Policy Forum Article

How Trump can Avoid War with China

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Abstract

The administration of Donald Trump is stacked with China policy hawks, who warn of imminent war with the rising Communist power. International relations theorists of the realist school of thought, such as John Mearsheimer, validate the views of these advocates of war. Chief among those clamoring for conflict is Steve Bannon, President Trump’s visionary ideologue, who has warned that the United States will go to war with China in the South China Sea in the next few years. Yet, President Trump may be uniquely placed to avoid war with Beijing. As someone comfortable with radical shifts in policy direction, Mr. Trump is predisposed for a course correction. As such, he and his team of advisers should utilize the strategy of ‘America first’ to steer US-China policy toward an aversion of conflict. That centers on two policy directions. The first is promoting American jobs and economic interests, which rely on stable relations with Beijing. The second is consolidating core US alliances and partnerships in Asia, rather than proliferating security agreements and overextending American security commitments. As such, Trump and his vision of America first just might be capable of improving the Sino-American relationship.

Mounting Tensions

US-China tensions are mounting as President Trump has pressured Beijing to help rein in North Korea’s nuclear ambitions all while mulling an arms sale to Taiwan and threatening tariffs on Chinese steel. Donald Trump’s chief strategist, Steve Bannon, stated in a radio show last year that he believes there will be war between the United States and China in the next decade. The president’s Asia advisory team, lacking experienced staff and composed primarily of China hawks, has reinforced this do-or-die mentality regarding the rising superpower. Peter Navarro, Trump’s pick to head the newly created National Trade Council, wrote in his 2006 book, The Coming China Wars, that the United States must ‘aggressively and comprehensively address the China problem’ before it is too late.

Trump rankled Beijing early on when he accepted a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen last December. Further stoking tensions with Beijing, the Trump administration is considering a $1.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan. These deviations from standard US policy may stem from a desire to impede China’s perceived expansion in Asia. In his Senate confirmation hearing, for example, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested implementing a blockade to prevent Chinese access to its manmade islands in the South China Sea. ‘We’re going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops,’ he declared. ‘And second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed.’

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The administration has since doubled down on the former ExxonMobil CEO’s statement. In a briefing, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer waded into hot water when he attempted to parse the international legalese surrounding China’s sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. He vowed that the United States would ‘defend international territories from being taken over by one country,’ breaking from past policy in which the United States did not take a position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The early actions of the Trump administration, however, reveal a more nuanced view than these hawkish statements would suggest. China critics like Bannon have seen their influence wane, Tillerson has moderated his bellicose statements, and Spicer has lost credibility. Furthermore, Trump came around to endorse the One China policy before he met Chinese President Xi Jinping as a concession following his phone call with Tsai. These shifts indicate the Trump administration will pursue a more mature China policy than initially indicated. That said, radical views still exist at the highest level of US government. Moreover, Chinese actions continue to touch a nerve among the American policymaking community.

International relations scholars John Mearsheimer and Robert Kagan affirm that the United States and China are inexorably drifting closer to a destructive confrontation. This momentum is due to China’s ability and willingness to reshape the international order as increasing, just as the United States’ capacity to preserve the status quo is declining.

The threat of superpower conflict is alarming, but an important fact to remember is that tensions were already rising before Trump took office. No doubt Trump and his team have accelerated escalation, but it is one that was also taking place under then-President Barack Obama. During his tenure, Obama’s administration implemented the ‘Pivot to Asia,’ a major foreign policy push to develop economic, diplomatic, and military ties in Asia. In the end, civilian branches of government faltered on key policy fronts, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), although the military made great advances.

The United States under Obama significantly expanded its network of security partners. It signed a strategic partnership with Singapore in 2012, and in December 2015 elevated that relationship to an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. The Pentagon secured the rotation of 2500 US Marines in Australia, while the Philippines and the United States upheld an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, allowing the deployment of American troops on Philippine territory. The United States furthermore deepened security cooperation with Indonesia and Vietnam.

The pivot also extended to Northeast Asia, where the Obama administration agreed to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea. Although THAAD was designed to defend against potential missile strikes from North Korea, China nevertheless perceived this as an incursion within its strategic domain. North Korea continues to be an issue of contention, as Trump has linked US–China trade relations to Beijing’s ability to curb North Korea’s weapons program.

Just as Trump is following in Obama’s footsteps, however, so too did Obama continue many of the policies of his predecessor George W. Bush, who oversaw increased confrontation with China. In fact, the Bush administration faced an early and extreme escalation in tensions when an American EP-3 spy plane collided with a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force jet over waters near China. The Bush years also saw the successful conclusion of a civil nuclear agreement with India in 2008, much to China’s chagrin. In Southeast Asia, the Bush administration prioritized security ties as part of its global war on terror. Bush furthermore formed a ‘Quad,’ a four-party security network linking the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. Beijing’s leaders perceived this as one more aspect of an American containment strategy aimed at checking China’s power.

All told, the opening years of the 21st century have seen a serious decline in the
relationship between China and the United States. When China seized an American underwater drone in the months before Trump took office, it was a sobering reminder of what is occurring: conflict between China and the United States is becoming more likely.

Optimists would contend that the two sides resolved the aforementioned drone incident quickly and peacefully via diplomatic channels. And although military encounters at sea have increased, there are also more military-to-military contacts and other communication mechanisms to mitigate potential escalations. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in our current era of globalization, trade and cultural exchange would hinder the likelihood of any conflict between China and the United States of going ‘hot.’ These ties mean that it is in both countries’ interest to avoid a war, which would entail catastrophic costs to both sides. Top decision-makers in government cite this view. The Chinese Foreign Minister, for instance, recently stated that, ‘there cannot be conflict between China and the United States because both will lose, and both sides cannot afford that.’ Others note the cordial relations Trump and Xi struck in Mar-a-Lago during their first meeting in April.

Although this argument is superficially reassuring, one must remember that cool rationality is rarely a major factor in nations’ decisions to go to war. If it were, the United States would likely not have decided to attack Iraq in the aftermath of September 11. There was no immediate linkage between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, as was commonly believed. Rather, fear and misinformation got the best of the American people and policymakers.

Before discounting a Sino-American war as unlikely, one must also remember that war is a perennial feature of international relations. There is no reason to expect that this generation of humanity has achieved such a level of enlightenment that war between China and the United States will not happen. To quote the arch-realist thinker Mearsheimer, ‘the great powers that shape the international system fear each other and compete for power as a result. Indeed, their ultimate aim is to gain a position of dominant power over others, because having dominant power is the best means to ensure one’s own survival…States facing this incentive are fated to clash as each competes for advantages over the others.’ As China gains power, Mearsheimer argues, it is bound to conflict with the United States. Steven Pinker’s appeals to ‘the better angels of our nature’ notwithstanding, humankind has yet to find durable solutions to the tragedy of interstate war.

Despite all this, even if war is unlikely, China and the United States appear to at least be heading towards a cooling of relations in which there is little constructive communication between them, and in which other countries are forced to take sides. As countries like Thailand and the Philippines line up to strike deals with Beijing, there has already been a fair amount of handwringing in Washington that the United States is ‘losing’ its allies in Southeast Asia. These concerns have grown since Trump scrapped the TPP, thereby giving China an opportunity to expand its influence in Southeast Asia.

Moreover, even if the two sides manage to avoid war, there would still be a high degree of instability. There would remain a constant risk of triggering explosive conflict, and proxy struggles would likely occur along the borders of competing influence. As the Cold War has taught, these proxy conflicts would not necessarily be minor—one has only to recall the Vietnam War.

The situation could be much worse, however, if tensions between China and the United States were to ignite a full-on confrontation. Hugh White states this most eloquently in his book, The China Choice. As White rightfully points out, even if there are many constraints in place that make a hot war unlikely, this does not mean one can dismiss the possibility altogether. It is in fact morally irresponsible to rule out the possibility of war. This is because if a war between the United States and China were to occur, it could easily be the largest such conflict in world history.

If, in the event that a conflict escalates to the point of using nuclear weapons, it is not hyperbolic to say such a conflict would be...
catastrophic. There is good reason the so-called doomsday clock was sped up after Trump’s inauguration. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists now says humanity is two and a half minutes away from ‘midnight,’ a euphemism for how long it would take humankind to self-destruct.

We are clearly in an important transition period in global history. Since the Cold War, the new structure of international politics has been uncertain. In the 1990s, it briefly appeared the era of unquestioned American leadership had arrived—capitalism had beat communism, leaving no credible alternative governance model. In the 2000s, in the wake of September 11, there was growing awareness of just how tenuous America’s insuperability had become, and that a plethora of new state and non-state actors had emerged.

Now it seems we are reverting to an arrangement akin to that of much of the 20th century: a world in which two powers compete for spheres of influence,pressuring smaller countries to take sides. Of course, there are numerous differences between today’s Sino–US rivalry and the Cold War, but even skeptics must admit the similarities are striking. Fernand Braudel and his Annales School historians may be right—the current longue durée historical era, which outlasts any particular generation, is one with no global hegemon. Despite a brief peak in US world dominance, the last 20 years have been an aberration from the status quo ante.

The last contest between two superpowers ended surprisingly smoothly, all things considered. Humanity avoided engulfing itself in nuclear destruction. The Soviet Union unraveled from inside and out, and the United States bloodlessly assumed the throne of global leadership. But just because this happened last time, does this mean we are safe? What if the Cuban Missile Crisis had not ended without a shot fired the way it did?

In this environment of increasing tension between China and the United States, we cannot afford to assume everything will turn out fine. It is dangerous and irresponsible to be so optimistic. Responsible policymakers had better at least contemplate contingency scenarios. What, then, is the solution? How do China and the United States avoid escalating towards war?

A Strategy for Success

For better or for worse, the challenge of extricating the United States from this 21st century security dilemma falls to President Trump. He must make a change in course now, and he has the most power to do so.

If Trump is to implement a successful strategy, it must align with his ‘America first’ worldview, which brought him to power and underlies his policies. At its core, ‘America first’ priorities fall into two categories: safety at home and economic nationalism. The White House devotes a page on its website to detailing eight specific elements of this vision. Three relate to keeping the homeland safe—defeating enemies, strengthening the military, and making law enforcement more robust. Four relate to economic nationalism—deregulating the energy sector, incentivizing companies to employ Americans, creating trade deals that clearly benefit the American economy, and boosting employment through infrastructure projects. (The eighth and final priority is to repeal ‘Obamacare’.)

Trump’s economic nationalism came across clearly in his inaugural address:

From this moment on, it’s going to be America First. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.

During the campaign, Trump repeatedly articulated his focus on defending the homeland, the second aspect of his ‘America first’ vision:

• ‘Politicians have failed in their duty to secure our borders and enforce our laws… Let’s fix this problem. Let’s secure our border.’
• ‘The military, we are going to make bigger, stronger. We need a strong military.’
Upon coming to office, President Trump unrolled a travel ban targeting individuals from Muslim-majority countries such as Iran, Libya, and Syria. He has since defended the ban in public statements: ‘As president, I cannot allow people into our country who want to do us harm.’ Responding to a partial Supreme Court ruling on the travel ban, he said, ‘My number one responsibility as commander in chief is to keep the American people safe. Today’s ruling allows me to use an important tool for protecting our nation’s homeland.’ In line with these priorities, the 2018 budget his administration proposed includes a request to boost military spending by roughly $54 billion.

In formulating an ‘America first’ foreign policy in Asia, Trump must accept the shift in the global balance of power. He and his advisors must realize that China is becoming the most influential country in Asia. This may be a difficult pill to swallow, but it is impossible to form an effective strategy without coming to an acceptance of this basic fact. Furthermore, failing to recognize what is happening undermines Trump’s ability to create a plan that responds to reality and ensures he can deliver on his promises of prosperity and safety at home.

Economically, Beijing has started taking on leadership roles by developing regional frameworks like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. As the Chinese economy continues to grow—despite the recent slowdown—the country will continue to gain influence. It is important to note that China’s geostrategic priorities by no means guarantee it will be able to tilt the balance of power in its favor. Economic statecraft is difficult for any country, and China is a new player in terms of flexing its economic muscle and has a mixed record. In Sri Lanka and Myanmar, for example, heavy-handedness and changes in government in those countries have led to pushback against deepening ties with China.

Militarily, although China is the second largest spender in the world, its increased assertiveness can backfire. Beijing’s moves in the South China Sea have prompted Vietnam to increase its military capacities and have caused Japan to take a more active role in regional maritime security. These smaller powers can exercise an important counterbalancing effect on China’s bid for military dominance of the region. Furthermore, China’s perceived aggression drives countries to deepen their security ties with the United States.

Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly clear that China will be able to translate its economic heft into military dominance. It will take time, but the most important indicator that China will eventually become Asia’s primary power is its commitment to asserting its influence. Like the United States in the Western Hemisphere, China is a resident power in Asia, and it will always have more vital interests there than the United States. China’s rise depends on the flow of oil and gas as well as trillions of dollars of imports and exports through the South China Sea. The United States has a huge stake in preserving regional stability and the free flow of commerce, but fundamentally Asia is a more immediate concern for China.

Trump should keep these issues in mind—incorporating ‘America first’ and recognizing China’s ascent—when changing American foreign policy toward Asia in order to avoid war with China. He should make two major adjustments to Asian foreign policy that break from the past decade: emphasize economic over military engagement, and concentrate on core alliances rather than expand security partnerships. These adjustments are qualitative, and it is important to note therefore that they do not imply Trump should change the overall amount of foreign policy engagement in Asia. Instead, he needs to retool it.

The first adjustment, favoring economic over military engagement, directly addresses the increasing militarization of Asia. A major reason tensions between China and the United States are so high right now is that both sides are ratcheting up their military presence in the Pacific. This creates more flashpoints that could spark conflict, and each country is increasingly on edge. In a very immediate way, therefore, reducing military overreach and instead reinvigorating economic ties would reduce the potential for conflict.
The United States already enjoys strong economic ties with Northeast Asia: Japan and Korea are the fourth and sixth largest trading partners of the United States. Trump should focus on creating similarly robust economic ties with Southeast Asian countries. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that nearly two-thirds of global growth will take place in Asia over the next year, much of it in developing Southeast Asian countries.

Although economic engagement could take many forms, Trump has already indicated he favors bilateral agreements that allow the United States to determine on a case-by-case basis what its gains are. Given this, it would make sense for Trump to be open to bilateral trade deals that help industries he is trying to revitalize. It would therefore be important for him to open up other markets to American exports in exchange for allowing in certain imports that fuel growth in those sectors. In this way, he could convince his constituencies that he is giving them a double win.

As an example, auto manufacturers are one of his major constituencies. Japan, an important ally, has non-tariff barriers that reduce American automakers’ access to the Japanese market. At the same time, Trump has vocally supported protecting the American steel industry, which would threaten Japan’s status as a major supplier of steel. Trump could create a bilateral deal that addresses both these issues. In exchange for allowing US car manufacturers greater access to Japan’s market, Trump could reward Japanese steel producers their continued right to export to the United States—at a price, of course, that is not seen as undercutting steel producers at home.

This would satisfy Trump’s domestic manufacturing base and align with his ‘America first’ vision by strengthening the American economy, specifically in sectors that voted him to office. The president would need to communicate clearly to the public that the net effect of these bilateral agreements is positive, even if there would be some drawbacks. He would further need to argue effectively that the deals do not hurt the United States’ trade balance, because he and his supporters are concerned by this issue.

There is already ample economic exchange between the United States and Asia, so there are plenty of existing relationships that the administration could strengthen. The Council on Foreign Relations reports that, of the $5.3 trillion in goods that pass through the South China Sea each year, American trade accounts for $1.2 trillion of those flows. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations ranks 4th after Canada, Mexico and China as a goods export market for the United States, according to the East-West Center.

After deepening economic engagement, the second way Trump must change foreign policy in Asia to avoid war with China is to concentrate US military engagement more selectively. Over the last decade, the United States has proliferated security partnerships throughout the region. The problem with this approach is that it appears to undermine the vitality of any particular relationship. Leaders in Manila and Bangkok perceive limited and shifting attention in Washington (especially when coupled with criticism of their internal politics). These perceptions in turn trigger real-world consequences. Responding to Washington’s coolness following the May 2014 coup, Thailand decided to allow China to upgrade its naval base and to purchase Chinese submarines. The Philippines’ President Rodrigo Duterte has openly championed closer relations with Beijing and mulled purchasing Chinese firearms after the US blocked a weapons shipment.

As these recent events show, the problem with expanding security commitments across Asia is not that the trend is unsustainable. The issue is one of appearances. Perceptions drive states’ behavior, and sovereign powers like Thailand and the Philippines are not willing to bet their geopolitical survival on uncertainty regarding the US security guarantee. To be clear, it is possible that the United States could reconfigure its global military spending to put more focus on Asia, even to the point of building up new partnerships to full-fledged alliances. It is also conceivable that Washington could sustain the long-term focus on the region necessary to do so. However, the fact of the matter is governments in the region perceive...
such a scenario as unlikely, whether or not US policymakers are willing to acknowledge this. China is growing more quickly than the United States, and even if Washington grows its spending levels and maintains its strategic focus on Asia, Beijing appears set to become militarily dominant in its own region.

Instead of proliferating partnerships, Trump should focus on devoting resources towards ‘core alliances’ in Asia along the lines of those with Japan and Korea. The salient feature of such core alliances is not that they are technically alliances—many exist in the world that do not have much depth. Rather, Japan and Korea are core alliances because of their deep level of economic ties and the nearly symbiotic quality of their defense coordination with the United States, which make them sustainable in the long run. Both Tokyo and Seoul face existential security threats, and neither can defend itself against a major attack without the US security guarantee. Furthermore, American troops within the borders of both necessitate a US military response in the event of an attack on either, if for no other reason than to defend the 80,000 American troops in those two countries. This is a level of security guarantee that exists nowhere else in Asia, and nowhere else in the world.

On top of all this, even if there were a willingness to part ways militarily, deep trading and investment ties mean there is a strong disincentive to do so. The United States quite literally has skin in the game it is willing to defend with military force. Indeed, the rapport between Trump and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe highlights the durability of their two countries’ core alliance. It also indicates a remarkable degree of continuity in US–Japan ties. This is despite initial comments by Trump on the campaign trail that cast doubt upon the US security commitment to Japan.

The United States’ alliances in Southeast Asia, on the other hand, are on shakier ground. Both Thailand and the Philippines have readjusted their foreign policy stances in significant ways, turning toward Beijing and away from Washington. There has been a dramatic shift in the strategic calculus of both countries, particularly the Philippines. Manila has transformed in a short time from being staunchly anti-Chinese under the administration of Benigno Aquino to vocally anti-American under Duterte. The latter has expressed a willingness to overlook a United Nations tribunal’s ruling on Beijing’s South China Sea claims, put in motion by his predecessor, despite the court’s decision in favor of Manila.

Rather than extending a host of tenuous commitments, it would better serve the United States’ interests if Trump consolidated these partnerships into a more manageable number of core alliances akin to those in Northeast Asia. Such a strategy adheres to his ‘America first’ vision: providing security guarantees to so many countries is costly and in most cases does not directly benefit the United States. Helping the Philippines combat the separatist group Abu Sayyaf, for instance, simply does not make much sense given that the group is unlikely to carry out an attack on the United States. In fact, maintaining so many military partnerships may actually increase the United States’ exposure to risk, not lessen it.

The proliferation of American defense agreements also causes China to suspect the United States seeks to contain it, making conflict more likely. Vietnam is the most pertinent example in this respect, with its popular anti-Chinese nationalism, fast-growing military, shared border with China, and deepening ties with Washington. China, which fears the return of an American presence to Cam Ranh Bay, will continue to act assertively to secure its periphery given Washington’s cooperation with Hanoi. China’s behavior in turn feeds American anxiety, causing paranoia and distrust on both sides, ultimately raising the likelihood of major power conflict.

A final reason that being more selective with defense agreements serves American interests is that if Trump consolidates the US position, this would encourage China to take on a more active role in providing regional security. This in turn would alleviate the massive financial burden Washington assumes as regional policeman. Stemming from this line of thought, a possible counterargument might be that China would like to see an expanded American
military presence—the rationale being that more presence equals more security. However, this ignores the reality that China already perceives the US presence as threatening. So consolidation would have a double benefit for the United States: transferring some of the costs of regional security to China and deescalating Sino–US tensions, thereby reducing the chances of war.

There are signs that Beijing is ready for such a shift in responsibility. Foreign minister Wang Yi declared last year, ‘China, as the largest littoral state of the South China Sea, is willing to provide more public goods,’ namely security against piracy and other transnational threats in the maritime domain. However, Beijing has a long way to go towards shifting the perception of smaller countries that fear China will use increased power to threaten their sovereignty. This fear, in fact, has led many countries like Singapore and Vietnam to advocate for a strong US military presence to counterbalance China. If Trump decides to consolidate the American military presence in the region, he will have to be sensitive to these voices.

The Trump administration should cultivate its core defense agreements while it still has the upper hand in the balance of power with Beijing, allowing it to make rational decisions rather than desperate ones. Whatever the core alliances, the United States must show it is truly committed to defending them. That means picking its fights wisely, and knowing when to walk away. Putting ‘America first’ requires avoiding unnecessary conflicts that bleed national resources when its core interests are not at stake.

Oddly Enough, Trump may be the Man for the Job

These recommendations are a stark break from foreign policy towards China in recent decades. They would certainly represent a break from the rising tensions that have characterized Trump’s tenure and those of Obama and Bush before him. But oddly enough, Trump is precisely the sort of president who is at ease with departing from precedent—if those breaks advance his ‘America first’ ideology. Most people can agree: Trump has shown a remarkable lack of qualms breaking the status quo. Admittedly, though, he frequently talks more than he acts—often his policies have turned out to be continuations of the norm.

Sometimes, however, Trump’s iconoclasm does mark radical shifts in foreign policy. The most striking example has been his decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accord, despite extreme criticism both at home and abroad. The reason he did so was clearly grounded in his ‘America first’ vision and his staunch opposition to internationally imposed restrictions, which he and his followers believe hurt American prosperity.

Trump may willingly move the United States away from path dependency if he sees doing so as putting America first. Such a dramatic shift is exactly what is needed with regards to American policy in Asia and specifically towards China. A new superpower conflict is becoming more likely every day. Only by departing from the current trend of increasing tensions, reinforced by recent administrations, can Trump avoid what would surely be an enormously costly conflict, both for China and the United States, and also for the world. If Trump can be convinced that the United States must change course, he may oddly be the president best placed to avoid war with China.

Endnotes

1. For more on this subject, see Joseph Liow (2017) Ambivalent Engagement: The United States and Regional Security Ties in Southeast Asia After the Cold War, Ch. 4, “Global Terrorism’s ‘Second Front’,” Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC
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