

China as a Provider of Regional Stability in the Asia-Pacific:

Balancing Security and Development

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Cover Photo: The Chinese flag flies in front of the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai (Picryl).

Executive Summary

Since the 1980s, the Asia-Pacific region has achieved rapid regional economic development while maintaining peace and stability. China's view on the stability of the Asia-Pacific region is informed by three assumptions: China's development needs regional stability and benefits from it; China is a contributor to regional stability; regional stability faces multiple challenges. Based on an assessment of official discourse, this report contends that the Chinese government's view is that "regional stability" is maintained as long as there are no large-scale military conflicts in the region, the sovereign independence and territorial integrity of the regional countries are respected, the right of all countries to choose their own political systems and paths of development is respected, and the international order centered on the United Nations is respected.

In the Chinese view, there are currently multiple challenges to several of these conditions of regional stability: the US strategy of great power competition to contain China's development; a negative and mutually reinforcing assessment of the security environment by regional powers; lingering non-traditional security challenges. To understand how China seeks to address these regional challenges to stability, this report explores China's policies towards the Asia-Pacific from four different dimensions: its response to regional hotspot issues; views on the construction of regional order; attitude towards the construction of regional security mechanisms; and policy of providing public security goods for the region.

Chinese academics are observing a number of concerning changes that are restructuring the regional order, some more successful than others. First, countries are reinforcing their military power in an attempt to enhance their self-protection capabilities, and the beginnings of an arms race in the region are already evident. Second, the United States is pursuing a policy of "decoupling and breaking the supply chain" with China, and US regional allies and partners are also seeking to "de-sinicise" their economies on the grounds of "economic security" to build an economic order in the Asia-Pacific that excludes China from important issues in the region. Third, the Biden administration's promotion of the narrative framework of "democracy vs autocracy" has been rejected by both China, regional states, and even US experts. Finally, Chinese academic wish to create an inclusive ASEAN+ structure together with the United States, to prevent the emergence of parallel regional systems.

China's approach to regional security mechanisms is now in its third stage. The first stage was the phase of institutional participation from the early end of the Cold War to 2001, and the second stage was the initial creation of a functional regional system from 2001 to 2012, where China promoted the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue, the Beijing Xiangshan Forum, and the China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong Joint Patrol and Law Enforcement Mechanism. In the current third stage (2013 and onwards) the Chinese Government has become more active

in promoting the construction of a holistic, comprehensive and complex security mechanism for the Asia-Pacific region and hopes to play a greater role in security governance in the Asia-Pacific region.

To support regional stability, China is striving to enhance its capacity to provide public goods for regional non-traditional security. To this end, it has enhanced marine meteorological storm and weather forecasting, assumed a greater burden in regional organisations working on tsunami monitoring, and enhanced institutionalised cooperation with regional countries through initiatives like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Recommendations

China is a provider of stability and development in the Asia-Pacific region. This report makes four recommendations for how China can improve this role:

- **Do not participate in securitisation:** China should ensure the continued development of its own economy in the face of anti-globalisation and rising geopolitical risks, and to contribute to the sustained economic development of the region. China should pay special attention to balancing the relationship between development and security, ensuring its own sustainable economic development and contributing to the economic development of the region.
- **Improve strategic communication:** China should present its own view of regional order and its vision of regional development more clearly: it needs to enhance the effectiveness of its strategic communication and policy dialogues with regional countries, and it needs its “Chinese-style” strategies, concepts and policies clear in a way that is acceptable to regional countries and in a language that they can understand. At the same time, China should be more sensitive to and respectful of the strategic anxieties and interests of regional countries and respond more actively to their concerns, such as concerns that economic influence might be translated into political or diplomatic leverage. If regional countries are suspicious of Chinese motives, it will undermine China’s own development, which is a key to regional stability.
- **Support ASEAN and inclusive multilateral cooperation mechanisms:** China should continue to strongly support the ASEAN-centered regional security architecture, support dialogue and cooperation, and oppose camp-like confrontation and black-and-white thinking in dealing with security issues. Doing so will not only prevent China and the United States from moving towards two parallel systems of regional governance, but also ensure that the future of China and the United States can build a more inclusive regional order.
- **Stabilise China-US relations and delimit “competitive aspects”:** China should stabilise China-US relations and strive to prevent the relationship from turning into a “new cold war”. China does not agree that the United States defines

the relationship between the two countries in terms of “strategic competition between major powers”, nor does it accept the US policy of “competition, cooperation and confrontation.” However, China has emphasised that the parties should “responsibly manage competitive aspects of the relationship.” What China should make clear is what exactly are the “competitive aspects” of the US-China bilateral relationship. Is it geostrategic influence? Or the model of national governance? Or just critical technologies? If it is not clear to Chinese decisionmakers, then it also not clear to the United States or regional decisionmakers, and China may fall into the trap of competing for global hegemony even if that is not its current intention.

In managing “competitive aspects” of the China-US bilateral relations, China should resolutely prevent a geopolitical zero-sum game with the United States and take the lead on effective strategic, diplomatic and military communication between the two sides to prevent the outbreak of a military conflict that neither side wants.

China as a Provider of Regional Stability in the Asia-Pacific: Balancing Security and Development

Shao Yuqun

Introduction

Since the 1980s, the Asia-Pacific region has achieved rapid regional economic development while maintaining peace and stability. Most would agree that “stability” can be impacted by a rise in either traditional or non-traditional security risks, yet stability itself remains a vague concept. Countries in the Asia-Pacific may have different perceptions of the degree of “stability,” depending on their size and interests. The Chinese government’s view of regional stability is evident in its judgment on risks that the region is facing, as stated in the 2023 Outlook on China’s Foreign Policy:

... global governance is in dysfunction; Cold War mentality is resurfacing; unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonism run rampant; multiple risks in such fields as energy, food, finance, industrial and supply chains and climate change are having greater impact on Asia. Asia also faces challenges such as uneven economic growth, and pronounced security and governance issues. Some countries have intensified efforts to build regional military alliances; the Korean Peninsula issue remains complicated and intractable...¹

Chinese academics agree that regional stability is being challenged across multiple domains, but the assessment of the extent of the challenge varies. Zhao Minghao argues that “in recent years, factors such as great power rivalry, geopolitical conflicts, anti-globalisation and Covid-19 pandemic have posed many challenges to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.”² Ling Shengli emphasises that “the risks to the economic development of the Asia-Pacific region have increased, and the security situation in the region is becoming increasingly critical.”³ Scholars Yao Yitong and Chen Yue find that “the overall situation in the Asia-Pacific region is relatively stable, but camp rivalries and

1 “Outlook on China’s Foreign Policy on Its Neighborhood in the New Era,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, October 24, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367504.html

2 Zhao Minghao, “The Compound Security Dilemma in the Asia-Pacific Region and China’s Response,” *Contemporary World and Socialism*, No. 4, 2023, 32.

3 Ling Shengli, “Construction of Security Mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific Region and China’s Solutions” [亚太地区安全机制构建与中国方案], *People’s Tribune*, August 2023, <http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2023/0906/682182.shtml>

great power competition persist.”⁴ Chinese scholars tend to agree that camp confrontation has emerged in the region, but they disagree on whether the situation remains stable, or whether it has reached a critical stage.

This report argues that as a major Asia-Pacific and global power, China’s internal and external policies have had and will continue to have a significant impact on regional stability. Recognising the current challenges to stability in the Asia-Pacific region, China should continue to make maintaining stability in the Asia-Pacific region an enduring and necessary commitment for the sake of its own national interest.

China’s view of stability in the Asia-Pacific region

China’s view of the stability of the Asia-Pacific region is informed by three lessons learned over the past decades: that China’s development needs regional stability and benefits from it; that China is a contributor to regional stability; and that regional stability faces multiple challenges. The white paper “China and the World in the New Era,” published by The State Council Information Office in 2019, argues that China has benefited from a peaceful and stable external environment, and that it needs to maintain such an environment in the future.⁵ The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) makes it clear that “from this day forward, the central task of the CPC will be to lead the Chinese people of all ethnic groups in a concerted effort to realise the Second Centenary Goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects and to advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernization.”⁶ The Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPC on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization, adopted at the 3rd plenary session of the 20th Central Committee of the CPC on 18 July 2024, emphasises that in diplomatic work, “we will resolutely safeguard China’s sovereignty, security, and development interests and foster a favorable external environment for further deepening reform comprehensively to advance Chinese modernization.”⁷ As a country in the Asia-Pacific region, the term “favorable external environment” refers, of course, first and foremost to the stability of the Asia-Pacific region.

4 Yao Yitong and Chen Yue, “2023: The Situations in the Asia-Pacific is Characterized with Stability and Change” [2023: 亚太地区局势稳中有变], *China National Defence News – China Military Network*, December 20, 2023, 4, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbxq/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-12-20&paperNumber=04&articleid=921835

5 “China and the World in the New Era,” *Xinhua Net*, September, 27, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/27/c_138427541.htm

6 “Full text of the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” International Department of the Central Committee of CPC, October 2023, <https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/tjzl/cpcjj/20thPartyCongrressReport/>

7 “Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPC on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, July 22, 2024, <https://wsb.sh.gov.cn/ywdt/szyw/20240722/d94ad4d14d7c431799359a72f591e3b1.html>



General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping and Chief Executive of Hong Kong John Lee Ka-chiu in Lima in 2024 (Wikimedia).

In terms of China's own contribution to regional stability, President Xi Jinping stated at a gathering of APEC business leaders in 2013 that "benefiting from the overall economic growth in the region, China has achieved its own development. At the same time, China's development has also contributed to regional economic growth. I believe that such interaction will gain even stronger momentum, thus creating more opportunities for the development of the whole region."⁸ In 2024, he reflected on China's contribution to regional stability at a conference on Chinese foreign policy:

We should promote peaceful settlement of international disputes, and participate constructively in the political settlement of international and regional hotspot issues ... Among the world's major countries, China has the best track record with respect to peace and security. It has been exploring for a distinctly Chinese approach to resolving hotspot issues. It has been playing a constructive role in the Ukraine crisis, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and issues relating to the Korean Peninsula, Iran, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. Every increase of China's strength is an increase of the prospects of world peace."⁹

While the situations in the Korean Peninsula, Afghanistan, and the South China Sea are very different, China's overall approach has been to advocate for managing these situations through multilateral dialogue mechanisms and building mutual

⁸ "Deepen Reform and Opening up and Work Together for a Better Asia Pacific, Address to the APEC CEO Summit: Address by H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China to the APEC CEO Summit, Consulate-General of the People's Republic Of China In Christchurch, October 9, 2013, http://christchurch.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/201310/t20131012_82364.htm

⁹ "Full text: Address by Chinese President Xi Jinping at conference marking 70th anniversary of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," Xinhua, June 28, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240628/71733dd6f26441d4965dbb1a937e21ef/c.html>

trust throughout such dialogues, with a view to seeking a final settlement of the issues.

Based on official discourse, this author contends that the Chinese government's view is that "regional stability" is maintained as long as there are no large-scale military conflicts in the region, the sovereign independence and territorial integrity of the regional countries are respected, the right of all countries to choose their own political systems and paths of development is respected, and the international order centered on the United Nations is respected.

There are currently multiple challenges to several of these conditions of regional stability. The first challenge is that the United States has adopted a great power competition strategy to contain China's development.¹⁰ As China's development contributes to regional stability, seeking to contain it is in itself a destabilising action. The US strategy promotes bloc confrontation in the Asia-Pacific region by strengthening bi- and multilateral military and security cooperation between the United States and its regional allies, which explicitly or implicitly target China and increase the risk of military conflict. The Biden administration's "democracy vs. autocracy" narrative framework has been repeatedly used to reinforce the idea that China is an "axis of autocracies" in the same camp as Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and also infringes on the right of all countries to choose their own political systems and paths of development.¹¹ According to Fu Ying, China's former vice foreign minister, the United States has turned its attention to the Asia-Pacific after ending the war on terror, and is now treating China as its main competitor and attempting to dominate the regional agenda with issues of security and political values. According to Fu, the most prominent factor affecting regional peace and stability is the United States' new focus on the Asia-Pacific (or "Indo-Pacific"), which has negatively impacted the theme of development and cooperation that Asia has adhered to for nearly half a century.¹²

Another challenge is that, as Zhao Minghao has argued, against the backdrop of intensifying competition among major powers and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on global security, more countries in the Asia-Pacific region tend to have a negative perception of their own security environment. Such perceptions will be mutually reinforcing, with multiple security hotspots in the region showing

10 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017," The White House, Washington DC, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; "Summary Of The 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America : Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge", US Department of Defense, 2018, <https://permaent.fdlp.gov/gpo91947/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

11 "Remarks by President Biden Before the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," US Embassy in Ukraine, September 21, 2022, <https://ua.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-77th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly/>; "A Conversation With Secretary Antony J. Blinken," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 18, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-secretary-antony-j-blinken>

12 "Fu Ying Talks China and Asia-Pacific Security at Xiangshan Forum" [傅莹在香山论坛谈中国与亚太安全], *Center for International Security and Strategy*, Tsinghua University, October 30, 2023, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/yw/6570>

an intertwined and superimposed effect, especially as the military build-up of countries in the region exacerbates the risk of an arms race and intensifies the “compound security dilemma” in the Asia-Pacific region.¹³

Yet another challenge is that countries in the region still face many non-traditional security challenges, and most countries lack the capacity to effectively manage non-traditional security issues. As Ling Shengli has argued, these non-traditional security challenges fall into four main categories: increased economic security risks due to the slowdown in the economic development of the countries of the region as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic; inadequate governance capacity and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in many countries in the region, leading to increased societal cohesion risks; the growing prominence of cross-border crime and other related issues; and piracy, terrorism, and violence perpetrated by non-state actors.¹⁴

To understand how China seeks to address these regional challenges to stability, this report explores China’s policies towards the Asia-Pacific from four different dimensions (hotspot issues, regional order construction, regional security mechanisms, and provision of public security goods) and proposes recommendations for how this approach can be improved.

13 Zhao Minghao, “The Compound Security Dilemma in the Asia-Pacific Region and China’s Response” [亚太安全的复合安全困境与中国的应对], *Contemporary World and Socialism*, No. 4, 2023, 36, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/af/75/c6852a634741/page.htm>

14 Ling Shengli, “Construction of Security Mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific Region and China’s Solutions.”

China's Regional Policies

China's regional policy can be observed in the following four dimensions: its response to regional hotspot issues; views on the construction of regional order; attitude towards the construction of regional security mechanisms; and policy of providing public security goods for the region.

Chinese responses to hotspot issues

Effective responses to regional hotspot issues form an important element of China's regional policy. In the South China Sea, for example, China believes that the tension will be prolonged, as its nature has gone far beyond a dispute over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, to a collision of two historic forces: the unchallenged naval and air superiority that the United States has enjoyed in the Western Pacific since the end of the Second World War and China's strategic ambition to become a "maritime power."¹⁵ Chinese expert Hu Bo argues that while tensions in the South China Sea do exist, they have been exaggerated, creating "South China Sea anxiety" among foreign media and think tanks, and that there is a clear difference between the real situation in the South China Sea and Western narratives of impending military conflict and escalation.¹⁶ The Chinese Government has put forward a "dual-track approach" to resolving the South China Sea issue, namely, that direct parties should resolve specific disputes through bilateral negotiation, and that "China and ASEAN countries should work together to maintain regional stability."¹⁷ However, as Hu Bo argues, during the negotiation process of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), the outcome of the South China Sea Arbitration in 2016¹⁸ and the increased involvement of countries outside of the region – especially the United States – had given countries around the South China Sea unrealistic expectations of what China would agree to.¹⁹ For example, ASEAN states have asked for the COC to be legally binding, while China argues that it should be a non-binding code, to allow

15 "Interview with Zhu Feng: The Essence of the South China Sea Issue" [专访朱锋: 南海问题的本质是什么], *Yicai*, May 23, 2016, <https://m.yicai.com/news/5017457.html>.

16 Hu Bo, Lei Xiaolu, Yan Yan, "Review of the 20th anniversary of the signing of the DOC and outlook for the COC consultation" [DOC签署20周年回顾暨COC磋商展], SCSPI, August 17, 2022, <http://www.scspi.org/zh/dtfx/1660724615>

17 "Wang Yi: The key to peace and stability in the South China Sea should be in the hands of the regional countries themselves" [王毅: 南海和平稳定的钥匙应掌握在地区国家自己手中], Xinhua Net, Mar 8, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019lh/2019-03/08/c_1124209177.htm

18 The Tribunal ruled that "there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line.'" China has rejected the ruling on the grounds that the Tribunal lacks jurisdiction: See "The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)", (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 22 November 2016), <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1801>

19 Hu Bo, Lei Xiaolu, Yan Yan, "Review of the 20th anniversary of the signing of the DOC and outlook for the COC consultation."

for greater flexibility in managing differences. China has also sought to include a provision which disallows joint military exercises in the South China Sea between any parties to the COC and any external parties.

Meanwhile, the Philippines has recently carried out provocations around both Huangyan Island and Ren'ai Reef. According to a briefing by the spokesperson of the China Coast Guard, on 23 March 2024, the Philippine government sent two coast guard vessels and one replenishment ship to trespass into the waters adjacent to Ren'ai Reef, which China claims. According to Yang Xiao, deputy director of Institute of Maritime Strategies at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations, the Philippines had stated that the warship needed to be resupplied once a month. It had only been eighteen days since the March 5 resupply, raising the question: why the rush to resupply again? The main reason, according to Yang, is that the Philippines was eager to complete the permanent construction of a “military outpost” here in 2024. The Philippine Congress had approved funding and the government had set up the project, so the frequency of delivery of building materials had been increased.²⁰



Capt. James T. Jones, commanding officer of the guided-missile cruiser USS Shiloh greets Rear Adm. Zhang Wendan, deputy chief of staff South Sea Fleet of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy during a ceremony welcoming the ship for a port visit in China, 30 May 2013 (U.S. Navy, Kristopher Horton).

²⁰ “Unreasonable provocations by the Philippines, extra-regional forces stirring up the South China Sea” [蓝厅观察 | 警惕! 菲律宾无理挑衅 域外势力搅局南海], *CCTV News*, March 26, 2024, https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item_id=12359733984368326536

China considers this a provocative act of non-compliance with its commitments, because under the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) reached in 2002, all parties undertook not to change the status quo, not to visit uninhabited islands and reefs and, in particular, not to promote militarisation. China believes that the Philippine action is a violation of this commitment, and that the actions shows that the Philippines is trying to use the support of the US-Philippine military alliance to distract China from the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, while magnifying the effect of public opinion and garnering support from the international community.

Most Western media and think tanks believe that China is also violating the DOC by using “coercive” means to deal with the Philippines. This understanding is too narrow. China’s response has emphasised diplomacy: first, it has maintained bilateral communication with the Philippines, seeking to manage differences through negotiation and consultation. In bilateral negotiations, China and the Philippines have agreed to establish three new channels of communication, the first of which will be an emergency hotline in the offices of the two heads of state, which will allow for direct communication between the leaders of the two countries on the basis of their designated representatives. The second channel is for use by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the two countries or their designated representatives. The third channel involves the coast guards, through which the Chinese and Philippine coast guards will first reach an appropriate memorandum of understanding.²¹ Second, China has strengthened its capability of maintaining stability (维稳 *wei wen*) and safeguarding its rights (维权 *wei quan*) in the South China Sea through increased coast guard presence while balancing the relationship between these two. In doing so, China ensures the effectiveness of its military deterrence against the United States and the Philippines while preventing tensions from evolving into a military crisis. Third, China has made use of the mechanism of the Joint Working Group Meeting between China and ASEAN countries on the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and continue to promote the COC consultations, which has received the support of ASEAN.²²

21 Fan Xiaoqi, “Philippines, China set up new communication mechanism to deal with maritime disputes” [菲中建立新沟通机制应对海域争端] *Lianhe Zaobao*, July 17, 2024, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/news/sea/story20240717-4288448>

22 “Joint Communique of the 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, Vientiane, July 25, 2024,” *ASEAN.org*, July 27, 2024, 33, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Joint-Communique-of-the-57th-AMM.pdf>

China's views on the construction of the regional order

Chinese academics generally believe that additional changes are taking place in the Asia-Pacific regional order.²³ Currently, the Asia-Pacific is in a critical period of regional order restructuring, and “major countries and forces in the region are striving for the restructuring of the regional order in a direction conducive to their own interests.”²⁴

Overall, the following aspects of the current order restructuring in the Asia-Pacific region deserve attention. First, because China pursues a policy of non-alignment and does not seek to build or lead military alliances in the region,²⁵ there will be no regional confrontation between military alliances. However, because of the rise in security risks in the region, countries are reinforcing their military power in an attempt to enhance their self-protection capabilities, and the beginnings of an arms race in the region are already evident.²⁶

Moreover, the United States is pursuing a policy of “decoupling and breaking the supply chain” with China, and US regional allies and partners are also seeking to “de-sinicise” their economies on the grounds of “economic security.” In doing so, they seek to build an economic order in the Asia-Pacific that excludes China from important issues in the region. However, China is actively promoting the Belt and Road Initiative with regional countries and joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which will help China and regional developing economies realise economic recovery and industrial development after the pandemic. Although the dependence of China and the regional developing economies on the developed economies will decline, it is unlikely that the Asia-Pacific region will see a regional economic order that completely excludes China.

23 Zhang Jie and Cheng Guoshan, “The Changing Direction of the Asia-Pacific Regional Order and China's Choice - An Overview of the 2024 Annual Meeting of the Asia-Pacific Society of China” [亚太地区秩序变化方向与中国的选择——中国亚洲太平洋学会2024年年会综述], *Chinese Social Sciences Net*, July 24, 2024, https://www.cssn.cn/skgz/bwyc/202407/t20240724_5766405.shtml

24 Zhang Jie, “The Security Situation in the Asia-Pacific in the Context of the U.S. Strategic Game with China: Influencing Factors, Main Characteristics and Development Trends” [美国对华战略博弈背景下的亚太安全形势：影响因素、主要特征与发展趋势], *Beifang Luncong*, No. 4, 2022, <http://niis.cssn.cn/xscgnew/xslwnew/202207/P020220701517462222907.pdf>

25 China and North Korea signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between China and the North Korea in July 1961, which was a standard military alliance treaty that explicitly guaranteed that one of the contracting parties shall render full military and other assistance to the other party in case of a state of war. Entering the period of the second generation of leadership under Deng Xiaoping, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between China and North Korea was still in force, but the relationship between the two countries could no longer be considered an alliance. One of the reasons for this is that, based on historical experience and changes in the international environment at that time, China explicitly abandoned the principle of alliance diplomacy and began to pursue non-aligned diplomacy. The second reason was that the relationship between China and South Korea began to improve. This is why China-North Korea relations are better characterised as a “special relationship”, but not an “alliance”. See: Wang Junsheng, “The Logic of China-North Korea “Special Relationship”: A Product of Complex Strategic Balance” [中朝“特殊关系”的逻辑：复杂战略平衡的产物], *Northeast Asia Forum*, No.1, 2016, 54, <http://niis.cass.cn/xscg/xslw/gjgx/201611/U020161209526866299696.pdf>

26 Luo Liang, “The Subtle Opening of Pandora's Box” [亚太地区军备竞赛的“潘多拉盒子”悄然开启], *ChinaUS Focus*, July 12, 2023, <https://cn.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/20230712/42892.html>

The Biden administration vigorously promoted the narrative framework of “democracy vs autocracy,” but it is unlikely that the Asia-Pacific will see a return to the socialist-capitalist confrontation of the Cold War. The Chinese government does not seek to export its ideology, and the differences between China and the United States in the area of values are mainly reflected in the differences between the two countries’ models of development and governance. Additionally, even American scholars have questioned the wisdom of this “binary” distinction.²⁷ Furthermore, the Trump administration is unlikely to further pursue this framing, and regional countries have made it clear that they have little interest in ideological confrontation.²⁸

Chinese academics have put forward the idea of building a China-ASEAN-US inclusive regional order, in which China and the United States can treat ASEAN as a neutral third party. ASEAN can play the role of “key interlocutor” between China and the United States through the ASEAN+ structure, and prevent the emergence of two parallel systems between China and the United States. The two major powers can take the lead in launching an initiative to shift from supporting ASEAN’s centrality to supporting ASEAN as a regional center, giving full play to ASEAN’s role in coordinating regional cooperation, especially in China-US relations.²⁹

China’s regional security mechanisms

Since the end of the Cold War, China’s participation in Asia-Pacific security governance can be roughly divided into three stages: the first stage was the phase of institutional participation from the early end of the Cold War to 2001, during which China’s major contribution to security governance in the Asia-Pacific region was to put forward a new security concept of “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation.”³⁰

The second stage was the initial creation of a functional regional system from 2001 to 2012. China promoted the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue, the Beijing Xiangshan

27 Robert Manning and Mathew Burrows, “The Problem With Biden’s Democracy Agenda” *War on the Rocks*, July 27, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/the-problem-with-bidens-democracy-agenda/>

28 See: Elina Noor and Mark S. Cogan, “How Should the US Engage in Southeast Asia?”, *Divided We Fall* (blog), 10 February 2022, <https://dividedwefall.org/us-engagement-in-southeast-asia/>

29 According to Zhai Kun, “ASEAN centrality” refers to ASEAN’s “driver” position in East Asian regional cooperation, while “ASEAN as a regional center” means that Southeast Asia, represented by the ASEAN Community, has become center of global influence. China and the United States should try to build a community with ASEAN. See: Zhai Kun, “Dilemma is Mission: Building a China-ASEAN-US Inclusive Regional Order?” [“困境即使命”：构建中国—东盟—美国包容性地区秩序?], *Journal of International Economic Cooperation*, No. 3, 2024, http://www.iiss.pku.edu.cn/local/A/81/16/726DDB1C8625E49A0DAE68A5974_F34D4431_107167.pdf

30 See: “Peace Development and Cooperation – Banner for China’s Diplomacy in a New Era”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, August 25, 2005, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11339769.html

Forum, and the China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong Joint Patrol and Law Enforcement Mechanism. During this stage China played a more active role in security governance in the Asia-Pacific region.

The third stage is the active promotion of the construction of a holistic Asia-Pacific security mechanism since 2013. The Chinese government has become more active in promoting the construction of a holistic, comprehensive and complex security mechanism for the Asia-Pacific and hopes to play a greater role in security governance in the region. According to Ling Shengli, such a holistic regional security mechanism entails the participation of all regional major powers – China, the United States, Russia, Japan, India, and ASEAN – and seeks to incorporate major sub-regional security mechanisms, like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The mechanism should be built on the principles of seeking common ground while reserving differences and the resolution of security differences through means of dialogue and consultation. The coordination of these security mechanisms should be conducted through the forums with the highest level of participation by regional countries. The best candidates are the East Asia Summit and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). However, as a result of the intensification of strategic competition between China and the United States, the difficulties facing the construction of security mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific region have increased significantly.³¹

During the three stages, China has consistently viewed the resolution of regional hotspot security issues and the building of regional security mechanisms in an integrated manner. With regard to the Korean nuclear issue and the security mechanism in Northeast Asia, “the formation and establishment of a multilateral security mechanism on the basis of multilateral consultations is the best way to ensure the resolution of the Korean nuclear issue.”³² China’s position has been that a multilateral security mechanism based on multilateral consultations is the best way to resolve the Korean Peninsula issue, and that only through the establishment of a security mechanism that promotes common and cooperative security can the Northeast Asian region emerge from the “security dilemma” it inherited from the Cold War.

With regards to the South China Sea issue and a security mechanism in the South China Sea, China attaches great importance to the role of ASEAN, respects ASEAN’s consideration of the construction of a regional security mechanism, emphasises the consensus between China and ASEAN on mutual agreement, and stresses that differences over the South China Sea issue should not affect the overall development of the region.

31 Ling Shengli, “Construction of Security Mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific Region and China’s Solutions.”

32 Zhu Feng, “The North Korean nuclear issue and the building of multilateral security mechanisms in Northeast Asia,” *China International Strategy Review*, 2008, (00), 265-274.

China's provision of public goods to the Asia-Pacific

China is striving to enhance its capacity to provide public goods for regional non-traditional security. In a white paper on China's Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation Policy released in 2017, the Chinese government stated that "China will shoulder greater responsibilities for regional and global security, and provide more public security services to the Asia-Pacific region and the world at large."³³ When China proposed to provide more public goods for the security of the Asia-Pacific region, the logic behind it was not based on "hegemonic stability theory," which holds that the hegemonic powers will provide the necessary public goods in the construction and maintenance of the international system. Rather, the logic behind it is "symbiotic development" (共生发展 *gong sheng fa zhan*), that is, China and regional countries will realise common development in the process of maintaining regional peace and stability. China's efforts to enhance its capacity to provide public goods for regional security are mainly manifested in meteorological monitoring, disaster preparedness, and combatting drug trafficking.



Lightning strikes the water in the South China Sea, as San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship USS Anchorage navigates between storms, on June 13, 2015. (US Navy, Liam Kennedy)

³³ "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation," The State Council Information Office (SCIO), The People's Republic of China, January 20, 2017, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/whitepapers/2017-01/20/content_40535681.htm

China has enhanced capacity in technological advancement for marine meteorological observation, which is a fundamental global marine public good. While China continues to promote the advancement of buoy technology, it has independently implemented the Global Ocean Stereoscopic Observation Program, constructed a buoy observation network in key areas of the world (e.g., in the ocean to the east of the Philippines) to observe the formation of typhoons and to forecast and warn of possible oceanic hazards, as well as to reduce the hazards of oceanic storm surges.³⁴

China has also taken on more work in international organisations. For example, on 5 November 2019, the South China Sea Regional Tsunami Warning Center (SCSTAC) in Beijing started its formal operation, which is one of the three tsunami warning centers operating within the Pacific Ocean region under the framework of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) constructed by China, and it provides tsunami monitoring and warning services for nine countries around the South China Sea, and the timeliness of tsunami warnings has been significantly shortened to between 6 and 12 minutes, the international standard. On 29 March 2023, the Hong Kong Backup Center of the South China Sea Regional Tsunami Warning Center (SCSRTWC) was officially opened to support the tsunami warning services of the Beijing Center.

Finally, China has enhanced capacity in institutionalised cooperation with regional countries. In 1993, during the 48th session of the United Nations General Assembly, the representatives of China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (formerly the United Nations International Drug Control Programme) signed a memorandum of understanding on counter-narcotics cooperation, deciding to work together to deal with the prominent drug problem in the Golden Triangle region through annual meetings, project cooperation, and other forms of cooperation. In 1995, the First Ministerial Meeting of the Signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding on Anti-Drug Cooperation in the Greater Mekong Subregion was held in Beijing, at which Vietnam and Cambodia were admitted as signatories. It was decided to convene an annual meeting of senior officials, a meeting of liaison officers, and a ministerial meeting every two years. Today, this mechanism has become the most important multilateral anti-drug cooperation mechanism in the region, and China has enhanced its own anti-drug capacity and its capacity for international cooperation in the fight against drugs over the years of its participation in this mechanism.

34 Wang Yinhong and Fang Zhengyang, “Conceptual and Practical Dimensions of China’s Participation in Global Ocean Governance in the New Era” [新时代中国参与全球海洋治理的理念之维和实践向度], *Journal of Shandong Academy of Governance*, No. 1, 2023, 34-31, <https://qikan.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=7108958777>

Policy Recommendations

China is provider of stability and development in the Asia-Pacific region, and this has been and will continue to be China's commitment to regional countries. At a time when the Asia-Pacific order is at a critical stage of restructuring and the United States is pursuing a strategy of great-power competition with China, China should express this commitment more resolutely and manifest it more clearly at the strategic and policy levels.



President Donald J. Trump and President Xi Jinping meet in Hamburg, July 8, 2017 (The White House, Shealah Craighead).

- **Do not participate in securitisation:** China should ensure the continued development of its own economy in the face of anti-globalisation and rising geopolitical risks, and to contribute to the sustained economic development of the region. As the United States and its allies continue to promote desinisation in the name of economic security, China's eye-for-eye retaliation will only make it a participant in this securitisation, which will only harm China's economic development. China should pay special attention to balancing the relationship between development and security, ensuring its own sustainable economic development and contributing to the economic development of the region.

- **Improve strategic communication:** China should present its own view of regional order and its vision of regional development more clearly. Chinese leaders have successively put forward the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. Countries in the region are keen to know what these three initiatives mean for the Asia-Pacific region; the nature of their implementation; and if China will demonstrate respect for the interests of regional countries in these activities. China needs to enhance the effectiveness of its strategic communication and policy dialogues with regional countries, and needs its “Chinese-style” strategies, concepts, and policies clear in a way that is acceptable to regional countries and in a language that they can understand. At the same time, China should be more sensitive to and respectful of the strategic anxieties and interests of regional countries and respond more actively to their concerns, such as concerns that economic influence might be translated into political or diplomatic leverage. If regional countries are suspicious of Chinese motives, it will undermine China’s own development, which is a key to regional stability.
- **Support ASEAN and inclusive multilateral cooperation mechanisms:** China should continue to strongly support the ASEAN-centered regional security architecture, support dialogue and cooperation, and oppose camp-like confrontation and black-and-white thinking in dealing with security issues. China should be better aligned with ASEAN at the strategic and policy levels to prevent China’s relationship with ASEAN from becoming defined by the South China Sea issue. At the same time, China should adhere to the policy of “setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development,” send peaceful signals to regional countries, and strengthen regional cooperation to protect fishery resources and the environment in the South China Sea. China should regard the current challenges in the South China Sea as a necessary path to becoming a real maritime power and maintain sufficient strategic patience. China should more vigorously promote China-Japan-South Korea economic cooperation in Northeast Asia and continuously promote open and inclusive regional cooperation. China could also consider promoting a Track II China-ASEAN-United States dialogue on the future of regional order, with the intention of maximising the role of ASEAN+ in balancing the relationship between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Doing so will not only prevent China and the United States from moving towards two parallel systems of regional governance, but also ensure that the future of China and the United States can build a more inclusive regional order.
- **Stabilise China-US relations and delimit “competitive aspects”:** China should stabilise China-US relations and strive to prevent the relationship from turning into a “new cold war.” President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden met in California in November 2023, and since then the bilateral relations have stabilised but not enough, due to several reasons. China does not agree with the United States definition of the relationship as a “strategic

competition between major powers,” nor does it accept the US policy of “competition, cooperation and confrontation.” However, China has emphasised that the parties should be “responsibly managing competitive aspects of the relationship.”³⁵ What China should make clear is what exactly are the competitive aspects of the US-China bilateral relationship. Is it geostrategic influence? Or the model of national governance? Or just critical technologies? If it is not clear to Chinese decisionmakers, then it also not clear to US or regional decisionmakers, and China may fall into the trap of competing for global hegemony even if that is not its current intention.

In managing “competitive aspects” of the China-US bilateral relations, China should resolutely prevent a geopolitical zero-sum game with the United States, avoid turning differences in the existing governance models of the two countries into a direct clash of values, and avoid demanding the countries of the region to choose sides. In addition, against the backdrop of both China and the United States increasing military deterrence against the other in the Asia-Pacific region, there is a particular need for effective strategic, diplomatic, and military communication between the two sides to prevent the outbreak of a military conflict that neither side wants.

³⁵ “President Xi Jinping Meets with U.S. President Joe Biden,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, November 16, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/xjpfmgjxzmshwtsxapcc/202311/t20231116_11181442.html

About APLN

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.

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