

Whither American Pacific Primacy

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Abstract

The rapid growth of China and its corresponding expansion onto the international stage has prompted many concerns about the ability of the United States to sustain its leadership role in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, American primacy in the Pacific rests on several key foundations that are increasingly being challenged. There are many regional hotbeds that risk confrontation between China and the United States or its allies. However, these challenges are not insurmountable and the path towards addressing them relies on increasing American investment in its regional alliances.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific, US-China Rivalry, American Alliance System, Sea Power, International Order, Maritime Strategy

Introduction

The United States has maintained a strong presence in Asia since its acquisition of the Philippines following the Spanish American War of 1898. However, American primacy in the Asia-Pacific was a product of the Second World War in which it decisively defeated the Japanese Empire and replaced it as the regional hegemon. American leadership in the Asia-Pacific is founded on its own military power, its alliance system, and the post-war liberal international order. However, the United States today faces many regional threats to its system. An increasingly assertive China dissatisfied with the status quo, an unstable nuclear-armed North Korea, and its own declining investment in the region serve to undermine American primacy. In spite of these factors, there has not been a dramatic shift away from the institutions set up by the United States. Likewise, no American allies have renounced their ties to the United States in favour of the rising power of China. As such, while American leadership in the region has withered, the possibility of revival remains distinct.

Foundations of American Primacy

The American Military

Integral to American primacy in Asia has been its strong military presence since the conclusion of the Second World War. Using its alliance system, the United States has been able to maintain a significant forward deployment of military forces across the region.¹ The

¹ James Przystup, "The United States and the Asia-Pacific Region: National Interests and Strategic Imperatives," *Strategic Forum*, no. 239, (2009), 2-3.

American military presence in the Asia-Pacific is organized under the United States Asia-Pacific Command. Host countries of American military deployments in the region include Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.² In total, the United States maintains approximately 368,000 military personnel in the Asia-Pacific.³ This military force represents one of the largest in the region.

The most important component of the American military presence in the Asia-Pacific, owing to the largely maritime geography of the region, is the United States Pacific Fleet. The United States Pacific Fleet is the largest of the United States Navy, continually maintaining a force of roughly 50 to 70 platforms in the region, thereby also making it one of the largest naval forces in Asia.⁴ American naval dominance in the Pacific enabled its intervention in numerous Cold War-era conflicts and remains key to its security guarantees.⁵ However, the United States Navy also serves to protect the freedom of commercial vessels, a particularly salient issue for the region which accounts for roughly 30 percent of global maritime shipping.⁶ In contrast, American ground forces in Asia play a twofold role of reassuring allies of its commitment to their security and as a deterrent to those actors who might threaten its partners.⁷ This is perhaps most notable in the deployment of American forces in South Korea for the last sixty years.⁸ Today, approximately 28,500 Americans maintain the commitment of the United States to defend South Korea and deter North Korea.⁹ Nonetheless, American land forces are present in over half-a-dozen countries across the region.¹⁰

The American Alliance Network

In the wake of the Second World War, the United States developed a system of alliances in the Asia-Pacific as a part of the larger Cold War policy of containment.¹¹ In contrast to American Cold War policy in Europe, the United States was unable or unwilling to create a version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Asia.¹² Rather, it developed a series of bilateral relationships supplemented by several multilateral alliances, such as the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) treaty alliance and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). There is a significant body of literature seeking to explain why the United States opted to pursue a largely bilateral alliance model despite its creation of the European-based multilateral NATO; notable conclusions include the maritime orientation of the Asia-Pacific, a lack of major American allies in the region immediately following the

² “Chapter Three: North America,” *The Military Balance* 120, no. 1 (2020): 58-60.

³ “The Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy: Achieving US National Security Objectives in a Changing Environment,” United States Department of Defense (2015), 22.

⁴ “The United States Seventh Fleet Fact Sheet,” Commander, United States Seventh Fleet.

⁵ Taeyoung Yoon, “The role of US naval power in the Asia-pacific region: From regional protector to regional balancer,” *Global Economic Review* 32, no. 2 (2003): 111.

⁶ United States Department of Defense, “The Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy,” 2-3.

⁷ Kimberly Field and Stephan Pikner, “The Role of US Land Forces in the Asia-Pacific,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 74 (2016): 34.

⁸ Michael R. Schiffer, “US Defense Posture in the Asia-Pacific Region,” *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (2011): 6172.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Chapter Three: North America,” *The Military Balance* 58-60.

¹¹ Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific*, Third (New York: Routledge, 2011), 91.

¹² Victor D. Cha, “Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia,” *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2009): 161.

Second World War, the lack of shared cultural norms and identities between East Asian states, deep distrust of Japan due to its actions during the Second World War, and racial prejudice against Asian peoples.¹³ However, what is more important for the discussion of this paper is simply that a trans-Asian collective security organization spearheaded by the United States has not developed in Asia as it did in Europe and North America.

The “hub and spokes” alliance system that emerged in East Asia was founded on the San Francisco Conference of 1951, during which the United States concluded bilateral security agreements with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Philippines.¹⁴ However, the core of the hub and spokes system is comprised of the 1951 bilateral alliance with Japan, 1953 agreement with South Korea, and 1954 treaty with Taiwan.¹⁵ The bilateral nature of these three alliances, particularly the latter two, was meant to restrain “rogue” leaders from inciting larger conflicts.¹⁶ These “spokes” in the alliance system have served as platforms to amplify American influence in the region.¹⁷ Not only this, but the network of American allies unites several of Asia’s largest economies. While there has been friction amongst American allies, they nonetheless serve as a binding force which enhances regional cohesion, norms, and, by extension, the legitimacy of the American-led order.¹⁸

The Liberal International Order

Founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, the existing international order is an overlapping set of rules and norms asserting liberal values.¹⁹ This international system is centred on free markets, multilateral institutions, democratic values, and, implicitly, the leadership of the United States.²⁰ It is epitomized in the institutions of the Bretton Woods Conference, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the United Nations, and the Group of Seven.²¹ These systems of international norms, rules, and governance bodies have successfully fostered a growing global economy and provided means of peaceful international dispute resolution.²²

¹³ See: Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein. “Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism,” *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (2002); Kai He and Huiyun Feng. ““Why is there no NATO in Asia?” revisited: Prospect theory, balance of threat, and US alliance strategies.” *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 2 (2012).

¹⁴ Vivek Mishra, “US power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region: The decline of ‘alliance mutuality’,” *Strategic Analysis* 40, no. 3 (2016): 159-160.

¹⁵ David W. Mabon, “Elusive Agreements: The Pacific Pact Proposals of 1949–1951,” *Pacific Historical Review* 57, no. 2 (May 1988), 164.

¹⁶ Cha, “Powerplay,” 163.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸ Michael Mastanuduno, “Incomplete Hegemony: The United States and Security Order in Asia,” in *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 151.

¹⁹ Hans Kundnani, *What is the Liberal International Order?*, German Marshall Fund of the United States (2017), 2

²⁰ John G. Ikenberry, “The Liberal International Order and its Discontents,” *Millennium* 38, no. 3 (2010): 512.

²¹ Ikenberry, “The Liberal International Order and its Discontents,” 512; Kundnani, *What is the Liberal International Order?*

²² Ikenberry, “The Liberal International Order and its Discontents,” 512-513.

Challenges for the United States

Expansion of the People’s Liberation Army Navy

As of 2020, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has become the world’s largest navy containing at least 350 combat-capable vessels.²³ Likewise, China’s naval personnel, totalling 250,000, dwarfs its regional peers.²⁴ Many of the PLAN’s ships have been produced at domestic shipyards and its first domestically constructed aircraft carrier was commissioned in 2019 with a second scheduled for completion in 2023.²⁵ However, it is the pace of its naval buildup that is most striking. Since 2005, the PLAN has acquired 117 new ships.²⁶ Nonetheless, the PLAN has stated its target force size as a 550-platform fleet, meaning an additional 200 ships will potentially be constructed in coming years.²⁷ Thus, in strictly quantitative terms, the PLAN demonstrates a significant challenge to the United States Navy.

Maritime Disputes in the South and East China Seas

One of the most hotly contested issues of the Asia-Pacific over the last decade has been the pursuit of maritime claims in East and Southeast Asia. There are several especially notable maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, including the Senkaku-Diaoyu islands contested between Japan and China, the Dokdo-Takeshima islands dispute between Japan and South Korea, and China’s so-called “nine dashed line” in which it asserts control over large swathes of the South China Sea including the Spratly and Paracel islands also variously claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan.²⁸

While the United States makes no territorial claim to islands in the East or South China Seas, the maritime disputes in this region involve several American allies, pose a significant risk to the operations of American military forces in the region, and threatens the liberal international order which it helped established. Chiefly, the most severe risk for the American-led status quo in the Asia-Pacific is that these maritime disputes have the potential to escalate into conflicts which likely would involve American allies and, in turn, the United States.²⁹ Moreover, American allies themselves assert conflicting claims. Questions about sovereignty over the Dokdo-Takeshima islands remain one of the most significant rifts between the two

²³ “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China” (United States Department of Defense, 2020), 44.

²⁴ “Chapter Six: Asia,” *The Military Balance* 120, no. 1 (2020), 261.

²⁵ “Annual Report to Congress,” 44.

²⁶ Ronald O'Rourke, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 28.

²⁷ James E. Fanell, “Asia Rising: China’s Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure” *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 1 (2019), 21.

²⁸ Dolven, Ben, Shirley Kan, and Mark E. Manyin, *Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (2013), i.

²⁹ George D. Sotelo, *United States Military Strategy and the East China Sea and South China Sea Disputes* (US Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth United States, 2018), 24.

closest allies of the United States, Japan and South Korea. With no path towards resolution in sight, the Dokdo-Takeshima dispute continues to undercut high-level cooperation.³⁰

At the same time, China's expansion in the South China Sea threatens the ability of American forces to support its allies in Southeast Asia.³¹ In what has come to be labelled as anti-access/area denial warfare (A2/AD) by foreign observers, Chinese military doctrine in the South China Sea seeks to utilize a combined arms approach to limit the tactical and operational flexibility of naval forces in the region. A2/AD is epitomized in the expanding role and capabilities of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). In the event of conflict, PLARF doctrine asserts its role as threefold: targeted destruction of major capital ships, the imposition of focused naval blockades, and general aerial defense.³² Its land-based ballistic and cruise missile network maintains platforms with a maximum range of 4,000 kilometres, extending well into the second island chain which includes the American military bases in Guam and Palau.³³ Since American capacity to support its regional allies relies so heavily on its naval forces, A2/AD presents a major challenge to supporting partners during potential periods of conflict. Furthermore, in building artificial islands which may be used as air bases or platforms for anti-ship and anti-aircraft systems, China's zone of sea control is extended thereby increasingly constraining naval freedom of manoeuvre.³⁴

Regarding the threat to the international order posed by these maritime disputes, China has exhibited an unwillingness to submit to international law and arbitration under the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) through its rejection of the ruling in the 2013 UNCLOS arbitration case with the Philippines.³⁵ Despite the United States itself not having ratified UNCLOS, it remains one of the leading proponents of the freedom of navigation and China's flagrant rejection of the international maritime legal regime poses a risk to maritime freedoms.³⁶

The Belt and Road Initiative

Much has been made of China's ambitious Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (hereafter the Belt and Road Initiative). Announced in 2015, China's official position on the Belt and Road Initiative is that it seeks to economically develop and integrate Eurasia.³⁷ While many Western observers have characterized the Initiative as a

³⁰ Azlie Ismail, "The Dokdo/Takeshima dispute: responses and approaches," *The International Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2017): 89-90; 96.

³¹ Jihyun Kim, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Implications for Security in Asia and Beyond," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (2015): 131.

³² Andrew S. Erickson, and David D. Yang, "Using Land to Control the Sea? Chinese Analysts Consider the Antiship Ballistic Missile," *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 4 (2009): 61.

³³ "Annual Report to Congress," 56.

³⁴ Shahryar Pasandideh, "Do China's New Islands allow it to militarily dominate the South China Sea?," *Asian Security* 17, no. 1 (2021): 4-5.

³⁵ Isaac B. Kardon, "China Can Say No: Analyzing China's Rejection of the South China Sea Arbitration toward a New Era of International Law with Chinese Characteristics," *University of Pennsylvania. Asian Law Review*. 13 (2018): 3.

³⁶ Kim, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," 131.

³⁷ Seng In Chan and Weiqing Song, "Telling the China Story Well: A Discursive Approach to the Analysis of Chinese Foreign Policy in the 'Belt and Road' Initiative," *Chinese Political Science Review* 5, no. 3 (2020): 422.

dedicated grand strategy to supplant the United States as the dominant power in Asia, the reality is that Belt and Road is a broad category for Chinese infrastructure projects which have seen varying levels of success and partner satisfaction.³⁸

The implications of the Belt and Road Initiative, despite its setbacks, are twofold: that China is promoting alternative multilateral institutions of global governance and that its power projection capabilities will be significantly enhanced, a possibility most acutely apparent in the maritime domain. First and foremost, in establishing parallels to pre-existing international institutions – most importantly the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as the funding arm of the Belt and Road Initiative – China is challenging the value of pre-existing institutions rather than seeking to integrate into them.³⁹ In the case of the AIIB, China has sought to create a financial institution which operates with no borrower institutional reform requirements. This is in stark contrast to the International Monetary Fund who, as the liberal international order's chief financial institution, requires domestic reforms in areas such as government corruption, opening of markets, and human rights. In so doing, China is asserting an alternative path to development in which the liberal and democratic values of the international order are not only marginalized, but it is also actively willing to invest in illiberal autocratic revisionist states such as Iran and Venezuela.

In the maritime realm, the Belt and Road Initiative has the capability to enhance China's naval projection capacity. China has initiated an overseas base acquisition strategy which seeks to add at least 18 PLA and PLAN bases between 2020 and 2030.⁴⁰ These basing efforts are likely to coincide with China's expanding Belt and Road Initiative throughout the Indo-Pacific region.⁴¹ As of 2019, China had invested \$126 billion through the Belt and Road Initiative into transport and storage facilities throughout Asia.⁴² Should these efforts be successful in developing into overseas military logistical bases, the PLAN's power projection capability will be significantly enhanced thereby potentially threatening American maritime operations. Moreover, as China's power projection capacity expands, its ability to compete with the United States in more theaters, such as the Middle East, is greatly improved.

The Taiwan Question

The issues of sovereignty and legitimacy between the People's Republic of China – mainland China – and the Republic of China – hereafter Taiwan – are longstanding and largely intractable. The division is rooted in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War in which nationalist forces fled to Taiwan while the communist forces assumed control of the mainland.⁴³ Taiwan's continued existence is essentially the product of American intervention in the dispute through

³⁸ Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng, "Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': Beyond 'grand strategy' to a state transformation analysis," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 8 (2019): 1426-1427.

³⁹ Matthew D. Stephen and David Skidmore, "The AIIB in the liberal international order," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 1 (2019): 65-66

⁴⁰ Chad Peltier, Tate Nurkin, and Sean O'Connor, "China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations," (Jane's Information Group, 2020), 22-3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24-27

⁴² Fanell, "Asia Rising," 16.

⁴³ David Kang, "Acute Conflicts in Asia After the Cold War: Kashmir, Taiwan, and Korea," In *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 361.

various deployments during the three Taiwan Strait Crises and arms sales.⁴⁴ Chinese leadership has expressed that “unification is an inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”⁴⁵ While China has indicated its strong desire for reunification, it has also indicated that it wishes to achieve reunification through nonmilitary means.⁴⁶ This does not, however, preclude the possibility of force being used to press the issue.

Reunification of mainland China and Taiwan, whether voluntary or by force, has become a zero-sum game for the United States. Should China, as an illiberal state already seeking to establish alternatives to the liberal international order, convince a liberal democracy – Taiwan – to eschew its democratic system in favour of an autocratic one, the ideological propaganda value would be inestimable. What is certain, however, is that such a scenario would present a severe blow to the legitimacy of the international order. In contrast, if mainland China were to militarily coerce Taiwan into reunifying, the United States would have to intervene or demonstrate that the foundation of its alliance system, guarantees of security, are meaningless. Should such a scenario occur, while American allies would be unlikely to “defect” to China, they would certainly place less value on American assurances which, in turn, would likely lead regional partners to seek alternative means of ensuring their security. Of course, if the United States does militarily intervene, it would become embroiled a war whose outcome is by no means assured.

Crisis on the Korean Peninsula?

The division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 was initially a temporary arrangement but has since become a part of the status quo.⁴⁷ Following the conclusion of the Korean War (1950-1953), friction between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – hereafter North Korea – and the Republic of Korea – hereafter South Korea – remains a potent security concern for the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁸ Yet the two most important issues surrounding North Korea are its long running nuclear program and the possibility of the regime’s collapse.

North Korea’s nuclear program has matured from hypothetical threat to a distinct reality.⁴⁹ Whether nuclear weapons are inherently a destabilizing force is not pertinent to this discussion, rather, that North Korea has acquired nuclear capabilities as an actor outside the American-led system is a blow to the American security order. In maintaining a nuclear deterrent, North Korea mitigates the capability of the United States to employ coercive force against it. Further, North Korea has threatened two key American allies, South Korea and Japan, thereby also threatening the American alliance system. Thus far, the American strategy of disengagement has served largely to reinforce North Korea’s desire to develop the weapons system.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Ibid., 361-362.

⁴⁵ Qiang Xin, “Having much in common? Changes and continuity in Beijing’s Taiwan policy,” *The Pacific Review* (2020): 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Kang, “Acute Conflicts in Asia After the Cold War,” 353.

⁴⁸ Mishra, “US power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region,” 3.

⁴⁹ Hill, Christopher R. “The elusive vision of a non-nuclear North Korea,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2013): 9-11.

⁵⁰ Jong Kun Choi, “The perils of strategic patience with North Korea,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2015): 65.

Regarding the possibility of government collapse, analysts have long forecasted the collapse of the regime due to an unstable line of succession.⁵¹ First, in 1994 when Kim Jong-Il succeeded his father Kim Il-Sung and, again in 2011, when Kim Jong-un succeeded Jong-Il, observers forecasted the collapse of dictatorship.⁵² While these transitions of power have proved successful, the regime certainly remains unstable. Should the North Korean government collapse, 24 million individuals, likely with severe health issues and suffering from malnourishment, would become refugees.⁵³ The consequences of this massive humanitarian issue would be wide-reaching and particularly challenging for the American-led regional order. An inadequate response from the United States would likely undermine its legitimacy as a leader, but also leave open the ability for China to upstage the United States in its own response.

Prospects for Endurance

The Challenge at Sea

Regarding the continued growth of the PLAN, the composition of China's naval forces is noteworthy. Of the PLAN's roughly 350 ships, approximately 209 are patrol and coastal combatants.⁵⁴ The remaining vessels are comprised of 63 submarines, 52 frigates, 28 destroyers, one cruiser, and one aircraft carrier.⁵⁵ Since the majority of China's fleet is comprised of patrol coastal ships while its truly combat-capable ships are primarily submarines and small surface combatants, such as frigates, lauding the PLAN as maintaining the world's largest fleet is somewhat misleading. Equally notable is that of the 117 ships the PLAN has commissioned since 2005, 49 were corvettes which are primarily used in coastal operations, 35 were small patrol boats, 15 were amphibious transport ships, 11 were destroyers, six were frigates, and one was cruiser.⁵⁶ From analyzing the composition of the PLAN's acquisitions, two important conclusions emerge. First, that the vast majority of the PLAN's vessels are patrol and coastal combatants, not major warships, indicating a limited operational scope. Second, that most of China's naval buildup during the last two decades has likewise centered around patrol and coastal combatants rather than warships or submarines.

In contrast, the United States fields a total force of 11 aircraft carriers, 92 cruisers and destroyers, and 59 small surface combatants and combat logistics ships.⁵⁷ Thus, the combined surface fleet of the United States amounts to approximately 162 vessels. Its submarine fleet is comprised of 50 attack submarines, 14 ballistic missile submarines, and four cruise missile submarines.⁵⁸ Of course, however, the United States Navy is a globally deployed force of which slightly less than half is deployed in the Pacific at any given time. This would put the United States at a significant numerical disadvantage in-theatre should conflict with China occur. However, the United States maintains a distinct advantage over China in its many regional allies. When considering the naval fleets of just two American regional allies – Japan

⁵¹ Ibid., 60.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind. "The collapse of North Korea: Military missions and requirements," *International Security* 36, no. 2 (2011): 84-85.

⁵⁴ "Chapter Six: Asia," 262.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 261-2

⁵⁶ O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 28-9.

⁵⁷ Mark F. Cancian. "US Military Forces in FY 2020," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2020), 10

⁵⁸ Ibid.

and South Korea – an American-aligned naval force doubles in size; Japan maintains a fleet of approximately 51 vessels while the South Korean navy totals 23 major warships.⁵⁹ As such, it becomes apparent that the key to maintaining Asia-Pacific naval supremacy is ensuring the commitment of American allies.

Questions of Territory

In 2014, by annexing Crimea, the Russian Federation reminded the world that territorial annexation is not a thing of the past. It likewise signalled that a state can do so and emerge largely unscathed. The implications for East Asia are not lost on the Chinese Communist Party. While it has asserted that it desires to achieve its goal of national rejuvenation peacefully, it has likewise repeatedly asserted its willingness to use force in achieving them. This has been demonstrated most pointedly in the repression of the Uighur populations in Xinjiang province and the strongarming of Hong Kong despite its ostensible independence. For its part, the United States has presented an ambivalent response towards China's actions in both cases. Should a significant foreign policy change regarding China's aggressive actions not occur, it is likely that the issue of Taiwan will increasingly be pressured by force. However, these matters are gaining increasing salience among American allies. The responses from states, such as Australia, have been notable, seeming to indicate that there is significant interest in forming a multilateral coalition to address such concerns.

Institutional Longevity

The threat of the Belt and Road Initiative is not one of direct intervention against or effect on the United States. Indeed, virtually none of the challenges presented in this paper directly threaten the United States itself. Rather, they represent latent challenges to American leadership and its values, embodied by the liberal international order. In the case of the Belt and Road Initiative, as a mechanism which not only does not enhance liberal democratic values abroad but actively bolsters those states who work against them, China is fostering cracks in the international order. To an extent, it is the oversights of the United States that China has been able to exploit such gaps in the international system. Should the United States wish to ensure continued faith in the existing international order among developing states, it needs to offer more accessible and meaningful alternatives to that of China.

Likewise, one of the most significant challenges to the American-led order has been the United States' own declining investment in it. Under the Obama administration, the United States introduced its "Asia Pivot" to address China's rising influence by deepening its alliances and improving its relations with existing regional institutions.⁶⁰ Yet the policies of the Trump administration appear to have reversed many previous efforts towards engagement and reinvestment in the order it ostensibly leads.⁶¹ In the wake of the Trump presidency, declining faith among American allies and the erosion of the rules-based liberal international order by

⁵⁹ "Chapter Six: Asia," 271-2; 278.

⁶⁰ Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, "US Grand Strategy and National Security: The Dilemmas of Primacy, Decline and Denial," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 5 (2017): 492.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 493.

new alternatives present a major stumbling block to continued American leadership in the Asia-Pacific.

Conclusion

Today, there are many challenges to the American-led order in the Asia-Pacific. First and foremost, the means by which the United States is able to sustain its presence in the region, the United States Navy, is increasingly challenged by an ever-growing Chinese naval force. Disputes over maritime territories and resources have shown that China is willing to flout international laws and norms. Similar disagreements have seen American allies clash over issues of territorial sovereignty, undermining the interconnectedness of the regional alliance system. Taiwan, despite maintaining de facto independence for roughly sixty years, will likely come under increasing pressure from the mainland as Chinese leaders seek to realize the goal of “national reunification.” The North Korean regime, however unstable, continues to pursue its nuclear programs, destabilizing the Korean peninsula. On a much wider scale, China’s Belt and Road Initiative has inaugurated alternative development options to the liberal norms and values that the system led by the United States has been founded on.

Nonetheless there have been no “defections” from the international order the United States developed, let alone its alliance system. Rather, we have seen American allies, Japan and Australia in particular, take more prominent leadership roles in the general maintenance of the international system. Moreover, such states have deepened their political and security ties to one another despite withering American assurances. With the foundations of the liberal international order proving resilient among invested regional actors across the Asia-Pacific, the question of whether American primacy will endure is more one of will the United States commit to ensuring that it does? From the early months of the Biden administration, it appears that the United States is still willing and able to do so.