new realities upon which American strategy must be based include recognition that:

- Once a vacuum requiring the United States to fill it, the region is now the greatest concentration of wealth and power on the planet. U.S. policy should leverage the strengths of Indo-Pacific countries, not seek to substitute American strength for theirs.
- The contest between great powers (China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the United States) in the Indo-Pacific is primarily economic rather than political or military. It cannot be won by the threat or use of force. It demands constantly improved American socioeconomic performance more than sustained U.S. military power.
- America's security partners in the region, not the United States, should bear the primary burden of defending their sovereignty and interests.
- Indo-Pacific countries have minds of their own and are – almost without exception – ready, willing, and able to defend themselves and their interests against all comers, including China, but see a mixture of accommodation and deterrence rather than confrontation as the best means of precluding bullying by China.
- Indo-Pacific countries have gained the maturity and self-confidence needed to welcome an end to unilateral agenda-setting by the United States and its replacement by American strategic backing for their independence through "offshore balancing."
- Past strategies premised on overwhelming American power and essentially unlimited resources are unrealistic and need to be adjusted to reflect the rising power of others and the declining revenues available to the United States.
- There are great powers in the region other than China that are capable, if encouraged to do so, of leading the organization of one or more coalitions to balance rising Chinese economic and military power.

The United States should stop focusing on preserving its own hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. It should focus instead on how to preclude the hostile hegemony of another great power – say, China – or a combination of great powers – say, China and Russia. And it should seek to minimize the costs to itself of precluding such a challenge. To this end, it should step back from primacy and encourage the countries of the region to assume responsibility for sustaining their own sovereignty and independence against potential challenges, while offering appropriate backing to them.

To this end, the United States should establish consultative arrangements to ensure that its policies and programs are based on the threat perceptions and support needs of the region's countries, rather than on approaches made in America alone. If backed by the United States, Indo-Pacific countries clearly have both the determination and the strength to preserve and protect their own national interests. It is entirely reasonable for the United States to ask them to do so.

Fifty-one years ago, in Guam, President Richard Nixon prescribed three principles for future U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific:

- First, the United States will keep all its treaty commitments.
- Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.
- Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.

The nations of the Indo-Pacific are far more capable today than they were in 1969 of meeting the challenges of their own self-defense. This is, in large measure, a success of past U.S. policies. America should acknowledge this and act accordingly. It is time to implement Nixon's vision.