

# A Liberal Approach to China

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The people of the Indo-Pacific region see the United States and China “as two poles, pulling their countries in opposite directions.”<sup>1</sup> The United States’ focus is to foster peace in the Indo-Pacific region by maintaining the regional order and respect for sovereignty, independence, and rules-based order. Beijing’s repressive vision of the world challenges this. With the nine-dashed line, Beijing asserts that almost all the South China Sea lies within its territorial waters and uses its economic and military might as leverage to become the hegemon in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Even with these misaligned goals, the United States and China have commonalities in universal issues that threaten global security. An effective US grand strategy of cooperative security in East Asia would take the overlapping interests of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief regarding climate changes to generate a platform for productive diplomatic dialogue between the powers, a forum by which US soft power might be operationalized and encourage future relationships of reciprocity between China and its neighbors.

The United States must use multilateral diplomacy to entangle China in international institutions and discourage it from aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific region. Diplomacy cultivates an environment of trust between nations because of the ethical standards that diplomats are held to when advocating for their government.<sup>3</sup> Cooperative security relies on building credibility through international institutions and encouraging collective action. International institutions have a critical role to play in fostering peace by connecting nations through mutually beneficial cooperation.<sup>4</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one such institution, established by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand to promote “regional peace and stability” and “active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest” in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> ASEAN currently serves as a forum for financial cooperation between its members and China in the areas of mitigating and adapting to climate change.<sup>6</sup> The United States can and should engage in this forum, as it faces the same national security challenges of climate change as the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>7</sup> This support will grow the United States’ influence in the area and provide an opportunity to engage with China diplomatically, potentially mitigating its ability to exercise pressure in the region. Xi Jinping proclaims there is a “rise in China’s international influence,” as well as its “ability to inspire and power to shape.”<sup>8</sup> To include Beijing in the rules-based order, the United States needs to

increase its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region by persuading China and the other regional nations into a multilateral diplomatic approach to start a productive dialogue that would influence China's objectives and aggressive behavior. This dialogue would establish a common purpose while outlining the differences between the individual nations' aims and demonstrate awareness of each other's interests in the region.<sup>9</sup> Once fostered, this diplomacy will develop shared preferences within particular issue areas that may contribute to a cooperative relationship in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>10</sup> Where overlapping interests between the US and China are lacking, the US can establish leverage in East Asia by continuing to build military partnerships in the region. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations in response to climate disasters offer a window through which to develop these partnerships further.

The United States can expand HADR operations in the Indo-Pacific region to generate influence and soft power. The military cooperation realized from HADR operations will provide the military capabilities required to engage the region's shared objectives. HADR operations provide aid that alleviates the suffering of foreign disaster victims. This includes rescue; evacuation; transport of food, water, clothing, and other life necessities; medical personnel and equipment; and repairing essential services.<sup>11</sup> These military operations will entangle, deepen, and create relationships between the Indo-Pacific nations and the United States.<sup>12</sup> Military cooperation establishes a shared security burden of a region that creates "stickiness." Stickiness is the locking of nations into predictable courses of action and restrains their exercise of state power.<sup>13</sup> The production of stickiness is often undermined in the Indo-Pacific region, as many smaller nations are concerned about their independence and sovereignty. Coalition and relationship building are hard, and nations do not show up "voluntarily." Still, the United States can recruit nations of the Indo-Pacific, including China, with the diplomatic embeddedness (the bilateral and multilateral tie that links nations together) created from these HADR operations.<sup>14</sup> The United States and its allies need to transform the current military alliances to have an expanded focus on HADR to address that concern, both in these smaller partners as well as in Beijing.

Assisting Beijing to address its disaster and climate security concerns through Indo-Pacific-focused operations will lower the region's existential threats. China and the countries that the United States has security alliances with (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Singapore) have common military goals of humanitarian relief and threats of disaster. These threats are universal issues and expand past the great-power competition's borders and take priority because the loss of life and resource depletion caused by natural disasters, global warming, and pandemics threaten everyone's security.<sup>15</sup> The stickiness and interdependence created by these

operations will reduce China's aggressive expansion motivation. The partnerships and shared achievement of humanitarian operations will maintain the United States' influence in the region and not allow China to fill a leadership vacuum even as its power continues to rise.

China's rise is inevitable and the best way for the United States to prepare is to use its soft power more effectively. Joseph Nye recognized that developing shared consensus and convergences of interest is more complicated than hard power, but its value lies in its longer-lasting results. Soft power can create a shared understanding and enhance a nation's ability to interact with each other by reducing tensions, mitigating conflict, and finding common ground.<sup>16</sup> More effective use of American soft power requires that it be actively on display in East Asia. America needs to increase interactions by engaging with regional institutions, like ASEAN or other Chinese-led institutions on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These interactions will show that United States-China cooperation is possible, expand human assistance resources, and improve transparency and environmental procedures.<sup>17</sup> These engagements will shine a positive light on the United States' ideals of individual liberty, the rule of law, and democracy, that will create a stark contrast between it and Beijing's domestic information suppression and its activity outside the rules-based order.<sup>18</sup> The United States can influence Beijing to work inside the established rules and institutions through global issues when it interacts with the international order.<sup>19</sup>

These strategic recommendations focus on the influence gained through the overlapping humanitarian interest between China and the United States and will maintain the United States' influence in the Indo-Pacific. America needs to wield multilateral diplomacy, operationalize soft-power campaigns, and expand HADR operations to encourage future relationships of reciprocity. This liberal grand strategy of cooperative security will prevent China from gaining influence and power at the expense of others and is critical in preserving the regional order and peace.

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## Notes

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