

US Asia-Pacific Hegemony vs. A Rising China

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The complexity and history behind the current tensions in Asia Pacific are belied by simplistic narratives underpinned by superficial nationalism. China's portrayal across the Western media as a regional "bully" versus its victims across Southeast Asia is dividing the general public down two sides of a predictable line.

On one side are those who welcome the rise of China as a counterbalance for longstanding Western hegemony across Asia Pacific, on the other are those that fear China will simply replace a "benevolent" Western hegemony with its own brand of regional domination.

Somewhere in the middle lies the truth, but to arrive there, one must understand the true nature of the unfolding, and very unnecessary tensions in the South China Sea.

Enduring Imperialism

The Pacific, and in particular much of China and Southeast Asia, was under the control of colonial European powers with Britain controlling Malaysia, Myanmar (then called Burma), and parts of China, and France controlling Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos.

Through British "gunboat diplomacy," the empire wrestled concessions resembling what would today pass as a highly unpopular "free trade agreement" from Thailand (then called Siam), as well as from China, including the seizure of Hong Kong. There is literally a street in Hong Kong still named "Possession Street" marking the site where the British first surveyed their newly seized lands, beginning a century and a half of occupation.

Hong Kong was seized during the Opium Wars, so called because they were fought amid attempts by China to shut down the highly destructive opium trade the British were carrying out in their territory.

The World Wars saw a significant reduction of Western power and influence across Asia Pacific. While the United States would retain hegemony over Japan and the Philippines, many other nations first ejected their colonial occupiers, then established independent nations.

Modern Western Hegemony

The Vietnam War fought between the 1950's and 1970's was not only an attempt to maintain Western hegemony over Indochina, but admittedly an attempt to ultimately encircle and contain China. Within the so-called "Pentagon Papers" released in 1969, it was revealed that the conflict was one part of a greater strategy aimed at containing and

controlling China.

[Three important quotes](#) from these papers reveal this strategy. It states first that:

...the February decision to bomb North Vietnam and the July approval of Phase I deployments make sense only if they are in support of a long-run United States policy to contain China.

It also claims:

China—like Germany in 1917, like Germany in the West and Japan in the East in the late 30's, and like the USSR in 1947—looms as a major power threatening to undercut our importance and effectiveness in the world and, more remotely but more menacingly, to organize all of Asia against us.

Finally, it outlines the immense regional theater the US was engaged in against China at the time by stating:

...there are three fronts to a long-run effort to contain China (realizing that the USSR “contains” China on the north and northwest): (a) the Japan-Korea front; (b) the India-Pakistan front; and (c) the Southeast Asia front.

The Pentagon Papers in fact provide for us today the context with which to properly view current tensions in Asia Pacific.

The US still to this day maintains its “Japan-Korea front” against China, with US troops literally stationed in both nations.

Across Southeast Asia, the United States through covert subversion has attempted to string together a supranational bloc constructed by obedient client regimes. These efforts can be best seen with US support through an extensive network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, and the Shinawatra dynasty in Thailand. The Philippines have remained subservient to the will of Wall Street and Washington more or less for over a century, while Vietnam has been witnessing a steady increase [in US-backed destabilization](#).

In Pakistan, political subversion and armed violence has been used in key strategic locations to disrupt Chinese investments including at Gwadar Port [and throughout the Pakistani province of Baluchistan](#).

And within China itself, the United States has resorted to political subversion in Tibet [and Hong Kong](#), while backing [armed terrorism and separatism in China's Xinjiang region](#).

While the US, [through its “pivot toward Asia,”](#) claims American exceptionalism is necessary to maintain peace and stability thousands of miles from its own borders for the people of Asia, it is clear that much of the chaos unfolding across Asia is the work of the United States itself. It is the proverbial “windshield repair shop” breaking car windows at night, then making a fortune fixing them by day.

China Strikes Back

China's journey toward becoming a regional power broker has been different than that of the Anglo-Americans. It has not invaded its neighbors nor erected a massive, region-wide network of subversive NGOs to topple governments under the guise of "popular revolutions." Instead, it has gained power and influence through economic and industrial power.

It trades and deals throughout the region, as well as invests and builds infrastructure. It is also building up its ability to eventually oust the West altogether from the region. Corporate think-tank RAND recently published a piece titled, "[China's Airfield Construction at Fiery Cross Reef in Context: Catch-Up or Coercion?](#)" In it, it's argued that China's construction and expansion of islands throughout the South China Sea is tantamount to bullying.

In reality, China is constructing defensive capabilities that will render Western fleets moot. An island cannot be sunk or interdicted by US ships. Once constructed, manned, and operational, it is a permanent strategic fixture that is for all intents and purposes incontestable save for a full-scale invasion amid total war.

Further, the bases give Chinese ships an operational edge over American vessels, providing logistical support in the South China Sea where the US has none. It is displacing the US both operationally and strategically, and if Beijing plays its cards right, displacing it diplomatically as well.

Should China steer away from attempts to snare it in a regional confrontation, and use its new capabilities to maintain safety, peace, and stability in every real sense as the US claims to, the entire purpose of Western meddling in Asia Pacific will be undermined and eventually collapse. The West will be resigned to playing a role proportional to its proximity to the region – or in other words – a negligible role.

Southeast Asia's Real Challenge

China's rising power is not entirely benign. Even for proponents of a rising China, it must be realized that power always has the potential to be abused, and most likely will be if a regional military and economic balance is not struck.

The real challenge facing Southeast Asia is how to strike that balance without sacrificing its sovereignty to foreign interests like the United States. The maintenance of formidable armies and navies throughout Southeast Asia, along with the preservation of national identities will prevent significant conflicts before they start. National economies throughout Asia that are not overly dependent on imports or exports either to China or the West can better defend their own socioeconomic and regional interests.

Above all, there needs to be a reluctance to allow the United States to pit the nations of Southeast Asia either against themselves or against China in yet another elementary example of imperial divide and conquer. And while this challenge is that of the nations of Southeast Asia, who dangerously gravitate toward a EU-style system (ASEAN) apparently indifferent to the monumental failure the EU itself has become, Beijing itself must recognize and defuse the tensions the United States is fanning the flames of.

China's patient, systematic displacement of the United States from the region will inevitably pay off. Those in the region who believe depending on the United States is a viable strategy in keeping China in check are setting themselves and the region up for failure.

Those that hold the best interests of each nation in Asia at heart are those nations themselves and they alone. Neither through supranational interdependent blocs, nor through foreign interests transforming regions into defacto protectorates, can Asia search for its future. Despite the rhetoric underpinning America's "pivot toward Asia," only through a multipolar world where nations pursue their own national sovereignty and respect those of others – maintained through military and socioeconomic balance – can true peace and stability be found and maintained.

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