Cold War Discourse and Geopolitical Flashpoints in Post-Covid-19 Northeast Asia

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the possible ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic as they relate to changing American strategic posture and geopolitical dynamics in Northeast Asia. Since the spread of the pandemic, the overall security situation in Northeast Asia appears to be worsening, contrary to public expectations. Disputes over the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic between Beijing and Washington have aggravated the Sino-American relationship, already shifting from the existing “cold peace” between the two into a Cold War. The authors explore the new and rapidly evolving Cold War discourse in the United States and traces its geopolitical implications across Northeast Asia. The first section examines emerging patterns of new Cold War discourse and practice in the United States. The second discusses four major geopolitical flashpoints in the region: the dynamics of military modernization and strategic arms races between China and the United States, Taiwan Strait relations, the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula. Finally, the paper makes suggestions to mitigate rising geopolitical tensions in Northeast Asia.

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought truly unprecedented impacts on human society. Domestic economic, societal, and political norms have been deeply affected by the spread of the pandemic. International politics have also undergone profound transformation. The traditional emphasis on military security of nation-states has been increasingly challenged by new attention on human security at the global level. While virtues of unmanaged globalization have been subject to growing skepticism, the pandemic has revealed fundamental limits to international leadership and cooperation. More troublesome is uncertainty over the future of world order. Scholars and pundits have produced contending scenarios of future world order. Some argue that if the pandemic lasts more than five years, the world could suffer from the proliferation of walled cities and the advent of a new medieval age. Others predict that America will emerge the sole winner of the pandemic fiasco, and the world will return to a renewed Pax Americana. Alternately,
China’s triumph over the United States could lead to a *Pax Sinica* world order. A true multilateral order might also emerge, a “*Pax Universalis*.”

At this juncture, however, it seems most plausible that the coronavirus is not likely to abruptly reverse ongoing trends nor slow them (Nye 2020). Instead, we predict the coronavirus pandemic will be resolved through a combination of public health strategies and vaccines long before it can inflict enough damage to pose a serious threat to globalism itself. Although the United States is amid a grave health crisis, while the People’s Republic of China has rather successfully managed the pandemic, it seems unlikely there will be any major power transition between the two countries in the foreseeable future. The *status quo* order will continue, characterized by a loose asymmetric bipolarity, a weakening multilateralism, and regional fragmentation. But the *status quo* was not and will not be static. Instead, it is always in flux, responding to changes from underlying conditions. It seems most probable that the global pandemic will, in the words of Richard Haas, “accelerate history,” (Haass 2020) hastening trends already underway. We see three possibilities. The first is an improved *status quo* in which the United States and China cooperate through the exercise of collective leadership such as the G-2. The second possibility is the continuation of the current *status quo* in which the United States and China maintain a “Cold Peace” through cooperation, competition, and rivalry. The third is the advent of a “new Cold War” in which China and the United States engage in fierce rivalry and even conflicts.

We see the third possibility of a new Cold War on the rise, casting a shadow on the geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia. The United States perceives China as a rival and even an enemy rather than a partner or competitor (Tellis 2020), causing a struggle to limit the growth of Chinese power and influence outside its borders (Allison 2020), accentuated by weakening multilateralism and regionalism. This situation, if mismanaged, may devolve into a new Cold War in Northeast Asia. With this backdrop, we first examine recent American discourses on the new Cold War under the Trump administration (Jan. 2017 – Jan. 2021). We then discuss how the newly emerging Cold War discourse and practice affect geopolitical dynamics in Northeast Asia. We present a detailed analysis of four major flashpoints in the region, military modernization and strategic arms race, the Taiwan Strait relations, the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula. Finally, we make some suggestions to mitigate rising geopolitical tensions in the region.

**The Worsening Status Quo and the Emerging New Cold War**

The rise of the COVID-19 virus coincided with a significant uptick in the aggressive rhetoric employed by American officials toward China. Former President Trump was relentless in his characterization of COVID-19 as a “Chinese virus” and “the Wuhan virus,” going so far as to refer it as the “Kung Flu” multiple times, despite widespread outcry about such a name being racist and offensive (Lee 2020). This messaging has not been restricted to the President himself, however. In May, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed there was “enormous evidence” the virus arose in a Chinese laboratory, but no such evidence has been produced, then or now (Borger 2020). A Pew poll shows

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1For a survey of the four contending scenarios, please see Moon (2020a).
that this rhetoric correlates strongly with a deepening distrust of China among everyday Americans, with 73% of US adults saying they have an unfavorable view of China, a 26-point increase in the last year (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2020). In this same poll, as many as 26% of American adults agreed that China was “an enemy” of the United States, a number that has doubled since 2012. Although there are fair criticisms to level at China regarding its lack of transparency in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the rhetoric on display, and its impact on American public perceptions of China, are far more reminiscent of the Cold War than at any prior point in Sino-American relations, up to and including during the US-China trade war. The opportunity to shift blame for the whole global mess of the coronavirus pandemic away from a flailing American response and place it squarely on China proved too tempting for the former administration to resist.

This strategy of rhetorical China bashing is not new and not limited to COVID-19. At least since during the Trump administration, and arguably for significantly longer, the United States has not been shy about referring to China as a rival growing in power, influence, and, by extension, threat. Indeed, much of the rhetoric employed in US security circles revolved around “managing” China’s rise economically, geopolitically, and militarily (Schwarz 2005), but this discourse gave way to a much more bellicose tone during the Trump administration. What underpins this shift in tone? Largely, it seems to be anchored not just by an acute American awareness of a shrinking comparative military and economic advantages but also by a long-standing habit that takes comfort in painting the world in sweepingly Manichean terms, viewing China as nothing less than the second coming of the Cold War-era Soviet threat. To be clear, some of these attacks on Chinese policy are well deserved, such as Chinese repression of its citizens in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, but the blithe insistence that Xi Jinping is an “heir to Joseph Stalin” (O’Brien 2020a) and the only suitable historical analogy for China is Soviet Russia is analytically suspect at best.

Official documents and reports reflect this emerging consensus that the growth in Chinese power is an urgent and grave concern. In December 2017, less than a year after the presidential election, the Trump administration published the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), which describes China as “using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda,” a relatively conventional analysis (Trump 2017). In terms of strategy, the 2017 NSS does not explicitly mention China, instead committing to “redouble our commitment to established alliances and partnerships, while expanding and deepening relationships with new partners that share respect for sovereign, fair, and reciprocal trade and the rule of law” (Trump 2017, 46). Some seventeen months later, the US Department of Defense published an annual report to Congress covering, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” which adopted slightly stronger language. This report asserts that Chinese leaders have “focused on realizing a powerful and prosperous China that is equipped with a ‘world-class’ military, securing China’s status as a great power with the aim of emerging as the preeminent power in the Indo-Pacific region” (US Office of the Secretary of Defence 2019, 2–3). By 2020, the White House published the United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China, which explicitly makes clear that, “the Administration has adopted a competitive approach to the PRC, based on a . . . reappraisal of the United States’ many
strategic advantages and shortfalls, and a tolerance of greater bilateral friction” (Trump 2020, 1). This stream of official statements signals not just to China but also to American allies in the region that the United States seeks, in the words of the report, “to compel Beijing to cease or reduce actions harmful to the United States’ vital national interests and those of our allies and partners” (Trump 2020, 1). Demonstrably, the way that the US government openly discussed its relationship with China had changed significantly over just a few years.

This rhetorical shift towards hostility became evident not just in official reports, but it has been a clear theme in speeches delivered by high-ranking American policymakers, as well. In the summer of 2020, a number of speeches were choreographed and delivered by a wide range of high-ranking American officials, including the secretary of state, the attorney general, and the director of the FBI. The first of these, delivered by National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien, set a deeply aggressive tone describing “the threat [the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)] pose[s] to our very way of life” (O’Brien 2020a). The speech invoked everything from the Tiananmen Square massacre to “widespread technology theft that eviscerated entire sectors of the American economy” and described Xi Jinping as “Josef Stalin’s successor.” O’Brien’s unusually speech even went so far as to flatly reject the idea that China might be a power like any other, instead quoting Australian governmental official John Garnaut’s assertion that in Chinese statecraft, “words are not vehicles of reason and persuasion. They are bullets. Words are for defining, isolating, and destroying opponents.” This rhetoric was not limited to O’Brien. In July, FBI Director Christopher Wray characterized the CCP as, “believ[ing] it is in a generational fight to surpass our country in economic and technological leadership” and “working to compromise American health care organizations, pharmaceutical companies, and academic institutions conducting essential COVID-19 research” (Wray 2020). Former Attorney General Bill Barr went in a more apocalyptic direction, claiming the CCP seeks to “overthrow the rules-based international system and to make the world safe for dictatorship,” using an “economic blitzkrieg” to build a global “arsenal of dictatorship” (Farivar 2020).

These speeches were requested by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who intended to set the scene for his own speech delivered at the Nixon library on July 23rd (Pompeo 2020). This speech, which attempted to link the disparate narrative threads of the previous four, centered around Pompeo’s strategy towards China, which he calls, “distrust and verify.” This declaration of a new Cold War by Pompeo was indicative of an ideological struggle between China and non-communist societies. He claimed that it is China’s Marxist-Leninist ideology that “informs [Xi Jinping’s] decades long-desire for global hegemony of Chinese communism.” Referring to former President Nixon’s fear of creating a “Frankenstein” by opening the world to the CCP, he attacked China for its practice of authoritarianism at home painting its ambitions as aggressive hostility that threatens freedom around the world. In this telling, the CCP is presented as intending to build a tributary international system where smaller countries are deferential to larger powers, instead of buying into the American rules-based international order wherein small countries enjoy equal rights. A clash of systems highlighted in the Secretary of State’s speech bears the hallmark approach of Pompeo – that it is incumbent on the United States to change China before China changes the world – which justifies the need for the United States to be at
the forefront of what is not merely a rivalry between nations, but rather an ideological battle for the future.

Pompeo took his criticisms even further, asserting that during his time in the Army during the Cold War, “if there is one thing I learned, communists almost always lie.” He continued to draw a clear parallel between the present moment and the Cold War when he claimed, “Free nations have to work to defend freedom. It’s the furthest thing from easy. But I have faith we can do it. I have faith because we’ve done it before.” Together, the content and tone of these speeches, as well as the government reports over the past four years, sent a clear message that the US government believes itself to be in a position broadly analogous to the US-Soviet Cold War, which requires similarly total “whole of society” efforts to thwart. As far as the United States is concerned, the next Cold War against untrustworthy communists (Pompeo 2020) has already begun.

What might a new Cold War look like? It is important to recognize that American policymakers consider themselves to be responding to Chinese revisionism. As such, American grand strategy is likely to be reactive in nature. American perceptions of Chinese grand strategy are also deeply informed by historical parallels with Soviet strategy. In an op-ed to The Washington Post, the former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon insisted that, “it is futile to compromise” with the CCP since, “if the CCP agrees to the United States’ demands in an enforceable manner, it would amount to a legal and regulatory dismantling of Chinese state capitalism” (Bannon 2019). Bannon’s insistence that the CCP and the United States are already in the midst of “an economic and strategic war” sheds significant light on American perceptions of the conflict, at least within the Trump administration. If one accepts the worldview that no compromise is possible, then any deal by definition requires the dismantling of the entire Chinese political-economic system, and no modus vivendi is possible. To this way of thinking, American interests are best served by immediate conflict before the Chinese economic juggernaut has a chance to even the playing field. To this style of thought, all Chinese policies must be thought of as being focused on carving out regional hegemony before an inevitable global expansion of said hegemony. Within this framework, no good faith negotiations are possible. Instead, any agreement reached can only be an attempt to “run down the clock,” not just on a particular American administration, but also on the American-led international system itself (Bannon 2019).

However, Bannon and Pompeo are not the only Americans who seem to be conceiving of Chinese grand strategy in these terms. Although he would almost certainly not agree with Bannon’s assertion that good faith negotiations with the CCP are unthinkable, famed American journalist and scholar Robert Kaplan does argue that the CCP is constructing a vast “Chinese Empire,” which implicitly opposes and threatens the American-led liberal world order (Kaplan 2019). Kaplan argues that Chinese activities abroad, ranging from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the militarization of the South China Sea, are part of one seamless project of empire building. He describes this rising as “...an empire that stretches from the arable cradle of the ethnic Han core westward across Muslim China and Central Asia to Iran; and from the South China Sea, across the Indian Ocean, up the Suez Canal, to the eastern Mediterranean and the Adriatic Sea. It is an empire based on roads, railways, energy pipelines, and container ports whose pathways by land echo those of the Tang and Yuan dynasties of the Middle Ages, and by sea echo the Ming dynasty of the late Middle Ages and early-modern period.” Any conflict
between the United States and China will, in Kaplan’s formulation, be an “imperial struggle,” something he believes the United States is poorly suited for, since “The Chinese . . . have a greater tradition in empire building than we do, and they are not ashamed of it as we have become.”

Regardless of whether Kaplan’s assessment is correct, it is reflective of a broadly shared belief among many American security specialists that Chinese grand strategy is seeking to partition the world into distinct spheres of influence, which will inevitably be used by the Chinese towards global domination. Such specialists have invoked everything from Sir Halford Mackinder’s “Heartland Theory,” dating from 1904, to Alfred Thayer Mahan’s seminal 19th century work, “The Influence of Sea Power upon History,” to argue the BRI is an attempt to seize the heartland of Eurasia while establishing naval dominance throughout the Indian Ocean in an attempt to become “the new superpower” (Loy 2018). A somewhat more reasonable read of the situation can be found in the 2020 United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China, which characterizes the BRI as “designed to reshape international norms, standards, and networks to advance Beijing’s global interests and vision, while also serving China’s domestic economic requirements,” concluding that “Beijing will attempt to convert OBOR [One Belt One Road] projects into undue political influence and military access” (Trump 2020).

If the American government considers itself to be in a state of Cold War, does the CCP agree? Not precisely. Generally, the CCP has been adamant that it rejects the necessity or utility of Cold War thinking. In a rebuttal to Pompeo’s speech, Xinhua News condemned the “distrust and verify” approach for its “strong Cold War mentality, ideological bias, condescending and bullying attitudes, as well as ignorance towards China.” The article claimed that any deficit of trust between the two nations is rooted in “Cold War mentality, ideological bias, and zero-sum game mindset of certain US politicians.” In July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed that, “China and the United States should not seek to remodel each other. Instead, they must work together to find ways to peaceful coexistence of different systems and civilizations” and rejected both “binary thinking” and “zero-sum games” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2020). Nevertheless, the rise of China’s “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy” seems to suggest a willingness to accept and even demand that nations choose sides. China’s ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyao, famously characterized it by saying, “We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns.” This combination of all-or-nothing American demands and pugnacious is a dangerous mixture if the United States insists on accepting nothing less than the overthrow of the CCP.

The American counterstrategy to what it perceives as China’s global hegemonic ambitions is to build resilience in the United States and its allies, defending the rules-based international order and exercising multilateral leadership to defend American values (Trump 2017), though the former administration has repeatedly demonstrated a lack of discipline or strategic thinking when it comes to implementing specific policies.

2Fact Check: Pompeo’s Fact-Twisting China Speech Versus the Truth,” Xinhua, 25 August 2020. http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0825/c90000-9738008.html
3“How Sweden Copes with Chinese Bullying,” The Economist, 20 February 2020. https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/02/20/how-sweden-copes-with-chinese-bullying
4Fact Check: Pompeo’s Fact-Twisting China Speech Versus the Truth,” Xinhua, 25 August 2020. http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0825/c90000-9738008.html
to uphold these goals (Powell 2017). The 2017 National Security Strategy outlines four pillars of American grand strategy: (1) protect the American people, homeland, and way of life; (2) promote American prosperity; (3) preserve peace through strength; and (4) advance American influence (Trump 2017, 4). The 2020 report on the US Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China insists that upholding these four pillars will involve, among other things, strengthening ties with American allies abroad, especially in the Indo-Pacific, and relying on the rules-based international order to push back in a multilateral way on Chinese exceptionalism (Trump 2020).

To this end, the United States has sought to build resilience via economic decoupling, while also curtailing Chinese attempts to carve out regional hegemony by engaging its allies in the region in stronger relationships. The logic behind economic decoupling is clear from both Chinese and American perspectives. Firstly, it is intended to secure vital supply lines, limiting the economic damage that may result from a sudden downturn in relations. This issue moved to the forefront when it came to light that China manufactures 43% of the world’s supply of personal protective equipment, such as face shields, gloves, goggles, and mouth and nose protective equipment (Brown 2020). This is also a tactic to protect valuable intellectual property, a recurring issue of major contention between both countries, and one that has grown ever harder to enforce as transnational corporations have made increasing use of Chinese industrial capacity to produce American-designed products. Finally, decoupling makes sense as a strategy to limit the economic coercion possible to an opponent, preventing either country from economically throttling the other to a degree sufficient to seriously distort foreign policy.

This economic decoupling has been complemented by an American strategy of cultivating stronger ties to regional partners in an attempt to hem in Chinese geopolitical ambitions. The renewed focus on what former Secretary Pompeo called, “a new grouping of like-minded nations, a new alliance of democracies” (Pompeo 2020), centered on the “Quad” countries of Australia, Japan, India, and the United States, is also a response to the perceived threat of Chinese power, as Pompeo’s speech makes clear. Together, these dual prongs of economic decoupling and political alliance-making are the linchpins of American strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

To what extent can we expect the pandemic to affect this dynamic? Likely, the answer is fairly little. The pandemic has inflicted significant damage to both the United States and China, undermining both nations’ standing abroad and opening (or perhaps deepening) potentially dangerous internal divisions (Rudd 2020). The pandemic has been especially harmful to American credibility at home and abroad and has cast a particularly harsh light on the United States’ failure to stem the pandemic. Allies now question the American capacity to think and act strategically although, in fairness, much of this damage occurred before the coronavirus (Jackson 2020). The simple truth is that for now, American allies lack better alternatives, particularly in East Asia, where there is an absence of strong multilateral institutions or even strong bilateral ties (Yeo 2011). Despite that China was the only major economy that grew in 2020, highlighting a 2.3% annual growth and an increase in GDP of 6.5% in the final three months (He 2021), the CCP will continue to face challenges. While its economic growth was lauded by Xi Jinping (Mai 2020), a diminished global reputation, domestic repression, and security issues that extend beyond China’s borders will present obstacles to President Xi’s success in achieving the CCP’s goals for 2035. Augmented by the distrust surrounding Chinese efforts to
cover up the extent of the virus in its early stages, the renewed focus on Chinese wolf warrior diplomacy and military action along China’s land borders (Zhu 2020) severely compromised Chinese credibility abroad. In the end, the pandemic is likely to have cost both the United States and China significant ground, but it does not appear to have altered the balance of power in their geopolitical struggle. This indeterminacy leaves a situation in which the region faces what amounts to a new Cold War – a sustained competition across multiple axes, in which neither side wishes military escalation but cannot entirely avoid security competition, either. As Professor Harry Harding of the University of Virginia pointed out in The Diplomat, the field of strategic competition is likely to be far broader now than in the United States-Soviet Cold War because it will involve “artificial intelligence, quantum computing, new generations of information and communications technologies, new materials, nanotechnology, and autonomous systems,” as well as military, economic, and soft power competition (Zhang and Tiezzi 2020). Although each of these fields of competition are important, this paper will restrict its focus to the nature and disposition of military forces throughout the region and examine possible geopolitical flashpoints that could lead to potentially disastrous escalation.

**The Pandemic, New Cold War, And Geopolitical Implications In Northeast Asia**

This new Cold War may have worsened during the Trump administration, but it did not begin there and is unlikely to end now that Trump has left the White House. President Joe Biden may not mechanically follow Trump’s collision course towards a new Cold War, but even if his administration avoids treating China as an enemy, rivalry with China is driven by deeper dynamics which have not changed and have only been sharpened by the coronavirus pandemic. These include the accelerating economic decoupling, the growth of “China bashing” sentiment in the United States, and the of China. A bipartisan consensus seems to have emerged in the United States that favors a hard-line policy on China, which will also constrain the Biden administration’s abilities to relax Trump-era policies regarding China. It is this policy inertia that will aggravate geopolitical confrontation between China and the United States in Northeast Asia, especially in four major areas of contestation. They are strategic arms race, the Taiwan strait relations, the South China and East China Sea disputes, and the Korean Peninsula.

**The Danger of Military Modernization and Strategic Arms Race in Northeast Asia**

A new Cold War would be a profoundly dangerous geopolitical order because of the real and ever-present threat of escalation caused by misperception or miscalculation. One need look no further than the Cuban Missile Crisis to see how easily crises can spiral under such circumstances. The worst-case scenario was only narrowly avoided by Stanislav Petrov in the 1983 Soviet false alarm incident. The most obvious potential fuel for escalation between the United States and China is the growing presence of soldiers and weapons systems in the Indo-Pacific region. As both sides are driven to modernize and expand arsenals, they also compete across multiple types of weapon systems such as conventional arms, hypersonic glide vehicles, space weaponry,
cyberwarfare capabilities, and weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons. Each of these capabilities are sufficiently dangerous that to be fully outmatched in any one of them may invite disaster, spurring both sides to invest more resources in a wasteful spiral of ever-expanding weapons procurements. In the best-case scenario, this expanding range of weapons systems will merely maintain parity between opponents, while in the worst case it will fail to maintain parity. Open conflict becomes more likely as one side perceives a decisive edge.

The military modernization and arms race dynamic bears closer scrutiny, especially in how it reflects existing “pre-new Cold War” tensions and its impact in a post-pandemic world. Although there are significant problems in comparing military expenditures between the two countries, among them being a lack of transparency, unreliable data, and conflicting reports from Chinese agencies, some tentative conclusions can be drawn (CSIS 2020). At present, the United States has long held a decisive advantage in the sheer amount and technological sophistication of its armed forces, spending 684 USD billion USD on armed forces in 2019, just over three percent of its GDP (IISS 2020, 21). According to SIPRI’s estimates, China has grown to become the number two military power, however, spending around 2% of its GDP (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 2020). Over the past twenty years, total Chinese military expenditures have grown almost seven-fold, from 39.6 USD billion in 1999 to 266.4 USD billion in 2019, an increase almost entirely due to the massive gains in Chinese GDP during that period.

This expenditure trend reveals an important dynamic at play. While the United States retains a decisive military spending advantage, even a modest fraction of China’s GDP spent on the military puts it easily at a global number two. More pressingly, for many years the Chinese GDP has grown faster than the American GDP. Conversely, other issues dilute the importance of a direct comparison between Chinese and American military spending – the fact that the United States deploys forces globally, splitting its focus; the increased cost (especially labor costs) associated with higher American cost of living and wages; and the considerable logistical burden of waging a war in the western Pacific, which is thousands of miles from American shores. Thus, for every American dollar invested in its military, the United States receives less security relative to China. This dynamic, in which the United States must spend more to get less, militarily speaking, while also watching its economy gradually eclipsed by the continued growth of the Chinese economy, even amidst the coronavirus⁵, is likely to fill American policymakers with disquiet. This situation, in which a formerly dominant and still superior military hegemonic power sees its comparative advantage slipping away, is conducive to arms races. China’s steadily growing military might may provoke renewed American investment, especially in strategic forces such as naval capability, ballistic missiles, and nuclear arsenals, to offset its dwindling conventional superiority. Such activity on the part of the United States is likely to spur new counter-innovations in China, provoking a further response.

What have the two powers built with these military expenditures? The United States remains far and away the dominant military power globally with its significant

⁵Mariko Oi, “Coronavirus: Chinese Economy Bounces Back into Growth,” BBC News, 16 July 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53399999
conventional military forces underpinned by a large and technologically sophisticated navy and nuclear arsenal. The Chinese strategic forces have significantly expanded and modernized. Over the last two decades, it has successfully built the largest navy in the world, with an overall battle force the Pentagon estimates at “350 ships and submarines including over 130 major surface combatants” (US Department of Defense 2020, vii). According to the same report, the US Navy’s battle force is approximately 293 ships. For obvious reasons a simple one-to-one comparison of ship numbers in no way translates to a clear assessment of military capabilities, but the brute fact of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy’s increasing size and technical sophistication relative to the US navy, let alone compared with regional navies, already drives the Pentagon’s strategic decision-making. A second major element of concern is the Chinese stockpile of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. Relative to American nuclear forces, China has not changed any of the ratios to its advantage, either relatively or absolutely. However, the United States has shown unusual attention to China’s moves. As Table 1 illustrates, the United States is far superior to China with respect to nuclear weapons, but China has been steadily upgrading its own nuclear triad. Although the DOD estimates that China is ahead of the United States in terms of number of ballistic missiles, the IISS Military Balance and the SPIRI Year Book show the United States maintains a competitive edge. The DOD report of 2020 also indicates that China has more naval warships than the United States, but the estimate seems debatable. In addition, China and the United States have engaged in fierce arm races in the field of supersonic missiles and space weapons, alarming countries in the region. Such arm races have intensified under the Trump administration.

Crisis on the Taiwan Strait

The most volatile flashpoint in Northeast Asia in the post-pandemic era is likely to be the crisis in cross-strait relations. Since the Nationalist Party government fled to Taiwan in 1949, mainland China and Taiwan underwent three rounds of cross-strait crises: the first on 3 September 1954 and the second 3 August 1958. Both crises involved the bombing of the Jinmen island. The third Taiwan Strait crisis took place between 21 July 1995, and

Table 1. China-United States strategic weapons: a comparison

|                        | United States | China |
|------------------------|---------------|-------|
|                        | DOD Report    | IISS Military Balance | SIPRI Report | DOD Report | IISS Military Balance | SIPRI Report |
| Nuclear Weapons        |               | 5,800 | 200s | 320 |
| Ballistic Missiles     |               | 800   | 1,350 | 172 |
| Naval Forces (warship, navy personnel, SSBN/SLBM) | 293 | 337,100 | SSBNs/SLBMs: 1,920 | 350 | 250,000 | Sea-based ballistic missiles: 48 |

Source: US Department of Defense (2020); IISS (2020); Kile and Kristensen (2020).

23 March 1996, as mainland China test-fired a series of missiles into the waters surrounding Taiwan. It was intended to warn the Lee Teng-hui government, which
was moving its foreign policy away from the One-China policy. The second set of missiles were fired in early 1996, allegedly aiming to intimidate the Taiwanese electorate in the run-up to the 1996 presidential election (Wikipedia 2017). Mainland China again conducted missile tests from July 21st to 26th in an area only 60 kilometers (37 miles) north of ROC-held Pengia Islet and mobilized forces in Fujian. Naval exercises in August were also followed by highly publicized amphibious assault exercises in November. The Clinton administration forcefully countered Beijing’s moves by deploying the two aircraft carrier battle groups, USS Nimitz and USS Independence, and Chinese leadership retreated. Surprisingly, a pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party defeated the Nationalist Party in Taiwan.

Since July 2020, military tensions heightened across the strait, foreshadowing a fourth cross-strait crisis. Several factors contributed to the heightening tensions. First, Tsai Ing-wen, who was sworn in for a second term president in May, declared that Taiwan can never accept “one country, two systems,” and public opinion in Taiwan strongly favored the position. According to a survey by the National Chengchi University’s Election Survey Center, 79% of respondents flatly rejected the “one country, two systems” model, while 90% preferring status quo (East Asia Forum 2020). Political developments in Hong Kong likely adversely affected Taiwanese perception of the tenability of the “one country, two systems” model. Perhaps more importantly, President Tsai pledged a 20% increase in Taiwan’s defense budget by 2025 and decided to purchase weapons from the United States (Yu and Torode 2018). Beijing could hardly tolerate such assertive moves by the Taiwan’s leader.

Second, the Trump administration’s attitude also mattered. The traditional American policy on Taiwan has been framed around four mutually shared understandings between Beijing and Washington, D.C., which are characterized by – “no American support of Taiwan independence or separation,” “no formal diplomatic normalization with Taiwan,” “limited sales of military weapons to Taiwan (no sales of offensive weapons),” and “no defense treaty or formal commitment” (Yu and Torode 2018). In other words, “strategic ambiguity” has dictated American policy on Taiwan. But the former administration began to show some signs of departure from its conventional stance since mid-2020. In mid-August, Alex Azar, US Secretary of Health and Human Services, visited Taiwan to discuss mutual concerns over COVID-19. Less than a month later, another high-level US official, Undersecretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy and Environment Keith Krach visited Taiwan on September 19th. Although his visit was for the memorial service of Lee Teng-Hui, the former Taiwanese president, a series of high-level officials’ visits to Taiwan alerted Beijing. The Trump administration continued to emphasize the shared values of democracy and human rights with Taiwan, but also pro-Taiwanese forces in the United States began to raise the possibility of formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Albert 2020). Worse was former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s remarks in a TV interview on November 12th that “Taiwan has not been a part of China.” Although the State Department attempted to backtrack by stating that “the U.S. does not have any position on the sovereignty of Taiwan” two days later, Beijing was outraged.

Finally, the Trump administration boosted arms sales to Taiwan in 2020, causing outcry from China as it threatened retaliation. On 19 June 2017, the Trump administration notified Congress of seven proposed Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programs for
Taiwan, with a total value of 68.8 USD million. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert combined the value of the FMS programs and the Direct Commercial Sale (DCS) program in announcing that the Trump Administration had notified Congress of 1.42 USD billion of arms sales to Taiwan. She said, “There is continuity here; the United States has been doing defense sales with Taiwan for 50 years or so, so nothing has changed” (US Congressional Research Service 2020). Of the seven proposed FMS programs, the largest is a 400 USD million operations and maintenance follow-on package for Taiwan’s Surveillance Radar Program. Other notifications cover joint stand-off weapons, high-speed anti-radiation missiles, MK-48 heavy-weight torpedoes, MK-54 light-weight torpedoes, upgrades to existing torpedoes, air-to-ground missiles, and an anti-warfare systems upgrade to four ex-Kidd class destroyers. The proposed DCS program notified is for the MK-41 Vertical Launching System. In addition, in late October, the Trump administration approved two large-scale arms sales to Taiwan. One was the sale of 135 air-to-surface missile Slam-ERs, eleven High Speed Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, and three external sensors for F-16s, worth 1.8 USD billion on 22 October 2020. The other was the sale of 400 Harpoon surface-to-surface missiles worth 2.3 USD billion on October 276. Although those arms are by and large for defensive purposes, Beijing reacted sensitively.

Even before these political and diplomatic developments, military tensions across the strait had been rising since April. During April 10–11, the first Chinese aircraft carrier battle group led by Liaoning passed near Taiwan, and the United States sent an American Aegis Destroyer to pass through the Taiwan Strait on April 24. The Liaoning entered the Taiwan Strait a second time in December in protest of a US guided-missile destroyer that conducted a routine transit (Shim 2020). In September, China’s military maneuvers became more assertive. On September 18, sixteen PLA air fighters crossed the middle line of the Taiwan Strait. The following day, nineteen PLA military planes intruded Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ). On October 14, President Xi Jinping visited a PLA marine corps base in Shantou and instructed marines that, “They should devote themselves to war preparation.”7 At the same time, China deployed supersonic DF-17 ballistic missiles and a brigade of J-20 stealth fighters in the southeastern coast and intermediate range missiles DF-17 in the Zhejiang and Guangdong provinces8. China has been adhering to the doctrine of “do not fire the first shot,” and Taiwan is keenly aware of it, but the chances of accidental clashes significantly increased in 2020.

Such precarious developments across the strait stirred some pessimistic projections. For example, Michael Morell, former CIA deputy director, and Admiral (ret.) James Winnefeld warned that “China could take Taiwan in three days in early 2021” (Yang 2020). They argued the PLA could paralyze the power grid and other utilities through an immense cyberattack on Day 1, accompanied by a swift sea and air blockade with several submarines joining in action on Day 2, allowing large numbers of PLA marines to land and take Taiwan on Day 3. This projection might be overly dramatic, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. In early August, Ma Yingjiu, former president of Taiwan, echoed a similar view. He said that “China’s attack strategy on Taiwan is to finish war early so

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6Yonhap News, October 22 and 28, 2020.
7Donga Ilbo, 14 October 2020.
8Yonhap News, 18 October 2020.
that there won’t be any chance for American military support. At present, American forces cannot come to aid Taiwan.⁹

To what extent is the United States willing to defend Taiwan in the case of China attacks? Historically, both the United States and China have held policies toward Taiwan that have been centered on the principle of strategic ambiguity. Soon after cutting diplomatic relations with Taiwan as a result of a joint communiqué between the United States and China, the US Congress passed the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which calls the use of force or coercion against Taiwan “a grave concern to the United States” and guarantees only to provide Taiwan with arms of defensive character” (Bosco 2019). Since 1979, both Republican and Democratic administrations have avoided answering the question of whether the United States would come to Taiwan’s defense in the event of a Chinese attack. Assistant Defense Secretary Joseph Nye’s response on how the United States would respond to an attack on Taiwan after China fired missiles across the Taiwan Strait in 1995 only amplified the American practice of strategic ambiguity (Bosco 2019).

Amid Taiwan’s growing concerns about China’s sustained show of force, the Trump administration responded to a large number of American policymakers and pundits, mostly on the political right and center, who called on the United States to guarantee Taiwan’s security (Beckley 2020)¹⁰. A review of the National Defense Strategy promulgated by former Secretary James Mattis asserts that, “the U.S. is committed to the defense of Taiwan against unprovoked aggression.” And, in a testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, a former deputy assistant secretary, Elbridge Colby, stated that it was in the “U.S. interest to continue to be able to effectively and credibly defend our allies and established partners such as Taiwan, in concert their own efforts at self-defence” (Beckley 2020). Since the enactment of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, no other administration has emphasized the American intention to go further than providing defensive weapons to Taiwan. Strategic ambiguity prevailed. It is still unclear, however, how statements made by officials of the Trump administration are aligned with actual American policy, particularly regarding Taiwan’s claim for independence (Lee and Blanchard 2020). When former Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian proposed a law in 2003 that could have led to a referendum to decide on the question of independence, Washington officials expressed that if Taiwan precipitated conflict with China, it could not count on American support. This assuredly affected the Taiwanese voters, and independence was not claimed. While the former US president, unlike Xi Jinping, believed that Taiwan’s present de facto independence was not “provoking” Chinese aggression, it did not identify Washington’s defense commitment to Taiwan. During the Trump administration, the possibility loomed of armed conflict erupting over Taiwan, especially one triggered by an accidental mishap with China, since China’s and Taiwan’s military aircraft routinely come into close contact. China is also facing foreign policy setbacks on multiple fronts, which could encourage Taiwan’s status quo approach. For Beijing to engage in conflict, it would have to assume involvement from the United States, Japan, and other countries. These risky actions suggest a significant

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⁹Yonhap News, 12 August 2020.
¹⁰Paul Wolfowitz, former Deputy Secretary of Defense, also argues for removing the strategic ambiguity policy to avoid the repetition of the same fallacy committed on the onset of the Korean War (Wolfowitz 2020).
likelihood of failure, and China risks enormous potential costs if the situation escalated, but it is still possible. President Joe Biden’s administration could set American tracks back to sustaining strategic ambiguity on Taiwan despite a strong Taiwan lobby in Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{11}

The South China Sea\textsuperscript{12}

The South China Sea could be another flash point in the post-pandemic era as a result of intensified power rivalry between China and the United States. The South China Sea conflict originates from China’s territorial claims over the nine-dash line since 1992, an area that accounts for 80\% of the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{13} In defiance of the United States and neighboring countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Borneo, China began to create artificial islands in the reefs of the Spratly and Paracel islands and occupied the Scarborough Shoal for military and civilian purposes. China maintains military bases, harbors, and runways on these atolls and has deployed anti-ship cruise missiles, long-range surface-to-air missiles, and other military systems in the Spratly Islands. This is a violation of President Xi Jinping’s 2015 public pledge that, “China does not intend to pursue militarization” in the disputed areas (Policy Planning Staff of Secretary of State 2020, 18–19). While Chinese efforts could have mitigated the issues surrounding the South China Sea had they been limited to strictly territorial, around the 1990s, access to the sea’s oil and gas reserves as well as fishing and ocean resources have complicated claims. Since 2010, the South China Sea has become a focal point for United States-China rivalry as it was linked with wider strategic issues relating to China’s naval strategy and America’s presence in the area.

In an article for the Washington Quarterly, Leszek Buszynski notes that China’s naval strategy has three missions that have guided the development of its naval capabilities (Buszynski 2012). The first is to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence while deterring the United States from supporting it with naval deployments in the event of a conflict. This mission became a salient feature of China’s naval strategy after the United States deployed two aircraft carriers during the Taiwan crisis of 1995, USS Nimitz in December 1995 and USS Independence in March 1996 in a demonstration of naval power that the Chinese have not forgotten. The second mission is to protect China’s extended trade routes and energy supplies that run through the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. This mission became important after China became a net importer of oil in 1993 and when Beijing realized how dependent its economy had become on oil imports. The third goal is to deploy a sea-based second-strike nuclear capability in the Western Pacific, another result of the Taiwan crisis of 1995. Beijing believed that this capability would serve as an ultimate deterrent against the United States in this and other crises.

These goals have largely been perceived as motivations to gain influence and rise to power, inciting resentment in discussions on hegemonic transition and the concept of

\textsuperscript{11}At least 131 pro-Taiwan lawmakers re-elected in U.S.,” Taiwan News, 12 November 2020. https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4051885

\textsuperscript{12}The East China Sea is skipped here because a direct US-China military confrontation is less visible. Disputes over the East China Sea and the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands have been by and large limited to China and Japan.

\textsuperscript{13}For an overview of the conflict, see Hayton (2014).
powers for Asia. The United States has responded to China’s assertive moves in three ways. First, it has pressed for a diplomatic solution by raising the issue at a bilateral summit with China, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and East Asia summit. Second, the United States has initiated the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea since October 2015 in which regional countries were invited to participate. The FONOP aims to assure freedom of navigation in the EEZs of South China Sea. Finally, the United States has been consolidating its cooperative ties with Vietnam, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian countries affected by China’s offensive maneuvers. Obama and Trump administrations strongly rejected China’s ideas on its spheres of influence and countered Chinese pressure by signaling interest in the South China Sea and strengthening security relations with allies and supporters.

In tandem with Trump’s administration’s initiation of a new Cold War, the overall situation in the South China Sea worsened. With a FONOP in the Paracel Islands on 8 January 2020, the United States conducted a series of naval operations in 2020 (in the Spratly islands on May 5th, in the Scarborough Shoal on May 21, and in the Paracel Islands on September 15th). In addition, two aircraft carriers, USS Nimitz and Reagan, passed through the South China Sea on the way to the Taiwan Strait, while USS Theodore waited in the Sea of the Philippines on July 14th. For several days in April 2020, an American carrier with F-35 jets, helicopters, and an embarked force of US Marines, was in close proximity to a Chinese survey ship, widely assumed to be a part of China’s maritime militia. Beijing’s apparent aim was to intimidate and disrupt Malaysia’s exploration activity, coercing it and other Southeast Asian states into accepting development with China (Graham 2020). In May 2020, a standoff along Malaysia’s Borneo coast between the US Navy and the Chinese occurred, and the United States deployed its naval forces to offer some reassurance to wavering Southeast Asian countries that Washington maintains alliances. As David Davis warned in his recent article in the Diplomat, the United States has revealed the risks of having unnecessarily too many FONOPs in the South China Sea (Davis 2020). China has been responding to the American moves in a similar manner. This was not new for China as it had repeatedly dispatched these types of expeditions, encroaching southward, despite that China has no basis under international law to claim jurisdiction.\footnote{The government of the Philippines brought the case of China’s illicit takeover of the Scarborough Shoal in 2011 to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2012. The Court delivered verdicts on the case in 2016, including the following: China’s claims over jurisdiction over the Nine Dash Line does not have any legal ground; Those artificial islands China created by reclaiming reefs are not entitled to territorial water and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ); Construction of artificial islands is illegal; China violated environmental obligations by building artificial islands.}

In the middle of rising tension in the South China Sea, former Secretary Pompeo declared on July 13th that the United States considers China’s interference with Southeast Asian countries’ fishing or oil exploration in their legitimate maritime zones – and its own exploration/exploitation there – to be “unlawful and bullying” (Pompeo 2020). This marked a sharp departure from the previous American policy that had been rather ambiguous on fishing and oil exploration, while stringent on the freedom of navigation. Such a posture can destabilize the South China Sea by sending a wrong signal to Vietnam, which would in turn increase the chance for military conflict with China in the area (Graham 2020). Moreover, this posture will not be able to bring Southeast Asian countries to the American side, not only because of waning American credibility, but...
also because of the necessity for these countries to strike a careful balance between China and the United States (Valencia 2020). For example, in May, Malaysia did not welcome American help because the US Navy had arrived unannounced and uninvited, prompting the arrival of more Chinese assets and escalating the situation beyond its capacity to handle independently. This suggests that countries in Southeast Asia are compelled to manage relations in which the United States and China coexist. Although China’s brash diplomacy during the current pandemic could alienate many countries around the world, many Southeast Asian elites are unlikely to pull back from Beijing’s economic embrace, especially during a time in which the United States struggles to manage the pandemic at home. Thus, even after the Biden administration’s inauguration, the South China Sea issue will not be resolved easily. The United States will continue its Freedom of Navigation Operations, whereas China will respond in kind, fueling military tensions and negatively affecting the peace, security, and stability in the region. Nevertheless, the current tension is unlikely to escalate into a full-blown military conflict.

**The New Cold War and the Korean Peninsula Security**

The Korean peninsula has remained a major flashpoint since the end of World War II in 1945, falling prey to the Cold War that lasted forty-five years. It was during the Cold War that the Korean peninsula suffered from national division, the Korean War, and protracted military confrontation. The advent of a new Cold War can affect the destiny of the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia in two ways. One is the entanglement of superpowers in the Korean conflict, and the other is the entrapment of Korea, especially South Korea, in the China–United States strategic rivalry.

The case of superpowers’ entanglement in the Korean conflict could take place if local stakeholders fail to handle the North Korean nuclear problem. Despite numerous diplomatic negotiations since 1994, the North Korean nuclear quagmire has become more complicated. North Korea has emerged as a full-fledged nuclear weapons state possessing nuclear facilities, materials (plutonium and enriched uranium), nuclear warheads (30–60), and a variety of delivery vehicles including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. While seeking a negotiated settlement through diplomacy, the United States has employed a mix of strategies in altering Pyongyang’s behavior. During the George W. Bush administration, the United States initially sought regime change, but later shifted to diplomatic negotiation. The Obama administration attempted to foster denuclearization of North Korea through a strategic patience policy based on malign neglect. The Trump administration combined high-stakes summit diplomacy with a maximum pressure tactic. Military options were also occasionally considered. In May 1994, then defense secretary William Perry came close to ordering a surgical strike on nuclear facilities in Yongbyon (Moon 2008). During the months between July and September in 2017, President Trump also deliberated on ordering a military strike on North Korea’s missile launchers and key military facilities, prompting severe concern among his advisors (Woodward 2020).

Failure to manage the North Korean nuclear problem can easily escalate into a major war on the Korean peninsula not only between the North and the South, but also between China and the United States. In an academic forum in Japan in 2019, Harvard Professor Graham Allison stated that the chance of a second Korean War is “increasing as the
impasse in denuclearization negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. continues, especially with the year-end deadline for talks rising on the horizon” (Park 2019). This came at a time in which scholars were concerned about a looming deadline and North Korea resuming ballistic missile and nuclear testing, like the provocation-filled period before November 2017. Professor Shi Yinhong of People’s University in Beijing expressed a similar view by saying that “The Korean peninsula is like a volatile landmine which explodes anytime.”15 The new Cold War is likely to impede China–United States cooperation even further in managing and resolving the North Korean problem. The worst-case scenario is North Korea’s crossing of redlines, such as a seventh nuclear testing, ICBM, or overt military conflict with South Korea; American military actions against the North; China’s intervention; and a full-blown great power conflict erupting on the Korean peninsula. Presently, the possibility is low, but it cannot be completely ruled out.

South Korea’s entrapment in the great power rivalry could entail a major security dilemma in the age of new Cold War. After the Trump administration initiated a strategic offensive on China, it urged South Korea to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, composed of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States and South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand for economic decoupling and a coalition of democracies. However, the South Korean government has been hesitant to join the Quad-plus. During a video conference hosted by the Asia Society on 25 September 2020, ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha described the alliance with the United States as an important anchor for Korea, but he stated that Korea would probably not join the Quad-plus framework if that meant automatically disregarding the interests of other countries. This revealed a major divergence in threat perception between Seoul and Washington. Many South Koreans now question whether the Trump administration’s China policy was legitimate and logical. An alliance is greatly affected not only by the balance of powers, but by the balance of threat. That suggests that South Korea would need to feel a strong threat from China to join the American front against China. But the majority of South Koreans do not perceive a “clear and present” danger from China. There are even suspicions that the American move toward a confrontation with China, including containment, encirclement, and coercion, is due to domestic political factors within the United States.16 After all, the United States is still far more powerful than China, and China itself wants a diplomatic solution. During the 45 years of the Cold War, Koreans suffered from the division of the peninsula and the ensuing war, an entrenched military standoff, and the limitations of a divided country. Thus, they are hardly about to welcome another Cold War.

The second question is whether South Korea’s national security will improve if it sides with the Americans. The former administration pushed to uphold its Indo-Pacific Strategy and protect itself and allies from an “assertive” China (O’Brien 2020b). But it is not easy for Seoul to join the bloc. Joining a United States-led front against China would require South Korea to allow the installation of another Terminal High Altitude

15The Joongang Ilbo, 26 November 2020.
16DOD refers to the US Department of Defense. SSBN refers to ballistic missile submarines. IISS refers to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a British research institute. SIPRI refers to the International Institute for Strategic Studies located in Stockholm, Sweden. SSBN refers to a nuclear-powered, ballistic missile-carrying submarine. SLBM refers to a submarine-launched ballistic missile.
Area Defense (THAAD) battery and the forward deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles on the Korean Peninsula. Washington would also expect Seoul to actively participate in military actions in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea. That would inevitably mean hostile relations with China and turn the Korean Peninsula into the front line of the new Cold War. China would aim its Dongfeng missiles at South Korea and would make aggressive military moves in the Yellow Sea and South Korea’s air defense identification zone, KADIZ (Moon 2020b). Most Koreans likely would not want South Korea to be entangled in a sharp military conflict between the United States and China. Taking sides with the United States and excluding China would further endanger the Korean Peninsula.

Siding with the United States could further complicate the geopolitical alignment on the Korean Peninsula. Since China withdrew its military from North Korea in 1958, it has only provided extremely limited military assistance to the North. If South Korea aligns firmly with the United States in a new Cold war; however, China would likely seek a trilateral alliance with North Korea and Russia. Beijing could generously provide Pyongyang not only with weaponry but also with petroleum and other logistical support. Such developments would only make a peaceful solution to the North Korean nuclear issue even more improbable. Instead, it would aggravate the threat of North Korea’s conventional weapons to Seoul. Expanding the Korean alliance with the United States could profoundly deepen its security dilemma.

The final consideration is the South Korean economy, which is strongly entwined with that of China. As of the end of 2019, China accounted for 25% of Korean exports and 21.3% of imports, both figures doubling that of the American share. If Korea were to forcibly decouple from the Chinese market or incur economic retaliation from China, it would suffer a serious shock. Furthermore, that shock would hit small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and microenterprises in the tourism industry harder than it would hit conglomerates. For electoral reasons, it is doubtful whether the South Korean government would take actions against China that could jeopardize the livelihood of those SMEs and microenterprises. This is particularly true because antagonizing China has had adverse consequences for South Korea before, such as the trade disputes over garlic and the severe economic retaliation after the deployment of US THAAD anti-missile battery (Meick and Salidjanova 2017). A new Cold War will leave South Korea with a major dilemma. Whereas shared values and historical inertia dictate South Korea’s alliance with the United States, at this juncture, such an alignment may run counter to Korean national interests.

**Conclusion**

In the post-pandemic era, we are unlikely to witness massive, abrupt changes in the world order. Instead, we should expect to encounter existing trends accelerating, as both the United States and China continue down the paths their leaders have chosen for them – paths defined by economic, technological, ideological, and at times military competition and conflict. Since 2014, with China’s launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, there has been much speculation about whether another Cold War between the East and West. Although headlines proclaiming that “The New Cold War is Here” and “Trump is Preparing for a New Cold War” have been abundant since 2018, many were skeptical
about whether a new Cold War would actually occur (Westad 2018). Since July 2020, however, the Trump administration was assertive, invoking anti-communist ideology and extending its geopolitical containment, geo-economic decoupling, and technological and value alliance against China. The Trump administration no longer considered China a partner for cooperation and competition, but as an enemy. A Joe Biden presidency may result in a different pace, but the geopolitical dynamics underpinning this shift is likely to continue. The Biden administration may moderate its rhetoric and avoid terms like a new Cold War, but it will likely continue the rebalancing strategy shaped during the Obama administration. The Biden administration will try to shape, deter, and constrain China’s rise, while seeking selective cooperation in the areas of the pandemic and climate.

We can draw the following geopolitical implications for Northeast Asia. First, the new Cold War is no longer merely rhetorical. It has become a multifaceted reality in the American policy-making community. From the trade war to American policy towards Taiwan, to sniping over the World Health Organization, the United States sees itself in competition if not outright existential conflict with China. The Biden administration will moderate its rhetoric and may avoid some of the Manichean overtones prevalent in the former administration, but American competition with China will continue and only grow in severity.

Second, China will not surrender. The CCP sees little reason to accommodate American demands for total surrender of its political and economic system and thus must make every effort to counter the American containment strategy. This dynamic is likely to feed China’s ambitions to carve out space beyond the reach of the liberal world order, as the United States increasingly opposes multilateral cooperation with their greatest competitors. Additionally, this dynamic will drive the acceleration of strategic arms races in the areas of nuclear weapons, ballistic and supersonic missiles, naval forces, space weapons, and cyber warfare.

Third, the Taiwan strait crisis will be less acute since the Biden administration is likely to recommit to a policy of strategic ambiguity, which may constrain Taiwan’s behaviour. Pro-independence forces in Taiwan could press President Tsai Ing-wen to take a more assertive policy on China, however, jeopardizing cross-strait relations.

Fourth, the South China Sea will continue to remain volatile because neither China nor the United States are likely to compromise. The Biden administration will strengthen its rebalancing strategy in cooperation with its allies and friends in the region, whereas China will continue to project its power by coopting Southeast Asian countries.

Finally, the Korean Peninsula will remain a major flashpoint in the region. The Biden administration will favor negotiations with Kim Jong Un, but Pyongyang is not likely to make any major concessions for its denuclearization in the near term. The United States will respond by continuing some version of a maximum pressure policy. If this situation continues, the DPRK might cross redlines that will be met by American military actions, potentially prompting a severe response.

**Policy Implications and Agenda for Action**

Without intervention, we predict in the post-pandemic era the geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia is likely to palpably worsen. Increasing competition between the United States and China will have severe economic and ecological ramifications as cooperation
grows more difficult and decoupling leads to weakened trade ties and market inefficiencies. Additionally, both nations will sink increasing amounts into costly and ineffective arms races, desperate to maintain at least minimal deterrence across a wide range of cyber-weapons, space weapons, and ballistic missiles. Finally, smaller countries in the region will be pushed to more closely align with one power or the other, limiting their political degrees of freedom and inflicting further economic damage as trade slows with newly disfavored partners. To avoid these trends, we suggest the following:

First, it is vital to note that a new Cold War can and should be avoided. A new Cold War will entail not just a zero-sum outcome, but rather a negative sum outcome that will hurt not only China and the United States, but the entire world. Accepting a new Cold War as an inevitability only hastens this suboptimal outcome, and so the first step to avoiding it is to recognize that it is contingent, not inevitable.

Second, China and the United States should engage in constructive dialogue wherever and whenever possible, even while they continue to compete in other arenas. It is incumbent on both nations to seek common ground and transcend the old logic of hegemonic rivalry. Cooperation is essential for peace, prosperity, and stability not only in the region, but globally, and represents a powerful benefit for both nations. They can and should find common solutions to the dynamics plaguing their relationship such as spiraling strategic arms races, the Taiwan strait problem, the South China Sea disputes, and the Korea question. They should also work together wherever possible to combat climate change, address global health crises such as pandemics, and build multilateral institutions capable of solving truly global problems. To achieve this, it is important to moderate totalizing rhetoric and avoid signaling the other side is untrustworthy. It is vital for leaders in both nations to reserve space for mutually constructive negotiations and dialogue, even while security competitions are at their most tense. Such negotiations allow for progress on problems that are simply too large for any one nation to solve alone and may also have a salutary spillover effect on negotiations meant to reduce escalation or misperceptions.

Third, middle powers must take a more active role in working to avoid any potential China-United States conflict. Middle powers cannot afford to stand idle, for their own benefit if for no other reason. A return to a bipolar Cold War will make the entire world – middle powers included – demonstrably less secure, less wealthy, and less in control of their own destinies. And joining the United States against China or taking sides with China against the United States will deepen the dilemma of bloc diplomacy, creating a world all too reminiscent of the old Cold War. Instead, middle powers must use their influence to resist the most extreme demands of both parties while encouraging diplomacy and negotiated solutions.

Finally, civil society, especially in Northeast Asia, has remained silent on the issue of an emergent Cold War. For global cooperation and coordination to succeed, civil society must play a vital role in building mutual understanding and trust and advocating against the sort of economic, technological, and political decoupling that is already underway. To battle the logic of Cold Wars, there is an inescapable need to activate civil society and to strengthen transnational networks.
Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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