

Selective Engagement

A Strategy to Address a Rising China

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In National Defense University's *Strategic Assessment 2020*, the contributors reaffirm an essential truth: "The great geopolitical shift of the next few decades, and the greatest challenge to continued global stability, will be defined by the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC)."¹ This exemplifies the famous trap of Thucydides: a dilemma in which a rising power presents a natural challenge and threat to the current power structure. In his words, "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable." Applied to our current moment, the trap signals an increased likelihood of war between the United States and China, as China's rise presents a natural challenge to American power, disrupting global stability. There is, no doubt, a danger here. But there is also a coincident need for the United States to challenge China's illicit actions. Walking this tightrope necessitates a strategy of selective engagement, in which the United States utilizes the instruments of national power to balance against China. In this strategy, the United States engages in the Indo-Pacific region to preserve peace among great powers and maintain a balance of power.² The United States must use a strategy of cooperation and engagement to arrive at a stable, peaceful balance with China that is in line with vital US interests. A selective engagement strategy in East Asia requires diplomatic and economic cooperation and confrontation, as well as information and military competition. This article will provide a background on China's growing influence in East Asia, outline a grand strategy of selective engagement, and describe how the United States should utilize the instruments of national power to realize its interests.

China's Objectives and Actions

China seeks to expand its influence and redefine the current balance of power in East Asia via economic development and military modernization. China's economic growth since the end of the twentieth century has enabled it to become the world's second-largest economy; in 2019, China generated nearly 16 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP), behind only the United States, which produced a global GDP of 23.9 percent.³ President Xi Jinping pursues the "Chinese Dream" and views the PRC as a leader with global influence and power.⁴ In an

attempt to rise as a powerful and prosperous nation and strengthen its international influence, China is expanding its economy and investing in infrastructure across the world; additionally, the PRC is modernizing its military by investing in power projection capabilities of aircraft carriers and long-range missiles while also developing cutting-edge weapons systems.⁵ China's drive to pursue emerging technologies with potential military utility has led to advances in artificial intelligence, advanced computing, hypersonic weapons, and quantum computing.⁶ Through these activities, China has transformed into "one of the globe's leading economic players possessing military capabilities commensurate with an emerging great power."⁷

Through unilateral territorial actions and economic coercion, China aims to organize a region that is more favorable to growing Chinese power. The PRC strives to expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific region through territorial sovereignty and resource claims. In the South China and East China Seas, China has built artificial islands and has competing claims over islands, reefs, and resources with states in the region including Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.⁸ Many Chinese intrusions into these territories violate international law and threaten the rules-based international order.⁹ China is able to escape international condemnation largely due to its proclivity for "gray zone" tactics, bolstering its territorial claims while avoiding egregious violations of international law as well as direct conflict with other disputants.

Through economic statecraft, China seeks to gain an advantage across the globe through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) inducements.¹⁰ The transactional BRI campaign increases the likelihood that, at some point, participating countries may be in dire need of Chinese capital, which the PRC could then use as leverage as it seeks to expand its geopolitical interests.¹¹ The port in Hambantota is a prime example of China's coercive tactics; when the Sri Lankan government failed to pay back Chinese loans required for local infrastructure development, the PRC assumed control of this strategically located Sri Lankan port and under the "agreement" will retain it under Chinese control for 99 years.¹² This action illustrates that China assertively seeks to gain control abroad through activities that "displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region and reorder the region in its favor."¹³ The United States should use the grand strategy of selective engagement to counter China's actions.

The Challenge of a Rising China and an Argument for Selective Engagement

Defensive realists recognize the challenges arising from China's unilateral agenda. As states endeavor for security as a means to survive in an anarchical world, they take defensive measures to uphold security and autonomy. Without an understanding of a states' intentions and capabilities, other states perceive actions as offensive and hostile and consequently take measures to ensure their own security and sovereignty. US actions to posture additional forces in East Asia and to preserve its ability to project power across the region could be misinterpreted by the PRC as escalatory attempts to contain China and assert US hegemony. This escalation of action leads to uncertainty, fear, and competition and decreases the security of any states involved.¹⁴ American efforts to contain China's expansive actions could lead to more aggressive Chinese behaviors, escalation, and conflict, which threaten peace and security rather than protect it.

The United States should pursue a grand strategy of selective engagement because China is rising and seeks to expand its international influence and to position itself as a great power. The selective engagement strategy emerges from the realist tradition of international relations and centers on upholding peace between the great powers to ensure US security, prevent nuclear proliferation, and protect the American economy.¹⁵ In this strategy, the United States engages in the Indo-Pacific region to maintain the regional balance of power and thereby ensure peace.¹⁶ Given that states are never certain of other states' motives or intentions, selective engagement recommends the use of a combination of cooperative and competitive policies.¹⁷

"Competition" in this sense is not synonymous with "conflict"; competition occurs between cooperation and conflict on the continuum of interactions between states.¹⁸ A selective engagement strategy prescribes cooperation and engagement to arrive at a stable, peaceful balance with China that is in line with key US interests. While China is taking action to grow its influence, it is not pursuing global hegemony or a closed sphere of influence irrespective of the cost. The PRC has benefited from the current international system through significant economic growth since its shift to a market-based economy.¹⁹

Instead of proceeding to overturn the world order, China seeks to reshape the existing system around its concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind" to support its growing status and interests.²⁰ Consequently, China strives to revise the international environment in its favor by reforming institutions and principles of interstate relations and gaining economic and military advantages, all while seeking to avoid direct military confrontation. As an example, through

the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the PRC gained a prominent voice in a new multilateral development bank that includes several key American allies; moreover, its membership includes 103 states, representing nearly 80 percent of the global population. With China's key involvement in this international financial institution, the PRC may be able to shape the rules and norms of global finances while the AIIB competes with similar Western financial institutions.²¹ China is not a revolutionary state but instead is a rational actor. As a rational actor, it recognizes the costs and risks of war incentivize states with conflicting interests to bargain and agree to constructive solutions.²²

Selective engagement enables the United States and China to find a new balance of power within the international system that does not result in primacy where the United States protects its role and influence in East Asia. The United States should seek to expand opportunities for cooperation with China while also managing the US-Chinese competition. *Strategic Assessment 2020* advises that a "U.S. strategy that cooperates when possible, competes smartly, confronts only when necessary, and concurrently builds out unique U.S. strategic tools and power capabilities . . . appears to be one best suited to the beginning of a new era of Great Power Competition."²³ The United States must use a selective engagement strategy with diplomatic and economic cooperation and confrontation, as well as information and military competition, to balance China's rise and uphold American interests. Diplomacy and economic engagement should provide the foundation of this strategy to cooperate with China when able and confront China when necessary.

Diplomatic and Economic Cooperation and Confrontation with China

Not every national interest in the United States–China relationship is conflictual. Indeed, there are many overlapping interests between the countries. The United States should cooperate diplomatically and economically with China to combat climate change and to maintain open maritime and space commons. Through diplomatic and economic cooperation, the United States and China can elevate shared strategic concerns, as both states have numerous political, security, and economic interests that intersect. Diplomacy and dialogue provide a foundation for the United States and China to identify and attain concrete progress on harmonious or complementary interests while also providing an opportunity for these states to develop a rapport, which may be critical to deescalating future conflicts.²⁴ US-Chinese diplomatic partnerships could center around endeavors to combat climate change. Furthermore, shared economic interests could provide

the United States and China a venue for cooperation as these states strive to maintain open maritime and space commons and promote the development of norms in the space domain.

The United States and China can work together to lead the international community to combat the multifaceted challenge of climate change. Accelerating climate change has the potential to shape national security in the future through adverse impacts on the environment and resource availability. Given that the United States and China are the leading carbon emitters, cooperation is central to developing a plan and making deliberate and tangible progress toward reducing emissions.²⁵ It may be difficult for a country to make significant progress acting alone due to the complex and interconnected nature of the problem and the necessity to develop novel solutions and foster support for collective action. The United States should reenter the Paris Agreement on climate change and collaborate with China to develop clean technologies and renewable energy sources. Moreover, these solutions should be available to other countries to enable global cooperation to address climate change.²⁶ During diplomatic teaming to combat climate change, leaders from the United States and China could build relationships that may be critical to enabling these countries to resolve future disputes through diplomatic channels and avoid the impulse to pursue one's objectives through armed conflict.

Efforts to maintain open access to maritime and space commons enable US and Chinese strategic collaboration to protect shared economic interests as the Chinese Communist Party considers economic development as the "central task" that enables modernization across all areas of China's society.²⁷ China may see value in partnering with the United States and other nations in counter-piracy operations to maintain open sea lines of communication necessary for national security and maritime commerce of critical energy and commodity supplies.²⁸ In the space domain, the United States and China should begin cooperating by sharing data and working together on space research. China, like the United States, recognizes space as a "critical domain in international strategic competition" and views the security of space as a strategic and critical aspect of national development.²⁹ Both the United States and China desire secure and stable access to space due to the vital role it plays in the international financial system. Consequently, the United States should pursue cooperation with China in space as opposed to engaging in direct competition; competition in space as in other domains increases the likelihood of escalation, miscalculation, and conflict. Initial US-Chinese partnerships could lead to further cooperation on space initiatives and advance efforts to establish viable rules and norms for space practices. This cooperation should allow leaders to develop amicable relationships and gain an under-

standing of the perspectives and values of others that may be beneficial in future engagements.

While cooperation with China on shared strategic concerns is desired, the United States and the PRC need a path to resolve conflicting interests. The United States should use efforts to cooperate on combating climate change and maintaining open maritime and space access to grow in its ability to identify areas of friction and develop potential solutions. Through continued communication and efforts to jointly solve challenges, the United States and China could build a long-term relationship and establish trust; this rapport could be advantageous for both partners in the future, especially in deescalating a conflict that arises in areas of disagreement. The diplomatic process of constructive engagement could allow the United States to connect with China in a constructive, results-oriented relationship that aims to make progress on matters of dissent.³⁰ This is critical because, while the United States and China have conflicting national interests, the costs and risks of war incentivize both countries to work together to identify potential settlements and bargain for a solution.³¹ Diplomatic engagements could allow the United States and China to identify opportunities to shape Chinese growth in areas that preserve, without compromising, US and allied interests. As an example, the United States should confront China on Taiwan's status and should use economic cooperation with allies and partners to counter China's illicit actions and rising influence.

Taiwan provides a central case for the use of diplomacy and engagement, as Taiwan's status and sovereignty represent a serious potential conflict between the United States and China. The United States should use diplomatic dialogue to reduce tensions and to support the peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status with an approach that is acceptable to both Taiwan and China.³² Diplomatic discourse with China may provide an alternative to escalating confrontation through options that otherwise intensify political and economic pressure or introduce the use of force.³³ Through engagement, the United States could confront China and set boundaries on Taiwan. One example centers around the multitude of People's Liberation Army airspace incursions of Taiwan's air defense identification zone, as such inappropriate behaviors oppose the rules-based international order. The US-Chinese dialogue could allow China to continue pursuing security interests that are in line with the existing rules-based international order and enable both the United States and China to adapt diplomatic relations to reduce the potential for conflict. The selective engagement strategy also recognizes the importance of engaging with partners and allies to uphold mutually shared interests while the PRC strives to reorganize a region that is more favorable to growing Chinese power.

The United States can confront China's growing influence by building economic partnerships with allies and partners to realize US interests in East Asia. To balance against China's vision to grow influence, the United States should bolster trade relationships with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, which should benefit states in the region and the United States. This trade could strengthen states and better equip them to credibly deter Chinese aggression and to compete with China if necessary. Additionally, a strong and robust American economy can allow the United States to preserve its role in the Pacific. Moreover, the United States should reassess the decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement; participation in the TPP or a similar trade agreement could allow the United States to further integrate with economies in the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, it could allow the United States to balance the influence China may gain through the recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership trade agreement.³⁴ The United States and its allies can work multilaterally to disincentivize inequitable trade practices in an attempt to shape Chinese actions. The United States, its allies, and its partners should reduce China's access to critical technologies through technology transfer restrictions to constrain China's ability to modernize its military and gain an advantage should conflict arise. Furthermore, the United States must compete with China by offering alternative investments to partner nations to fracture the transactional BRI agreements and limit predatory Chinese coercion and influence abroad. The United States must use a mix of cooperation and confrontation to build rapport critical to resolve future conflicts and balance China's growing influence. Military engagement with allies and partners and advances in US information capabilities is also a crucial element of this strategy.

Countering with Information and the Military Engagement to Compete with China

The United States should use its military and information advantages to compete with China and counter China's efforts to reorder the region and supplant the United States from East Asia. The United States must increase its ability to access information and make decisions necessary to maintaining an advantage should conflict arise. Moreover, the US military must engage with allies and partners to deter aggression and provide a lethal forward presence. Prevailing information capabilities are critical to the US ability to counter the PLA's asymmetric approach.

The United States should improve its information capabilities to counter the PLA's strategy of information dominance. The Chinese military recognizes the

importance of the information domain by asserting that information deterrence can help achieve national and military strategic objectives.³⁵ Moreover, the PLA believes taking the initiative by achieving information dominance and denying adversaries from using the electromagnetic spectrum is vital in future wars.³⁶ The PRC has put the concept of information power into practice by outfitting its island reefs in the South China Sea with substantial communications capabilities.³⁷ The United States should improve its command, control, and communications capabilities to counter China's information dominance strategy. In the event conflict breaks out, the United States could use these improved information technology capabilities to maintain an advantage with battlespace information superiority; at the same time, the United States could use advanced weapons to target key locations in the South China Sea and deny the PLA battlespace information. These actions could enable the United States to counter the Chinese strategy by maintaining the offense–defense balance inherent in conflict with the PLA. America must reinvigorate alliances and partnerships to promote stability while deterring the PRC from acting offensively.

The United States must use the military instrument of power to engage with allies and partners to bolster the regional balance of power through deterrence and a lethal forward presence. The selective engagement strategy recommends the use of alliances to protect US interests, advance US influence abroad, deter aggression, and maintain stability and predictability in the Pacific.³⁸ The United States should maintain collective defense agreements with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Australia to deter China from acting offensively. United States Indo-Pacific Command recognizes the importance of using an exercise, experimentation, and innovation program to provide readiness and lethality, cultivate asymmetric concepts, and deter adversaries while reassuring allies, partners, and friends.³⁹ These security cooperation efforts could improve interoperability, communication, and information-sharing and demonstrate multilateral capabilities to counter threats if required; this is essential to deterring China from using the PLA and armed conflict to achieve its national interests. It also provides the United States with access for peacetime and contingency needs and allows the United States an opportunity to positively affect conditions that could lead to crisis. Furthermore, partnerships may allow our combined forces to conduct freedom of navigation operations to patrol international waters; these actions could deter Chinese aggression and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. Through strong relationships, the United States and our allies and partners can work together to actively defend our interests and ensure global stability.

A lethal forward presence in East Asia also supports US efforts to reinforce the regional balance of power. The United States must keep military forces stationed

in the Pacific to allow the United States to provide combat forces and project power across the region to shape the theater and balance China's unilateral and coercive actions. The presence of these forces should help reduce China's ability to push the United States from this region and achieve regional hegemony.⁴⁰ American forces postured in the Indo-Pacific region also allow the United States to reassure allies and partners of its commitment to their security if they are faced with PRC hostilities. Moreover, the United States should develop and deliver capabilities to increase joint force lethality to counterbalance increases in Chinese military and economic power. The military must continue to engage with partners by providing training and support and participating in multilateral exercises. These actions could help prevent China from believing it can use offensive military action to achieve strategic objectives. A lethal US forward presence in the Indo-Pacific region reassures America's allies of the importance of their defense and shared interests. America's strong network of allies and partners could provide a capability and credibility to deter Chinese aggression and support a stable balance with China, ultimately contributing to a more secure global environment.

Conclusion

Selective engagement allows the United States to balance China's unilateral actions to magnify its international influence and realize the "Chinese Dream" as a great power. The United States must work with China to identify potential areas of cooperation in support of complementary interests and global stability. Potential areas for diplomatic and economic collaboration center around combating climate change and protecting open access to the maritime and space commons. Collaboration on shared strategic interest builds rapport that could facilitate conflict de-escalation in subjects of disagreement such as the PRC's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The United States should use engagement and diplomatic dialogue to make progress on matters of dissent, including Taiwan's status and Chinese illicit actions surrounding Taiwan. The United States must cooperate economically with regional partners to confront China's actions to grow its influence. The United States should advance its forces' information capabilities to compete with China's strategy of information dominance to maintain the offense-defense balance. Furthermore, the United States must engage with allies and partners through a lethal forward presence in East Asia to deter Chinese offensive actions, balance China's rise, promote stability and support the defense of allied nations, and preserve vital American interests. Through these collective actions, the United States can compete with the PRC's desire to reorder the region and address its efforts to undermine stability in the Indo-Pacific. By fostering an integrative approach, the United States must pursue a strategy of selective en-

gagement centered around diplomatic and economic cooperation and confrontation and information and military competition to arrive at a stable, peaceful balance with China while preserving vital US interests and promoting an environment of peace and security.

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Notes

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