

Will the South China Sea Spark the Next Global Conflict?

In Asia's maritime heartland, all the ingredients of a global cataclysm are conspiring against the post-Cold War period of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

By Richard Javad Heydarian

“One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans,” warned Prussia’s Otto von Bismarck in the thick of *fin de siècle* insouciance. Lo and behold, the Iron Chancellor’s foreboding at the turn of the new century proved eerily prescient, as “some damned foolish thing” on the margins of empires seamlessly transformed the improbable into the inevitable. What initially began as the Balkan Wars over the last vestiges of Ottoman territory in Europe quickly transmogrified into the First World War following the surreal assassination of Austria’s heir-apparent, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by the teenage Bosnian-Serb nationalist, Gavrilo Princip.

The fateful event, which at first seemed like a relatively manageable tragedy in the greater geopolitical scheme of things, set in motion a catastrophic wave of belligerent posturing and military mobilizations by a whole host of rival powers, where ascendant hawks ached for a glorious war. “Once the mobilization button was pushed, the whole vast machinery for calling up, equipping, and transporting [millions of] men began turning automatically,” wrote Barbara W. Tuchman in her classic account of the fateful weeks in mid-1914 that would change the fate of humanity.

A major culprit was the bundle of impersonal historical forces that structured the early 20th century global order. The unexpected leap from relative tranquility to total war was possible, Tuchman wrote, because “Europe was a heap of swords piled as delicately as jackstraws; one could not be pulled out without moving the others.” And it didn’t help that the decision-makers – from squabbling ministers to the blood-related monarchs in St. Petersburg and Berlin to Paris, Vienna, and London – effectively sleepwalked into conflict by failing to “to prepare for the harder alternative” rather than foolishly “act[ing] upon what they suspected to be true,” namely the perilous delusion of early, easy, and decisive victory in an event of armed confrontation.

The First World War, which claimed tens of millions of lives and wiped centuries-old empires from the face of the Earth, was the singular event that defined what Eric Hobsbawm famously described as the “short 20th century.” After all, in Fritz Stern’s words, it was the “first calamity,” with the even more devastating Second World War and the ensuing Cold War as its geopolitical derivatives. Upon closer examination, it’s also clear that the structural conditions that enabled the First World War are eerily reflected in our contemporary geopolitics. As Christopher Clark put it, the early 21st century international order features “a more complex and unpredictable array of forces, including declining empires and rising powers – a state of affairs that invites comparison with the Europe of 1914.”

In many ways, the South China Sea disputes are today’s version of the early 20th century Balkans, where “some damned foolish thing” can trigger a devastating global conflict without precedence and beyond our wildest imagination. It is here in Asia’s maritime heartland, where all

the ingredients of a global cataclysm are conspiring against the post-Cold War period of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. It's also here where the naked edge of China's hegemonic ambitions are on full display, with dire consequences for smaller neighbors and the broader liberal international order. Here lies the defining geopolitical dilemma of our times.

Today's China is too big to be "contained," à la George F. Kennan's antidote to the Soviet threat, but it's also becoming too voracious to be left to its own devices. If there is one thing that history teaches us, it is that neither strategic fatalism, which would risk turning the South China Sea into a Chinese lake, nor a reckless superpower rivalry, which could spark a global conflict, is advisable. So, how should we deal with the most powerful communist regime of all time? Or, as Vladimir Lenin once put it, "What is to be done?"

To prevent China's prospective domination of a main artery of global trade, what's necessary is nothing less than a multilateral "Goldilocks" approach, which checks Beijing's worst instincts through an optimal combination of engagement and deterrence. Here, what is needed is a "constraint" strategy, whereby like-minded powers and China's besieged neighbors should collectively deploy a combination of diplomatic, economic, and military countermeasures to uphold a free and open order in the world's most dynamic region.

What's at stake is nothing less than the future of the 21st century global order.

The Tinderbox

Once an obscure and relatively tranquil seascape on the margins of the Western Pacific, the South China Sea has been catapulted into global headlines in recent years. There is no shortage of pundits and policymakers willingly sharing their two pennies' worth on the significance of the brewing conflict in Asia's maritime heartland.

The South China Sea has been described, with varying degrees of superlative eloquence, as "the world's most important body of water" (Daniel Yergin), "Asia's cauldron" (Robert Kaplan), and "Asia's Battlefield" (yours truly). In the words of veteran Singaporean diplomat Kausikan Bilahari, this is where "the parameters of U.S.-China competition and their interests are most clearly defined." Others, with a more mercantilist bent, never cease to remind the world about the estimated \$5 trillion in commodities that annually pass through these hotly contested waters.

Perhaps the best way to understand the gravity of the South China Sea disputes, however, is to imagine it as a tinderbox, which can set ablaze the extremely hard-earned peace dividends of recent past. Lest we forget, the contested waters embrace Southeast Asia, an unfortunate region that was the site of one of the bloodiest conflicts of the Cold War era, which devastated whole nations in Indo-China and claimed millions of lives amid proxy wars among the U.S., Soviet Union, and China. The specter of superpower conflict is once again haunting this dynamic yet deeply traumatized region.

Just to put things into perspective, last year alone saw within a span of weeks "at least nine" incidents of "unsafe" encounters between Chinese and U.S. warships roaming the contested waters. In 2018, a Chinese destroyer came within 45 yards of the U.S. Navy's USS Decatur during the latter's routine freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the Spratly Islands – underscoring the frequency of superpower flirtation with "some damned foolish thing" in Asia's high seas.

Just as dramatic are the months-long naval showdowns between China, on one hand, and major rival claimants such as Vietnam (at Vanguard Bank) and the Philippines (at Scarborough

Shoal and Whitsun Reef) in recent years. As if things weren't dramatic enough, Malaysia, another active claimant in the South China Sea, triggered a three-way naval showdown with both China and Vietnam after its late-2019 decision to unilaterally explore energy resources in its continental shelf. But while the perilous nature of the South China Sea disputes is increasingly apparent to much of the world, the genealogy of the disputes still remains both mystifying and mystified.

Here, the analytic conundrum echoes novelist Rebecca West's lamentation on the origins of the First World War while writing her classic "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon" (1941), a heartfelt reflection on the troubled history of the Balkans. "I shall never be able to understand how it happened," she told her husband atop Sarajevo Town Hall's balcony, fully two decades after the fateful assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife in the city. That sentiment is not due to a lack of knowledge, but instead because there are too many facts to consider.

In the same vein, the South China Sea disputes are stubbornly confounding, despite the plethora of think tank analyses, media commentaries, and open-source data on the almost day-to-day evolution of the maritime spats. The reality is that what we are confronting is the combustible concatenation of multiple, interlocking clashes of interests and ideology among rival nations. At once, the disputes are about national identity and popular nationalism, resource competition and local government politics, international law and superpower rivalry.

The South China Sea is where every claimant professes the moral high ground, and presents itself as the "victim," yet no one is truly innocent. At different historical junctures, various littoral states have acted as the "bully," taking full advantage of their superiority over weaker rivals. Few remember that in the 1970s, it was the Philippines, then a thriving economy and equipped with state-of-the-art American weapons, that was at the forefront of the territorial scramble across the Spratly Islands. Under the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship, which hosted the United States' largest overseas military bases of that era at Subic and Clark, the Southeast Asian country became arguably the first country to establish advanced facilities, including an airstrip on Thitu Island, the second largest naturally-formed land feature in the area.

Predictably, however, the Philippines never missed a chance to lay its initial advantage to waste, as other claimant states quickly developed similar structures on contested land features in the area. In recent decades, China and Vietnam have been leading the race to fortify ever-larger and more sophisticated military facilities across the disputed waters. Ironically, it was not until the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, who has invariably been described as China's "Manchurian candidate," that the Philippines began to upgrade and expand its long-neglected and now-decrepit facilities in the area. For some strange reason, Filipino despots, for all their shambolic governance, always have had a better understanding of the need for stronger presence on the ground than their sanctimonious reformist counterparts.

In terms of the number of land features under each country's control in the Spratly Islands, it's Vietnam (21) that leads the Philippines (8), China (7), Malaysia (5), and Taiwan (1). Meanwhile, Taiwan, not China, controls the Pratas group of islands in the northern portion of the South China Sea. Nonetheless, China is in a league of its own in terms of the qualitative transformation of disputed land features, dwarfing the similar efforts of all its rivals combined by several orders of magnitude. Within less than two years, China, beginning in late 2013, reclaimed 2,900 acres (1,170 hectares) of land, giving birth to a sprawling network of full-sized islands and airstrips on a whole host of atolls, rocks, and reefs, most prominently Fiery Cross and

Mischief Reef. Further north, in the Paracel Islands, China's recently constructed Sansha City across Woody Island now covers 800,000 square miles of artificially reclaimed land, which is 1,700 times the area of New York City.

Most preposterous are claims to "historical" ownership of disputed land features and precious resources in the area. Here again, as in its massively unprecedented reclamation and militarization of disputed land features, China is the gold standard of pomposity. Perhaps no scholar has done a better job at exposing the paucity of Beijing's cartographic acrobatics and historical revisionism than Bill Hayton, who has meticulously documented the unlikely Western origins and relatively recent efflorescence of China's "false memory syndrome." To begin with, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) "nine-dashed line" and "historic rights" claims are ironically a legacy of its main rival, the Kuomintang, which explains the eerie overlap between autocratic Beijing's and democratic Taipei's claims in the area. Both sides of the Chinese Civil War are themselves the heirs of early 20th century Chinese nationalist cartographers, most prominently Hu Jinjie, who seemed more interested in false nostalgia than geographic accuracy.

It's quite telling that even the uber-pragmatic German Chancellor Angela Merkel couldn't help reminding Beijing about their true geographic history by gifting a copy of the precious early-18th century d'Anville map to Xi Jinping, which clearly shows "China proper" barely included Taiwan and Hainan and, even more crucially, never included the South China Sea basin. Beijing's historic claims are even more preposterously ahistorical and condescendingly sinocentric when one considers the fact that maritime Southeast Asia was home to its own "empires of the wind." Long before the establishment of China's first empires, birthed out of the brutal "warring states" period, the Orang Laut (Indonesia), Badjaos (Philippines), and Bajaus (Malaysia) were masters of the Asian waters. And someone should remind China that their greatest admiral, Zheng He, who ably roamed much of Asia's waters, was actually a Muslim of Persian ancestry.

In 2016, an arbitral tribunal at The Hague under the aegis of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) categorically rejected China's "historic rights" and "nine-dashed line" claims to the land features and resources in the South China Sea as incompatible with prevailing international law. Predictably, China dismissed the unfavorable ruling as a "piece of trash paper," but it has had the decency to quietly drop the "nine-dashed line" doctrine in its subsequent formal statements and policy positions. Its new quasi-legal concoction, namely the "four sha" doctrine (a creatively desperate variation on its earlier discredited claims), has met even greater mockery among legal luminaries and global policymakers. It didn't take long before Beijing conveniently "discovered" a "new map," which purportedly proves its expansive claims in adjacent waters. This inevitably reminds one of the oft-cited comment that "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results."

Fishy Business

Truth is not the only casualty of the festering South China Sea disputes. Over the past decade, China has been the main driving force behind an unprecedented ecological disaster in a global center of maritime biodiversity. It's not only the scale, speed, and sophistication of China's reclamation activities that have been a deep source of concern to smaller neighbors and external powers, but also the environmental cost of its artificial transformation, through large-scale dredging in the high seas, of a whole host of rocks, atolls, reefs, and sandbars into the gigantic islands, which now host Chinese airstrips, surface-to-air missile systems, and a growing

number of People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops. During its historic arbitration case at The Hague, the Philippines accused China of damaging up to 300 acres of coral reefs, tantamount to an "irreversible and widespread damage to the biodiversity and ecological balance" in the whole area.

By some estimates, China's corrosive reclamation activities have cost \$100 million in environmental damages, most especially to coral reefs that act as breeding grounds for high-value fisheries resources. This brings us to the other major contributor to the ongoing disputes: a resource competition on steroids. As philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham warned centuries earlier, high-minded principles are often invoked to conceal more mundane interests at the heart of man's actions. This partly explains China's "historic rights" claims to much of the South China Sea basin, which is host to, among others, 40 percent of the world's tuna supply and potentially \$2.5 trillion in hydrocarbon resources. Hundreds of millions of people across littoral states depend on the fisheries resources in the area as their primary source of nutrition, while rapid economic growth has made China, Vietnam, and the Philippines increasingly desperate for new sources of energy security.

While hardly a single claimant is a paragon of environmental sustainability, China has been the leading contributor to illegal, underreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing in the area, thanks to its sheer size, increasingly meaty diet and, crucially, systematic governmental support to an armada of militia-cum-fishermen forces roaming the Indo-Pacific with growing impunity. In the past decade, China's per-capita consumption (35.1 kilograms) of fisheries resources reached twice the global average (18.9 kilograms) – an astronomical number when one considers the country's market size.

Eager to meet growing demand at home, Chinese local government units, especially in its southern shores, have proactively encouraged fishermen to venture into the high seas. From Guangdong, Fujian, and Guangxi to Hainan, governors and petty officials have been at the forefront of arming and funding the country's gigantic fishing fleet, the largest in the world. In Hainan, for instance, Chinese fishermen with relatively large vessels can receive substantial fuel subsidies (\$320–\$480 per day) as well as renovation grants (\$322,500). A growing number of them are given paramilitary training, weapons, and electronic tracking technology in order to seek help in the event of contingencies on the high seas.

Aside from local party officials, veteran bureaucrats such as Liu Cigui (former State Oceanic Administration director) and Luo Baoming (former director of Hainan's National Defense Mobilization Committee) have also played a key role in the emergence of China's armada of militia-cum-fishermen forces, namely the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). The upshot is China's much-dreaded "cabbage strategy," whereby maritime militia forces, disguised as innocent fishermen, roam contested waters and credibly rely on rapid intervention by Chinese coast guard forces and, in an event of armed escalation with rival claimants, PLA Navy (PLAN) warships hovering just over the horizon.

As Andrew Erickson and Conor Kennedy explain, maritime militia forces "represent an integral part of China's territorial ambitions in adjacent waters," which "are organized by local military and government officials along the nation's many ports, providing China with small tactical units designed to execute specific missions in support of the country's more professional military and maritime interests." What we are witnessing here is a broader, coordinated "people's war at sea" doctrine, where Beijing is corralling the world's largest maritime fleet to

dominate the world's most important waterways. Pushed out of their own traditional operating grounds, Vietnamese fishermen have been forced to venture into the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of nations as far away as Indonesia and Australia. Fishermen from the Philippines, meanwhile, have had to compete not only with Vietnamese fishing vessels, but also constant harassment from Chinese coast guard and militia vessels.

Combined with climate change and mechanical accidents, the ongoing scramble for fisheries resources has contributed to the deterioration of up to 70 percent of coral reefs in the South China Sea, portending diminishing fisheries stock and even more vicious resource competition in the near future. Things have become so desperate that Indonesia, which is not even a direct party to the South China Sea disputes, has been forced to fortify its position in its northern waters, the so-called "North Natuna Sea," by implementing draconian measures such as the "sink the vessels" policy as well as augmenting military bases in the area.

China's brazen "militarization" of the disputes, erecting a "Great Wall of SAMs (surface-to-air-missiles)" across a whole host of disputed land features, has rightly met growing international scrutiny. But even more troubling is its "militia-zation" of the disputes, namely China's growing reliance on an unprofessional, armed, and overzealous armada of militia forces to swarm, surround, and intimidate other claimant states. In particular, the Philippines has been at the receiving end of this increasingly reckless strategy, which culminated in the Reed Bank incident in mid-2019, when a suspected Chinese militia vessel rammed a boat and almost drowned 22 Filipino fishermen, as well as the more recent month-long standoff over the Whitsun Reef, which has all but torpedoed Duterte's quest for a "golden age" of bilateral relations with China amid widespread outcry among Filipino generals, diplomats, and broader society.

China's militia vessels have also caught the attention of major powers, especially the U.S., which is developing countermeasures against "gray zone" threats. In recent years, the Pentagon has begun treating the PAFMM as an extension of the PLA, thus applying the same rules of engagement to both Chinese grey hulls as well as fishermen-cum-militia vessels. During the Reed Bank incident, the U.S. signaled its willingness to extend the coverage of its mutual defense treaty obligations to the Philippines beyond conventional warfare scenarios by including "gray zone" threats and potential "low intensity" warfare involving Chinese militia forces. Thanks to China's "cabbage strategy," and its growing reliance on paramilitary forces, the potential for accidental clashes and unwanted escalation is increasing by the day.

Within a decade, China has managed to fulfill three out of four stages of its domination strategy in adjacent waters, namely (1) reclamation and transformation of disputed islands, (2) militarization of reclaimed islands, and (3) "militia-zation" of the disputes through deployment of the PAFMM throughout the South China Sea. The next logical step for Beijing is to impose an "exclusion zone," including an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) whereby the Asian powerhouse coercively restricts the movement of civilian as well as military vessels and aircraft throughout the disputed areas.

Failure of Imagination

"War," legendary Austrian Foreign Minister Klemens von Metternich told his friend, "contaminates everything, even the imagination." The chief architect of 19th century peace in Europe, who helped end the Napoleonic Wars, was a man, who "hate[d]...war and all that it brings: the killing, the pain, the piggishness, the pillaging, the corpses, the amputations, the dead horses – not to forget the rape."

Almost exactly a century later, it was precisely the absence of consummate diplomats such as Metternich, a lifelong inspiration to Henry Kissinger, that facilitated the outbreak of the First World War. Today, we face a similar dilemma in Asia, as a whole host of rivals sleepwalk toward a cataclysm.

The reality is that each aspect of the South China Sea disputes is perfectly manageable in itself. All that is needed is some degree of diplomatic panache and strategic imagination. The problem, however, is that we are simultaneously confronting multiple, interlocking conflicts, precisely when the supposed anchor of regional integration and peace is at its weakest point.

For more than two decades, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which claims “centrality” in shaping the regional security architecture, has failed to negotiate a legally binding code of conduct (COC), which would de-escalate geopolitical tensions and pave the way for a rules-based resolution of the disputes in the South China Sea. At times, the regional organization couldn’t even agree to agree on the significance of a multilateral solution to the maritime disputes, nor has it ever managed to call a spade a spade, despite China’s bullying of multiple member states and frontal assault on everything that the regional body stands for.

In fact, ASEAN is so divided and indecisive that China has had the audacity to dictate the terms of the COC negotiations, including a bizarre demand to veto the sovereign prerogative of Southeast Asian states to conduct joint drills or energy exploration activities with external powers. Each year, ASEAN is living up to its reputation as an empty “talk shop,” featuring regular “funny shirt” confabs among self-satisfied despots and their dithering diplomats. So, what went wrong? Is ASEAN so feckless by nature? What explains the growing peripherality of the regional body in shaping the course of disputes in its own very backyard?

In his classic “Muqaddimah” (“An Introduction”), historian Ibn Khaldun observed the resilience of many nations, arguing that “a physical defeat... has never marked the end of a nation.” The decisive factor, he claimed, is “when a nation has become the victim of a psychological defeat.” This marks its downfall. Something very similar is happening to ASEAN.

Many forget how the regional body was born out of the cauldron the Cold War, as the U.S. and the Soviet Union struggled for supremacy in Southeast Asia. Back then, the region was not too different from the contemporary Middle East, where large-scale wars and internecine conflicts stubbornly lurk over the horizon. Throughout the 1960s, “Konfrontasi” armed skirmishes between Sukarno’s Indonesia and the emerging Malaysian Federation coincided with the raging war in Vietnam, not to mention the festering disputes between Manila and Kuala Lumpur over oil-rich Sabah.

Against all odds, visionary leaders from the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand established ASEAN before the end of that brutal decade. Although composed of mostly U.S.-aligned Southeast Asian nations, the regional organization consciously sought to transcend the zero-sum logic of the Cold War. At times, ASEAN even embodied “Third Worldism” principles, which undergirded the global Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the earlier Greater Malayan Confederation, also known as MAPHILINDO, composed of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Before the end of the 20th century, the regional body even welcomed communist and post-communist regimes into its ranks, transforming ASEAN into the most diverse regional organization on earth. Under the stewardship of great statesmen such as Singapore’s Lee Kuan

Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad, the regional organization managed to establish the foundations of a "security community," whereby even the threat of use of force as an instrument of intra-regional foreign policy became increasingly unthinkable.

Among ASEAN's greatest achievements are the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and ASEAN Free Trade Area, which have successfully facilitated the peaceful management of intra-regional disputes, including maritime and territorial spats, as well as commerce and people-to-people exchange among Southeast Asian nations. More broadly, ASEAN has also contributed to pan-regional security and economic integration through the ASEAN Plus Three (including China, Japan, and South Korea) and ASEAN Regional Forum mechanisms, which facilitate institutionalized dialogue among major powers, as well as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), so far the most ambitious trade agreement of the century.

Early success, however, sowed the seeds of self-destructive complacency. On one hand, Southeast Asia lacks a core, visionary leadership, which allowed ASEAN to navigate the vicissitudes of Cold War. The region is riddled with notorious despots and mediocre reformists, who are nothing like 20th century titans such as Lee and Mahathir, or even the Philippines' Fidel Ramos and Indonesia's Suharto.

The problem, however, is even more institutional: ASEAN suffers from a dysfunctional decision-making modality. The search for consensus (*mufakat*) has led to a "cult of unanimity," whereby each member, regardless of size and interest, has a de facto veto on collective organizational decisions. Thus, external powers like China can simply lean on a regional weak link to torpedo any united ASEAN front on the South China Sea disputes. What many ASEAN apologists and critics alike tend to forget is that the regional body has an encouraging history of employing alternative decision-making modalities, most especially the majoritarian "ASEAN Minus X" formula, which facilitated, among other things, the swift negotiations of the Agreement on the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) Scheme for the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).

Furthermore, the European Union offers a more accurate version of consensus-based decision-making, namely qualified majority voting, whereby size, interests, and contributions of individual member states are not ignored. For some reason, however, current ASEAN leaders are sticking to a dysfunctional unanimity-based decision-making process on the hottest geopolitical challenge of our era, the South China Sea disputes. This is even more astonishing when one considers the long history of China's brazen opportunism from its coercive occupation of Mischief Reef shortly after the departure of American troops from the nearby Philippines in the early 1990s to its harassment of Southeast Asian claimant states at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Obviously, the status quo is unsustainable.

The Art of Constraintment

Reflecting on the tangle of forces that enabled the horrors of the Second World War, German philosopher Walter Benjamin observed, "Behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution." The "failed revolution" of our era is Asia's inability to translate its enormous economic success into an enduring and effective security architecture, which would prevent the "fascism" of unabashed territorial aggrandizement and destabilizing maritime expansionism in the South China Sea.

In China, decades of “patriotic education” programs have managed to compensate for the declining appeal of communist ideology, but has also unleashed a feverish wave of populist revanchism based on half-truths and full-fledged belligerence. Across the region, neighboring countries from Vietnam to the Philippines, and even Indonesia, are succumbing to their own versions of exclusionary identity politics, whereby China is increasingly portrayed as the ultimate “other” – a civilizational threat, which evokes both fear and loathing.

What’s even more troubling than the rising tide of popular nationalism across Asia, which invites comparison to pre-war Europe a century ago, is the miasma of strategic defeatism and fatalist thinking among those who should know better. Often, tragedy befalls humanity not because of hubris but because of a lack of a sense of agency. A major indicator of this troubling phenomenon is how countless pundits and policymakers are easily overwhelmed by the enormity of China’s admittedly impressive material power and even more astonishing ideological determination to reassert its place of pride among nations.

Even at the heart of Western civilization, from Brussels to Washington, D.C., often private and off-the-record conversations over the supposed inevitability of Chinese hegemony in Asia have become dispiritingly ubiquitous. Others have been more outspoken. Think of, for instance, Australian academic Hugh White’s controversial “The China Choice” thesis, which essentially argues that Chinese domination of the so-called “First Island Chain,” stretching from the East China Sea to the South China Sea and Indonesia’s North Natuna Sea, is a geopolitical inevitability.

There are also U.S. treaty allies, Thailand and the Philippines, where despotic populists can’t help praising and groveling before China as the supposed new center of the universe. Then, we have the faux anti-imperialists: After half-a-millennia of Western ascendancy, Sinophiles and some self-described progressives tend to argue, the re-emergence of an Asia-wide Chinese tributary system would be a refreshing return to a familiar past. Perhaps, we should prepare for a “when China rules the world” scenario, sooner than later?

There are three fundamental, conceptual problems with the “China hegemony inevitability” argument, however. First, there is nothing pre-determined regarding the trajectory of China’s material growth and power. Lest we forget, the past century alone shows that hegemonic challenges, from Imperial Japan to Kaiser’s Germany and the Soviet Union, are often more formidable on paper than in the long run. After all, authoritarian powers are by nature obsessed with concealing, and at times even denying, systemic vulnerabilities at home, which are often brutally revealed in times of revolutionary upheaval.

Now, this is not to say that China will collapse tomorrow, or even a decade from now, but leading economists have correctly highlighted the immense structural vulnerabilities, from a demographic winter to ballooning “shadow banking” debt, which will certainly alter Beijing’s long-term calculus and disposable strategic resources.

Second, although China has shown remarkable dynamism in overcoming successive crises, its national power is often not properly assessed. A more accurate way of measuring global power is in “net” terms, namely the net stock of resources, including natural endowments, technology, manpower, military hardware, soft power, and all key ingredients necessary for sustained projection of power in the international system.

As perceptive scholars such as Michael Beckley have noted, “a nation’s power stems not from its gross resources but from its net resources — the resources left over after subtracting the costs of making them.” Although China is set to overtake the United States as the world’s largest economy later this decade, the wealth of its average citizen, the strength of its educational institutions, and its overall stockpile of strategic resources are far behind those of its Western rivals.

By every major indicator, U.S. universities, scientists, and industrial-military complex will likely enjoy a significant qualitative edge over their Chinese counterparts for the foreseeable future, with the notable exception of artificial intelligence (AI) and 5G network telecommunications technology so far. Nonetheless, Western advantages could deepen amid intensifying “tech war” sanctions and restrictions on Chinese national champions and tech giants, which will limit Beijing’s ability to accelerate its catch-up strategy.

And third, the United States, unlike China, exercises power through a hub-and-spokes network of alliances, which serve as force multipliers. While it’s true that none of the United States’ allies are 100 percent reliable, no allies ever are. Meanwhile, it’s also true that China can hardly boast a single major ally, given structural competition with Russia in key strategic sectors and across the Eurasian landmass as well as the unreliability of the likes of Pakistan and North Korea, two countries that have their own share of frustrations with strategic overdependence on Beijing. In fact, one thing that astonished me during my visit to North Korea in 2018 was the total absence of any sense of gratitude toward China, their main and suffocating strategic patron.

In contrast, the U.S. can rely on major allies such as Japan, which not only boasts one of the world’s most advanced navies, but, even more crucially, has trounced China in terms of new infrastructure investment pledges in key regions such as Southeast Asia. The consolidation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the Quad, and the growing presence of European powers in the Indo-Pacific will further augment Washington’s “networked power” vis-à-vis China. In addition, there are strong prospects for “minilateral” cooperation with like-minded and pivotal powers within ASEAN, most especially Vietnam but also Singapore and Indonesia.

Upon closer examination, what’s clear is that there is nothing predetermined nor inevitable about China’s bid for hegemony in Asia. We may be moving toward a “post-American” world, but that doesn’t mean that it will be dominated by China. Instead, like-minded powers can collectively preserve a free and open order in the Indo-Pacific. In the South China Sea, the way forward is what the late political scientist Gerald Segal characterized as a “constraint” strategy, whereby like-minded powers “tell [China] that the outside world has interests that will be defended by means of incentives for good behavior, deterrence of bad behavior, and punishment when deterrence fails.”

The good news is that China is yet to clarify the precise coordinates of its maritime claims, ever prevaricating between a “minimalist” claim to precious fisheries and hydrocarbon resources to a more “maximalist” claim over all contested land features as well as resources across the entire South China Sea basin. From its decision to forego full veto powers in the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), to quietly dropping the “nine-dashed line” in its formal statements following the 2016 arbitral tribunal award, recent history shows that Beijing tends to blink first when faced with concerted pushback by external powers. The strategic implication is clear: A “Goldilocks” approach, which combines determined deterrence with calibrated engagement, can forestall China’s domination of the world’s most important waterway

and, to use Bismarck's memorable phrase, prevent a "damned foolish thing," which could spark the next global conflict.

The Author

- **Richard Javad Heydarian** is a professorial chairholder in geopolitics at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, and author of, among others, *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China and the New Struggle for Global Mastery* (Palgrave Macmillan) and the forthcoming *China's New Empire* (Melbourne University Press). He has delivered lectures at Harvard, Stanford, and Columbia universities, and written for *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Guardian*, among other leading publications.