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# Sino-US Great Power Conflict from a Realist Perspective

Sean Carver

Healthcare Leadership

June, 2021

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Etga Ugur

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors, University of Washington, Tacoma

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Approved:



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# CONTENTS

<b>NEOCLASSICAL REALISM: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>RAMIFICATIONS OF CHINESE HEGEMONY .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>TAIWANESE DE FACTO INDEPENDENCE &amp; STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND CHINESE ECONOMIC POWER .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>SOLUTIONS TO THE SINO-US GREAT POWER CONFLICT .....</b>	<b>18</b>
US ALLIANCES IN EAST ASIA: JAPANESE STRATEGY .....	18
PROTECTING TAIWANESE DE-FACTO INDEPENDENCE .....	21
MITIGATING RISKS FROM THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE .....	23
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>26</b>

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was defined in stark terms by great power conflict between the reigning powers of the day. From WWI and WWII to the Cold War in the latter half of the century, intense security competition shaped the world for most of the duration of the century. Unfortunately, the modern world does not seem to be inherently immune to such competition. In fact, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, much like the one preceding it, is likely to be defined in large part by conflict. In this century, it will be between the current dominant global power, the US, and the rapidly growing Chinese state. The competition is likely to be intense, and it will involve much of the globe (Mearsheimer, 2014).

What are some of the possible ramifications of the rise of China and the security conflict between the Chinese state and the US? How can the US work to contest China and prevent some of the more concerning ramifications of its rise while also preventing the worst outcomes of the security conflict? In this paper I aim to establish that the rise of China, if left unchecked, could lead to a destabilization of East Asia and the American-led system of alliances that has kept a relative balance there. Furthermore, if handled improperly, the security competition between the US and China could lead to outright war. However, there are ways the US can mitigate the risk of open conflict while ensuring that China does not dominate East Asia uncontested.

China is an economic, military, and political powerhouse. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has seen growth over 5% yearly on average for the past few decades, and it has over one billion people living within its borders (World Bank, 2019). It has also been growing its military strength, now fielding the largest army in the world and working to modernize its military forces (DoD, 2020). Despite this, there is no consensus in the international relations community on

whether China will attempt to become a hegemonic power, whether it will succeed, or if it does attempt to do so, in what manner it will go about it (Danner & Martin, 2019; Beckley, 2018).

Chinese state leaders have attempted to show the world that the economic rise of China will be peaceful, and that their intentions are not to radically upset the balance of power, that China is a status quo power (Danner & Martin, 2019). However, some of the more recent actions of the Chinese government have worked against this notion. China has been increasing its funding for their military in recent years, and as of 2020 had the largest navy in the world (DoD, 2020). Additionally, in 2017 the Chinese navy was considered 70% modern, a rapid rise from previous estimates (Heginbotham, 2015). Finally, China has been rapidly developing more advanced area-denial weapons systems including surface-to-air missiles and land-based cruise missile sites (Jamison, 2020). These weapon systems could serve to make US intervention in the region significantly more challenging.

China has also been acting assertively, perhaps even aggressively, in the economic sphere. By expanding its infrastructure plans and creating a reliance on Chinese goods in foreign countries, China is able to gain leverage over some of those nations' governments, creating indebtedness and allowing China to expand its influence abroad at other states' expense as will be examined in detail below (Wong, 2021). China has also been more assertive with regards to the sea regions surrounding itself, bringing it into some amount of conflict with Japan over islands such as the Senkaku island chain (Kim et al., 2016). Given these recent trends and actions, it is my contention that China is unlikely to truly be a status quo power, despite the statements of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials.

It is conceivable, or perhaps even likely, that an intensification of security conflict could lead to outright war. Given the more assertive stance of China toward Taiwan discussed previously, as well as US commitments to Taiwanese independence reiterated in 2021, that could serve as a flashpoint for armed conflict. Additionally, based on a realist framework and Thucydides' Trap discussed below, it seems likely that China, as an up-and-coming great power, runs a high risk of being brought into conflict with the dominant great power, the US (Allison, 2018). While many scholars of international relations believe that an armed conflict can stay limited in scope and stay within the realm of traditional warfare, that is not a universally accepted view, and the potential damage from a nuclear conflict means that avoidance of armed conflict with another nuclear power is the best option for global security (Gibson, 2019).

Furthermore, should China obtain regional hegemony, it would be more empowered to upend the existing systems of international monetary and economic policy such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), radically changing international norms and regulations to be more friendly to Chinese interests (Hang, 2017). China would also be able to intensify its ability to leverage economic ties with developing nations, as well as the reliance of multinational companies on Chinese markets, into political power and infrastructure assets. This would give it more authority over both the governments of other nations and the decisions of businesses within them (Wong, 2021). Given this, the US and its allies should not simply accept a new status quo in which China supersedes the US on the global stage; it is my contention that the US must attempt to prevent China from attaining regional hegemony and must remain competitive with the Chinese economy and military

throughout the century, both for the security interests of the US and its allies as well as interests of global economic prosperity and security.

To that end, this paper will provide recommendations and strategies for how to overcome, or at least stay competitive with, China in the coming years without resorting to open warfare. It will begin with an outlining of neoclassical realism, the theoretical framework to be used throughout the rest of the paper. This section will also cover alternative theoretical frameworks and some of their strengths and weaknesses as I see them, as well as why I have chosen the particular framework that I have.

After discussing the theoretical framework being used, this paper will discuss the rise of China itself, and the ramifications of its rising power. This section will especially focus on the potential ramifications of Chinese attempts at hegemonic status in East Asia. It will also focus on the importance of Taiwan to regional security, as well as a discussion of how China is using its robust economy and infrastructure development initiatives to gain increased dominance in East Asia and abroad. Following this section will be a discussion on the current status of US alliances in Asia and how those nations, predominantly Japan and to a lesser extent South Korea, factor into the balance of power in the region.

Finally, the last section of this paper will be a discussion on what the US specifically can do to help curtail the displacement caused by the rise of China. This section will detail how the US can work with regional allies to ensure the de-facto independence of Taiwan. It will also discuss how the US can lead an effort to use existing international financial institutions and private sector investment to reduce the reliance on China and its loans that is spreading in



developing nations, as well as how to reduce the ability of China to use existing debt among those nations to increase its standing.

### **Neoclassical Realism: The Theoretical Framework**

There are many lenses through which one could analyze the international system that the US and China exist within. Each of these interpretations would have radically different effects on the understanding of the current situation and the recommendations for policymakers. Therefore, it would be prudent to go over several of them before delineating why I have chosen the theory I have for this paper.

One of the major theories within the international relations discipline is that of liberalism. Liberalism, in its various forms, maintains that the international system consists of international organizations through which norms and collaboration between states can be fostered. This can take the form of economic interconnectedness such as with the IMF and the WTO, or it can take the form of international laws and agreed upon standards such as those enshrined in the UN or the Geneva Conventions (Moravcsik, 1992). This theory maintains that through the use of such institutions we can drastically decrease the likelihood of conflict in the international setting. However, as we will see, China's participation within such international organizations does not appear to have lessened the desire of the Chinese state for power, and in fact may have given them some of the tools that they are using to acquire power and influence on the world stage, often at the expense of other states (Wong, 2021; Lee 2018).

The next theory we will discuss is that of realism. Realism is a theory that, at its core, emphasizes the idea that conflict between nations, rather than being a result of differing

ideologies or the personalities of their leaders, results from tensions within the structure of the international system. First and foremost, realists believe that states, which are the highest real form of human organization at present, always exist in a state of anarchy (Waltz, 1979). Because of this, they must look to their own safety and security due to the lack of a higher authority for arbitration, and so this becomes their highest priority (Mearsheimer, 2014).

There are a few specific variations of the realist theory. Offensive realism posits that states seek to maximize their share of power in the system they are in by aggressively expanding, seeking at all times to outdo their competitors and establish hegemony over their region. A key principle of offensive realism is that a state is only a credible contender for regional hegemony if it is able to fight and defeat all of its great power rivals at once (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Offensive realists also believe that economic strength is the foundation for hard power, especially the military power that so often determines the outcomes of security conflicts (Mearsheimer, 2014). Thus, economic power provides a sort of latent power that allows a state to maintain a competitive edge in security conflicts. While there are numerous factors that may influence the outcome of conflicts, realist theory contends that the economic strength of a state is critical to its ability to manage conflicts in a way that is beneficial to its interests.

This stands in contrast to defensive realism, which posits that in order to best provide for their own security states must ardently defend their borders without antagonizing or otherwise provoking their neighbors. This theory states that wars of aggression or other attempts to establish regional hegemony are either foolish endeavors launched by leaders failing to heed the

necessities of the international system or sporadic, rather than endemic, necessities (Lobell, 2017). However, one very large example strongly defies this theory: the US itself.

The United States is the first nation in modern history which has established credible hegemonic status over their region. Furthermore, the US has done so in large part via wars of aggression (Mearsheimer, 2014). These wars include the Spanish-American War, which gained the US large territories in the Caribbean and some in the Pacific, as well as the Mexican-American War at the conclusion of which Mexico ceded all of its territory north of the Rio Grande including New Mexico and California (Brittanica, 2021; Brittanica 2021). This hegemonic control has been exemplified by the Monroe Doctrine, which warned European powers against interfering in the Western Hemisphere and through which the US claimed more political authority to intervene in the affairs of its neighbors, solidifying its power (Gibson, 2019). This was then solidified by the Roosevelt Corollary, which lent further credence to the American policy of using force to ensure political stability of nations in the Western Hemisphere, as well as intervening in their domestic politics to support US interests (Ricard, 2006). This aggressive expansion and establishment of regional control is firmly in line with the expectations of the realist theory (Mearsheimer, 2014).

There is another major theory of realism that is especially useful for the purposes of this paper, that of neoclassical realism. This theory shares many, if not most, of the underlying assumptions of other realist schools of thought. It is still predominantly structural in nature, emphasizing that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to protect their security interests first and foremost and to seek power where it can be found. It also agrees that

in the face of a revisionist challenger state such as interwar Germany or, I argue, modern day China, balancing or buck-passing are still the most useful options for managing the disruption to the status quo (Ripsman, 2011).

The main piece that neoclassical realists bring to the table as opposed to structural realism is that neoclassical realists allow for the idea that while there are certain ways states ought to respond to threats in the international arena, domestic considerations may prevent them from doing so. It recognizes that states are institutions that are led by humans, and therefore the responses to outside stimuli may not be proper. This can be because the leadership of a state does not properly recognize the situation it is in. It could also be because leaders do not recognize all of their options or choose improperly among several of them. Finally, a state could pursue an improper strategy to outside stimuli because of domestic economic or political constraints that prevent the apparatus of state from gaining enough resources from their civil society to compete properly (Ripsman, 2011).

It may seem strange to use a framework that, compared to other theories under the realist umbrella, emphasizes domestic politics and the importance of domestic politics in a paper that barely touches on that. However, neoclassical realism looks much the same as other realist variations when examined through a purely international relations lens. Because of this, using it is helpful if I decide to further expand on this paper later, while also maintaining the same utility that a different, more classical realist framework would provide to the paper as it stands now.

Fitting within the overarching theory of realism is an idea that sheds some light on the specifics of the US-China conflict. It is called Thucydides' Trap, named after a Greek scholar

during the Peloponnesian War. This theory states that when an existing dominant force in a system is confronted by a rising state that threatens to displace it, the system suffers structural strain to the point that armed conflict is the most likely outcome (Lee, 2019). Some modern scholars of international relations have asserted that the Sino-US conflict is another example of this phenomenon, contending that the current place of both China, the rising state, and the US, the dominant state, makes armed conflict likely (Allison, 2018).

Thucydides' Trap is what this paper seeks to help the US and its allies avoid, while at the same time attempt to preserve the overall structure of the current geopolitical system. This paper also seeks to help the US remain competitive with its current competitor, and to limit the changes to the system that the rise of China is likely to create. Under a realist interpretation, the rise of China is going to change the balance of power; by acting wisely, the US can increase the likelihood that the world retains safety, stability, and prosperity without ceding US primacy.

### **Ramifications of Chinese Hegemony**

First, we must define what exactly it means for a state to be a hegemon. A hegemonic power is a state that, in addition to wielding a disproportionately large amount of wealth and power compared to its contemporaries in the system, is also able to shape that system to suit its own ends (Gilpin, 1988). This is exemplified in the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary mentioned earlier: they were ways in which the US could shape the international forces in their region in a way that profoundly benefitted itself.

Additionally, according to realist theory, a hegemon must be able to credibly exert military dominance over every other great power in the system. Thus, true global hegemony has so far not been achieved by any state, and the advent of nuclear weapons has made achieving this goal considerably more difficult, if not impossible (Mearsheimer, 2014). While the US may meet some standards for hegemony, namely having a vast amount of wealth and power as well as shaping international norms and systems, it cannot credibly defeat every other great power's military, and therefore despite its global influence it is a regional hegemon. Because of the great difficulty in achieving global hegemony, this paper will focus solely on potential regional hegemony for China.

Before diving any deeper should be clear about a critical point: China does not yet have hegemonic control over East Asia. As we will see later, Japan has been shifting towards a firmer stand in opposition of China in recent years, including a government initiative designed to shift production from China back to Japan (Nakazawa, 2020). Given the Japanese status as the third largest world economy, China is far from the only great power in the region (World Bank, 2019). Additionally, Japan had a GDP per capita roughly four times that of China in 2019 according to the World Bank. Some research shows that GDP per capita provides a more reliable measure of economic and military strength than GDP alone (Beckley, 2018). Even South Korea, with its comparatively small economy and overall population, possesses a large and well-equipped military (Nye & Kim, 2013). More critically for our definition of hegemony, China does not appear to be capable yet of radically altering the nature of the international system in East Asia, as shown by the continuing alliances of Japan and South Korea with the US as well as the failure

thus far of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to generate significant economic power for the Chinese state (Wong, 2021).

With that said, the Chinese economy is the largest in East Asia, and the second largest in the world (World Bank, 2019). This lends credence to the potential for China to grow in power over the next few decades if their economic growth continues. Additionally, while BRI may have produced limited financial gains for China thus far as indicated previously, there is evidence that it has increased China's ability to influence other nations through debt, showing that they may be on the way toward reshaping at least some elements of the international system (Gerstel, 2018). The BRI will be covered in significant detail below.

China is also using other elements of the international economy to its own ends. Chinese companies, supported by the Chinese state, are buying or otherwise gaining favorable access to ports in both Europe and Asia (Lee, 2018). In Asia, especially in developing nations, this can buy the Chinese state both greater economic clout as well as political primacy, enabling the Chinese state to better shape the politics of the region in a way that favors the strategic interests of the Chinese government. While this strategy is more difficult in Europe, it is still possible, especially given the particularities of the EU.

Since actions by the EU require unanimity among participants, the swaying of even a single nation toward Chinese strategic goals is a large victory for China. Greece, for instance, has been more open than other European nations toward allowing Chinese economic influence, allowing more investments in the region and allowing a Chinese company to purchase a Greek shipping company (Lee, 2018). It seems that this may be starting to pay off for China, as in 2017

Greece prevented the EU from issuing a statement regarding Chinese human rights abuses. Using this strategy, China only needs a relatively small amount of influence in Europe in order to prevent the EU from taking any meaningful action to curtail Chinese power or otherwise act counter to Chinese interests.

When all is said and done, a world in which China has attained credible hegemony over East Asia is an inherently less stable world. Furthermore, it could severely diminish or destroy the security guarantees that have in large part built the modern world. Without those guarantees, while it is certainly possible that the EU would maintain as an independent force, the war-torn history of Europe shows that such a rosy outcome is not likely. The best way to maintain peace and prosperity globally is for the US to contain China and ensure that it does not attain such vaunted status.

### **Taiwanese De Facto Independence & Strategic Importance**

Taiwan is an island just off the southern coast of mainland China which has historically been Chinese territory, though it has been controlled by the Japanese at points as well, most notably during WWII. In the 1940's, Mao Zedong led a revolution against the reigning government at the time, led by Chiang Kai-shek. When Chiang Kai-shek was pushed off the mainland, he and his government fled to the island of Taiwan. Since then, both governments have agreed that Taiwan is a part of China, but the government in Taiwan maintained that it was the legitimate Chinese government whereas the government in Beijing, along with the vast majority of the international community, has held that the government on the mainland is the legitimate Chinese state (Brittanica, 2021).



In the 1970's, Taiwan lost its UN representation, and has since lost much of its international diplomatic ties with other nations as a result of China's growing strength and the importance of maintaining good relations with the Chinese state (Brittanica, 2021). However, the US has stated that any attempt to change the status quo regarding Taiwan would be "of grave concern" to the US. In the 1990's, the US sent a carrier group through the Strait of Taiwan after China fired missiles off the Taiwanese coast as a response to their elections (Blackwill & Zelikow, 2021).

Recently, China has been putting more pressure on Taiwan, as well as ratcheting up their rhetoric on the possibility of outright aggression in order to secure control over the island, citing the supposed failure of the president, re-elected in 2016, to adhere to the One China policy (Blackwill & Zelikow, 2021). This increased bellicosity increases the importance of the ongoing US discussion, among scholars of international relations even if not always among elected officials, over whether the US should support Taiwanese de-facto independence (Rehman, 2014).

There are some who contend that withdrawing support for Taiwan may ease the tense relationship between the US and China (Glaser, 2011). They argue that were the US to allow China to take control of Taiwan uncontested, its territorial ambitions would be satisfied, and it would become a status-quo power. However, it is my contention that this stance is ill-conceived.

The main reason I consider this to be a poor strategy to reduce Sino-US tension is that there is no reason to believe Chinese territorial ambition would be sated. If, as I made the case for earlier, China is indeed pushing for regional hegemony over East Asia then their territorial ambition would very likely involve other parts of the region such as the Senkaku island chain,

contested by Japan (Rehman, 2014; Kim et al. 2016). Indeed, if the rise of China is viewed through the lens of Thucydides' Trap, then the absorption of Taiwan into the main Chinese state would do little to ameliorate the underlying structural tensions between the US, the superpower state, and China, the rising state (Allison, 2018).

The protection of Taiwan is also of critical strategic importance to the US and its allies. This is because Chinese territorial ambition is to a significant degree contained by the group of islands immediately surrounding it, referred to as the first island chain, which Taiwan is a part of along with the Philippines and a few other island chains (Espena & Bomping, 2020). Were China to attain control of Taiwan, it would be in a significantly better position to dictate the flow of any potential conflict in the Pacific, gaining much greater ability to project both air and naval power over many of the other islands in the region, or even regions in the Southwest of Japan that are critical to Japanese communication and transport (Rehman, 2014).

Currently, Taiwan serves as a sort of plug, a natural barrier to help contain Chinese force projection in the Pacific. Given that a walking-back of American support for Taiwan would be unlikely to reduce tensions between China and the US, it is in the best interests of the US and its allies to retain the status quo of Taiwan as a functionally, though not technically, independent island. The strategy for how to ensure the status quo will be discussed at length later in this paper.

### **Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese Economic Power**

The Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI, is a massive infrastructure project designed to create economic inroads in developing nations in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Europe.

It began in 2013 under the tenure of Xi Jinping, China's current head of state, though the BRI designation is somewhat loose and has been given to projects begun before that date as well. The scope of the initiative is massive, with some estimates placing the total cost over the lifetime of the initiative at \$1.2 to 1.3 trillion (Chatzky & McBride, 2018). Despite the opportunities that such investment could present to developing nations, however, there is a great deal of concern in the international community that the details of the BRI are both opaque and unfavorable to the nations receiving investment (Chatzky & McBride, 2018).

The plan, which has both an overland component and a maritime component, is based around creating large amounts of infrastructure in recipient nations, especially transport infrastructure such as roads, pipelines, and ports in order to better facilitate trade. This could have multiple beneficial effects for China. First, it would create large dividends for Chinese companies and the Chinese state, given that China is an extremely export-focused economy (Chatzky & McBride, 2018).

The BRI is also designed to more generally improve the standing of the Chinese state abroad. Xi Jinping has been attempting to use the BRI and other Chinese economic strategies in order to push the Chinese system of economic planning to other nations in the region, attempting to supplant, or at least compete with, the existing international monetary and economic structures. Additionally, according to Elizabeth Economy in a 2018 Foreign Affairs article, the Chinese state has been granting preferential treatment to companies that are owned and operated by the CCP. This not only subverts domestic corporations without government aid but also foreign ones when these state-supported companies compete with private companies abroad.

The support of certain companies by the Chinese government speaks to a wider concern regarding the Chinese economic structure. The CCP has shown a willingness to bend the rules and expectations of a modern economy in order to ensure the primacy of Chinese businesses. For instance, after enacting its “Made in China 2025” program the CCP has begun requiring car manufacturers to use only batteries that have been created in Chinese factories operating for at least one year (Economy, 2018). This allows those companies to have a disproportionately large market share in China, pushing out foreign companies that may be competitors without such government assistance and interference.

These economic and political goals have converged recently in China’s attempts to use economic leverage to silence dissent amongst both corporations that seek to do business in China as well as foreign governments that have relied on Chinese money (Economy, 2018). The Chinese government uses the massive market potential inherent to its large, economically growing populace to threaten companies, initiating punitive taxes or restrictions on how companies can operate in China (Braw, 2021). This can cause companies to attempt to pressure their home governments into different action or rhetoric. This has occurred with multiple companies in multiple nations, notably in Sweden after its government announced it would not use Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE in its 5G network and in Australia after that government advocated for an investigation into the origins of Covid. These coercive measures function similarly to how sanctions have historically functioned when levied by the US and its allies, though targeted to individual companies and for more blatantly illiberal, political reasons (Braw, 2021).

China is expanding its economic and political clout through debt-based foreign investments in developing nations, buying up influence that can then be used to either strengthen its economic power or cause governments to act more in ways that are amenable to Chinese interests. In addition, it is using the power of its government to artificially alter the playing field for multinational companies, while using its large population and critical importance to many Western companies in order to influence their behavior and that of their home nations. This may allow China to fundamentally alter the dynamic of the international economic order at least in its own geopolitical backyard in East Asia. It is still possible, however, for the US and its allies to counter these strategies, as will be shown below.

### **Solutions to the Sino-US Great Power Conflict**

#### **US Alliances in East Asia: Japanese Strategy**

One of the main ways the US can contain the growing military might of China, and to blunt its assertiveness, is to ensure that our existing alliance structures in the region are robust and strong. As the third largest economy in the world, Japan is an extremely valuable ally for the US. However, there are some problems that prevent it from being as reliable as it could be, problems the US could go a long way towards fixing.

Before delving further into the specifics of Japan, it should be made clear that Japan is not the only ally the US has in the region. South Korea in particular is a militarily strong ally (Nye & Kim, 2013). However, many of the basic strategies that will help solidify the US-Japan alliance will work with other nations as well, and so Japan is being used as an example. This is

not meant to limit or discredit the importance of other regional allies, simply to save on time and space for the purposes of this paper.

Since the end of WWII, Japan has had no true military relying instead on a purely defensive force called the Japanese Self-Defense Force or JSDF. Because of this, it has relied on a strategy called economic hedging, meaning it has economically balanced against the US by ensuring that its economy is extremely robust even independent of US based resources or investment, while militarily bandwagoning with it, relying almost entirely on the US military for defense of its waters and force projection. Japan has had a more assertive approach to China, one that rightly cannot be called hedging, but still seems to fall short of traditional balancing (Koga, 2018).

This is because Japan has certainly aided in balancing against China, mostly by providing the US military with ample army, air, and naval bases in the region. However, while Japan has not bandwagoned with China economically, neither has it really balanced against it. Rather, Japan has had periods of economic cooperation, or outright investment, with China interspersed with periods of rapidly declining relations accompanied by economic withdrawal (Mochizuki, 2007). This Japanese strategy vis a vis China appears to be shifting, however.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has recently signaled a shift away from Japanese economic entanglements with China (Nakazawa, 2020). Japan is attempting to change its supply chains such that it will no longer be overly reliant on China. According to Katsuji Nakazawa at Nikkei Asia, it has put \$2.2 billion towards a policy assisting Japanese companies in either moving their production to Japan or trying to spread their production base to other parts of Asia.

In addition, the Japanese appear to be becoming more willing to invest in the JSDF with Prime Minister Abe steadily increasing Japan's military spending as well as allowing it to cooperate fully with foreign militaries to protect Japanese interests (Smith, 2021). This will go a long way towards allowing Japan to help contain China without outright conflict. By providing an overwhelming united front, Japan helps ensure that China cannot successfully fight all of its great power rivals in East Asia plus the US, thus not fulfilling one of the key requirements for a hegemonic contender. However, the Japanese military still relies heavily on the US which presents its own challenge.

The biggest challenge the US faces with regards to its alliance with Japan is that Japan is stuck in something of a paradox: if it relies on our military, it may win out with minimal cost to itself should the US successfully come to its aid and honor our alliance. However, if America does not, it will be thoroughly unable to put up a fight against China on its own. However, should it build up its military, then it will at least somewhat hamper its economy, perhaps unnecessarily should the US indeed support it militarily (Koga, 2018).

The best way the US can help manage this dilemma is by visibly rededicating itself to the alliance with Japan and by taking steps to increase the cooperation between the US military and the JSDF. This will not only enhance actual operational capability and cohesion, but it will also show the Japanese state that America will honor its alliance. However, such rededication must be contingent on continued building of the JSDF. The US must make it clear that it wants to help Japan defend itself and the balance of power but that it will not and cannot do it alone.

Japan has a huge amount of latent power, and its economic abilities could allow it to build a robust, effective military. Moreover, the US can lend its vast experience and organizational talent to the JSDF using joint exercises. This could make Japan a force to be reckoned with in the region, decreasing the likelihood that China will be willing or able to push for hegemony.

The United States, being first and foremost an offshore balancer, requires a strong regional ally to contest and contain China in its quest for hegemony. Japan, with its strong economic base, long ties to the US, and vested strategic interest in seeing China contained, is a natural partner for America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, this alliance will require some amount of care and management if it is to be effective. This means that the US must ensure that it is visibly committed to Japanese security and has sufficient forces ready to respond to an incident. It also requires that Japan increase its military spending and support the American effort to contain China. Doing so would decrease the likelihood of both Chinese hegemony and open warfare.

### **Protecting Taiwanese De-Facto Independence**

As discussed previously, there are several ways China could attempt to eliminate the question of Taiwanese autonomy and gain firm control over the island. As we will see below, diplomatic attempts at finding unification have failed and do not seem likely to succeed in the near future. With this in mind, China can attempt either coercive measures in order to try to encourage Taiwan to accept unification, or it can mount an outright invasion of Taiwan in order to force the issue with military might.



Coercive efforts to encourage Taiwanese unification with mainland China have not been working thus far. In 2016 Taiwan elected a left-leaning president to its highest office. Since then, citing a failure of the Taiwanese president to commit to a One China policy, which is the policy that Taiwan is a part of China, the government on the mainland has attempted to push Taiwan out of many international systems and reduce its foreign trade and tacit alliances (Hernandez, 2016). It has also begun forcing Taiwanese businesses to use rhetoric more in line with the official CCP stance on Taiwan (Blackwill & Zelikow, 2021).

Despite this, the president of Taiwan has refused to accept the One Country, Two Systems framework for unification, under which Taiwan would keep much of its economic structures, but become a special administrative region similar to Hong Kong, with China in control of who can lead Taiwan. Additionally, the people of Taiwan appear to be staunchly against unification under mainland Chinese terms, with over 60% opposing it (Hickey, 2020). Since coercive measures appear, at least so far, to be ineffective in forcing unification, this paper will focus primarily on preventing China from using military power to cause Taiwan to accept unification under mainland Chinese terms. This focus is made more prudent by the second goal of this paper, which is to help avoid open conflict between the US and China.

There are several ways China could attempt to use military force to unify Taiwan with the mainland. While the details of any US and allied plan would change with the situation, the overall strategy should any use of military force to coerce Taiwan occur would likely be similar (Blackwill & Zelikow, 2021). That strategy would likely look similar to what occurred in Berlin during the Cold War.

According to a special report from the Council on Foreign Relations written by Robert D. Blackwill and Philip Zelikow about the subject in 2021, a US response, in close partnership with our allies in the region, principally Japan, would entail sending support material such as area denial weaponry to Taiwan with ships clearly marked as US and Japanese. This would provoke one of two likely responses from the Chinese forces in the seas surrounding Taiwan: either they would allow the ships to pass in order to avoid escalation, or they would end up firing on the ships in order to avoid their supporting Taiwan.

Should this occur, Blackwill and Zelikow argue, the US and its allies would almost certainly enter into a war with China. They argue that all efforts should be made to keep the war very limited in scope and prevent escalation that would be disastrous for all involved parties. The backlash against China in the international community would be intense and would lead to severe economic pain in short order.

It should be made extremely clear that the goal of this plan is to not have to utilize it. Instead, such a plan should be devised loudly so that both China and regional allies alike are keenly aware of what it would entail. This is critical to the strategy behind such planning. By making clear the ramifications of Chinese aggression toward Taiwan, the US and its allies can help prevent China from taking such actions. It would show that the cost is simply not worth the benefit for the state. This would both help keep the status quo on Taiwan while also reducing the likelihood that the issue becomes a flashpoint that leads to more generalized conflict.

### **Mitigating Risks from the Belt and Road Initiative**

As discussed previously, China is engaging in predatory practices in its investment strategies with other nations, including predatory lending with the Belt and Road Initiative, in order to gain leverage over developing nations. By doing so, China is able to gain access to more favorable trade deals, to new ports, and to more maritime power in the East Asian region, as well as further afield. It is also able to suppress criticism of China even within the local polity of nations in debt to it, as has been shown by Greece when it prevented the European Union (EU) from condemning China's actions on human rights, likely due at least in part to the deep economic ties Greece has to China (Lee, 2018).

There are ways for the United States to work with allies and developing nations around the world to mitigate the risks associated with increasing Chinese economic power and the BRI. One way the US could help minimize the fallout from the BRI and the high debt it often entails for developing nations would be to use international economic controls to extend the amount of time that countries have to pay back their debts (Lipsky & Mark, 2020). Additionally, the US can lead a push for China to be more transparent with its lending practices, bringing it more in-line with the other major creditors in the international community. This would help lending be fairer, and help untenable debts be restructured in such a way that allows for easier payment and therefore less Chinese leverage over debtor nations.

The United States can also undercut the ability of China to further spread the BRI by increasing the competitiveness of US investment abroad (Lew et al., 2021). This can be accomplished by both increasing the ability and incentives for US firms and companies to invest abroad, as well as talking up the relative benefits of working with US companies instead of the

Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, helping developing nations gain the specialized knowledge they need to determine the worth of potential infrastructure ventures can help reduce the likelihood that a state takes on a bad investment and is saddled with unrepayable debt (Lew et al., 2021).

Finally, the US should work to strengthen existing international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to provide a transparent, safe alternative to BRI investments for countries across the world. Ensuring that institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank are able to offer transparent, low-risk, competitive loans capitalizes on the strengths of the US-led international economic system and helps ensure that more countries do not tacitly increase the power of the Chinese state by buying into the BRI (Lew et al, 2021). Undercutting the predatory aspects of the BRI and increasing the competitiveness of other systems of international infrastructure investment increases the resiliency and economic strength of developing nations while ensuring that China does not gain further power in the international community at the expense of both the US and its allies, and BRI recipient nations.

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