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ARE CHINA-US RELATIONS SPIRALING DOWN INTO A NEW COLD WAR? KEY FLASHPOINTS

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AMERICA AND THE WORLD ARE NOW waking up to the multi-faceted effort of China to project its power and influence both regionally and globally, particularly through the influence of China's naval power via People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In the South China Sea (SCS), for example, China has sought to transform the SCS into "China's Caribbean" (Kaplan) under China's sovereign control. The US initially reacted with freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) – and by supporting States such as Vietnam being bullied by China in the SCS. The US State Department has forcefully challenged Chinese claims in the SCS stating that "Beijing has failed to put forth a lawful, coherent maritime claim in the South China Sea" noting that the Permanent Court of Arbitration (convened in connection with the dispute between The Philippines and China) "rejected the PRC's maritime claims as having no basis in international law".

It seems that suddenly China has gone from being perceived as a "partial power"¹ to being a powerful State with "solar system influence cast[ing] an enormous gravitational pull both regionally and globally".² The long-standing focus on trade issues with China is now a distant second to serious concerns about China's rise as a military and expansionist power.

Some have even suggested that the United States is now in a Cold War with China. Whether or not the US and China are in a new Cold War, the challenge from China is formidable. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is of the view that "it may not yet be Cold War 2.0, but it is starting to look like Cold War 1.5".

"Hide Your Strength, Bide Your Time" (Deng Xiao Ping) – Not Anymore!

China is no longer hiding its real intentions and is now outwardly pushing forward to extend its power and influence throughout the world. This situation has been developing steadily over time. In the words of China's leader for life Xi Jinping, "[o]ur nation is a continental power and an oceanic power, possessing a wide range of strategic maritime interests." Xi stated at the 12th Party Congress of the PLAN that a "powerful and modern navy" is needed "for the realization of the Chinese Dream and the dream of a strong military".³

What appeared to be a series of unconnected moves of the part of China, on further analysis seem to be elements of an organized worldwide push for Chinese hegemony and influence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) touted as a soft power effort to assist developing nations, is now looked at as an effort to obtain influence over nations stuck in a 'debt trap' to China,

and to militarize commercial ports in key strategic locations (also sometimes referred to as the "string of pearls"). Hong Kong, which was supposed to be governed under a "one country, two systems" approach following the handover from the UK to China in 1997, has now effectively been fully absorbed into mainland China with the enactment a repressive National Security Law outlawing peaceful protest, and elections have been postponed. Given the Chinese obsession with "One China", suppressing Taiwan's independent existence, some have wondered if Taiwan is the next Hong Kong, the next target of Chinese aggression. The fact that the pandemic originated in China is a source of vigorous debate as to whether China was responsible for the release of the virus (with President Trump calling COVID-19 the "China Virus"). The leaders of the World Health Organization (WHO) have been accused of being under the control of China, and the United States announced that it is pulling out of the WHO, effective July 2021.

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The Confucius Institutes, long thought of as a beneficent soft power effort to provide education exchange and resources to countries around the world, are now seen as a form of "sharp power", seeking to penetrate the "political and information environments of targeted countries" (Walker). This is accomplished through "CAMP Vulnerability". "In democratic countries, the spheres of culture, academia, media, and publishing (the so-called "CAMP" sectors) are open and accessible... Unfortunately, however, this makes them ripe targets for sharp-power penetration". US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that he wants the Confucius Institutes in the US to close by the end of 2020.

Among the key takeaways from the Pentagon's Report on China 2020 are the following:⁴

- China's strategy seeks to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation";
- Nationalist aspirations to "return" China to a position of strength, prosperity and leadership on the world stage;
- Strengthening the PLA into a world class military by the end of 2049;

- Capabilities for power projection beyond the first island chain. China's continuing improvements of air and ground missile strike capabilities and, increasingly beyond the First Island Chain enable other military assets to operate farther from China;
- China's nuclear weapons policy prioritizes the maintenance of a survivable nuclear force that can retaliate against an adversary's first strike – and respond with sufficient strength to inflict unacceptable damage on an enemy; and
- To project and sustain military power at greater distances. Beyond its base in Djibouti, the PRC has been seeking access to selected foreign ports to pre-position the necessary logistics support to sustain naval deployments in waters as distant as the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean to protect its growing interests. Both the PRC and Cambodia have publicly denied having signed an agreement to provide the PLAN access to Ream Naval Base in Cambodia. Cambodia declined a U.S. offer to pay to renovate a U.S.-donated building on Ream Naval Base. If China is able to leverage such assistance into a presence at Ream Naval Base, it suggests that China's overseas basing strategy has diversified to include military capacity-building efforts.

All of these developments must give American policy makers cause for serious concern. America and the world are faced with a challenge very much analogous to the rise of the Soviet Union after the Second World War.

George Kennan urged that America needed to take action to contain the USSR. Like the Communist Party of the USSR, it can be said of the Chinese Communist Party, that the "leadership of the Communist Party is... always right" and that the party's "infallibility" rests on "iron discipline". What Kennan advocated as a response to the USSR applies equally to China now, namely "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment" of China's expansive tendencies". We should note that the competition with China may not wholly be about Communist doctrine and might be based in nationalism as well.⁵ There are certainly elements of nationalism where "China is eager to stand tall, asserting its power in Asia and beyond" thereby overcoming a "century of humiliation".

Two Roads Diverged in a Wood

We might be able to identify two roads to China's desire to become a superpower ("two paths to global domination"): one runs through the Western Pacific, focusing on building regional primacy as a springboard to global power. The second road focuses less on building a position of unassailable strength in the Western Pacific

than on outflanking the US alliance system and force presence in the region by developing China's economic, diplomatic, and political influence on a global scale. Either way the threat to America and its allies is real and formidable.⁶

Areas of Future Concern In many respects, Australia is the 'canary in the mine'. When Australia supported the effort to find out how the coronavirus originate in China, the Chinese government responded with crushing tariffs and other actions against Australia. Australia is on the front line. A Chinese official referred to Australia as a "bit of chewing gum stuck on the sole of China's shoes. Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off. one's shoe that needs to be kicked off".

It is no coincidence that Chinese troops attacked Indian troops in the remote Galwan Valley, the first such clash since 1962. "China's greatest vulnerability in its strategy to dominate the Indian Ocean – and thereby India – is the Malacca Strait... a lifeline for China's seaborne trade and the main path of its navy toward South Asia, and points further west". China has been pushing to invest in the establishment a canal across Thailand's Kra Isthmus, which would open a second sea route from China to the Indian Ocean. Such a canal would "fit neatly into Beijing's plans to encircle India... and would allow the Chinese navy to quickly move ships to the Indian Ocean without diverting more than 700 miles south to round the tip of Malaysia".

China recently entered into a 25-year strategic partnership with Iran in trade, politics, culture and security. Indeed "China's growing influence in East Asia and Africa has challenged US interests, and the Middle East is the next battlefield on which Beijing can challenge US hegemony – this time through Iran".

What is to be Done?

Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison insisted that we "deal with the world as it is not as we'd like it to be". The reaction must be organized and effective.

Clearly the US can't do all this alone – it needs to work with its allies, in particular, Japan, Australia and India, the States in the South China Sea, as well as the nations caught in China's 'debt trap' by the BRI – to push back against China's ascendancy.

Be Careful What You Wish For – Chinese Proverb

China's leaders might wish to rule the world. At some point they may be stretched thin and face vulnerabilities. All empires face such challenges. The Chinese may even make the mistake of becoming "mired in the Middle East" or in some other region and may face pushback as they relentlessly push forward with their actions in the SCS, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and through the militarization of the BRI. It is essential for America and its allies to unite and act forcefully to push back the rise of China where China interferes with regional and global stability.

As with China now, Kennan said that "the issue of Soviet-American relations" was "in essence a test of the over-all worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation". Clearly, maintaining a world in which there is an American rules-based order which implements the tenets of international law and stability is the highest priority at this time. America can and must do its part to preserve a stable and peaceful world order. At minimum, we do need to immediately institute a "new architecture of détente between the United States of China" to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control.⁷

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