

A roadmap to Peace, Freedom and Prosperity in the Indo-Pacific Amid the Strategic Fluidity and Uncertainty

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The rampaging two wars in Europe and the Middle East are a stark reminder of the advent of the post-post-Cold War era in disarray.

The strategic terrain of this uncertain era has been undergoing several profound changes. Primarily, the relative decline of the US, combined with the rapid rise of China as a systemic challenger, has sapped the primacy the US has held as the sole superpower during the post-Cold War era. It is fair to say that we would not see the US hold overriding sway over international poli-

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tics within the foreseeable future again.

On a closely related development, **the foundations of the liberal international order that had buttressed global peace, freedom and prosperity are being seriously undermined** by diverse centrifugal and centripetal forces. The most significant centrifugal force is China's ambition to shape its own alternative international order. China has assisted and banded together with Russia and pariah states like Iran, North Korea and Venezuela that share hostility to, and ceaselessly disrupt, the liberal international order. The emerging and developing states of the Global South which, like China, have been the beneficiaries of globalization under the liberal international order are forming the third pivot on the world stage, though they lack a common ideology or program and tend to seek cherry-picking in the Global West-Global East confrontation.

At the same time, the centripetal **forces for the maintenance of the liberal international order are weakening** due to the rise of isolationism and America First-ism in the US, its main architect. The world with an introvert America will be left wanting for global public goods in a Kindleberger trap. The socio-economic downturn of Europe and Japan, America's allies and the traditional champions of the liberal international order, is also exacerbating this trend.

Simultaneously, **we are experiencing multiple mega changes that are closely interconnected with each other.** The Covid-19 pandemic has already wreaked havoc on an unfathomable scale, and may portend the increasing frequency and gravity of similar pandemics. Global boiling requires a joint global action to reduce the greenhouse gas emission by transitioning from fossil fuels to green energy, which **entails profound impact upon energy geopolitics.** The Fourth Industrial Revolution driven by digital transformation is altering the contour of geo-economics to underscore the significance of emerging technologies in economic competition and their deepening nexus with security. The shrinking population of developed and, increasingly, developing states will be another source of long-term power shift.

The strategic landscape is further compounded by a spate of complex poly-crisis in the form of black swans or gray rhinos. We therefore find ourselves in a murky, volatile and rudderless international community. **The features and factors of the post-post-Cold War era have meant a return of geopolitics, a fragmented global order and a hyper-connected world.**

In the post-post-Cold War era, the Indo-Pacific has become the pivotal region thanks to its rising economic and geostrategic weight in the global power constellation. During the last two decades, this region has emerged as the epicenter of the global manufacturing and consumption, generating several great powers with economic prowess and military muscle. Asia's GDP share in the world economy is projected to increase from 48 percent today to 58 percent in 2030.

There are several characteristics of the Indo-Pacific worth mentioning when discussing the prospect for peace, freedom and prosperity of the region. First and foremost is China's economic dominance and outstanding military muscle, as demonstrated by its GDP share in Asia reaching 55.6 percent in 2022 and overwhelming military outlays being the world's second largest, which outweigh the rest of Asia combined. It makes the intra-regional balance of power *à la Europe* well-nigh impossible. As the rest of Asia alone cannot check Beijing's ambition to turn the entire region into its sphere of influence, **a continued US presence and engagement is essential for preserving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.**

In global terms, **the Indo-Pacific is most crucial in determining the future course of the US-China rivalry.**

Beijing's strategic goal is to drive out the US military footprint from the first and second island chains by employing an Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) strategy. In the western Pacific, the specter of the "Thucydides Trap" looms over as China's rapidly growing military force with the advantage of geographical proximity is assessed to have already reached parity with the US. Along this geopolitical fault line lie the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, where China has made the legally dubious "Nine-dash line".

The Indo-Pacific is also a laggard in terms of regional integration and collective security arrangement. There is nothing comparable to the EU or NATO in the region owing to the absence of a region-wide historical, cultural, linguistic, or religious heritage and a weak regional identity. In a bid to bridge the gap, particularly in the security field, the US recently created a host of lattice-type mini-lateral groupings by connecting many spokes under its bilateral alliance system in the Indo-Pacific. The examples include Quad, AUKUS, Korea-US-Japan trilateral framework and other trilateral networks of similar kind.

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Moreover, **the nuclear threat in the Indo-Pacific is growing conspicuously** due to the near completion of the North Korean nuclear and missile program and China's plan to triple its nuclear warheads by the mid-2030s. Amid the nuclear parity between the US and Russia, the addition of Chinese and North Korean nuclear capability will pose a grave danger to the strategic stability, and risk triggering a nuclear domino effect in Northeast Asia. Especially worrying is North Korea's aggressive nuclear posture which does not explicitly rule out first use and even codified the development and possession of nuclear weapons in its Constitution, as it might lead to the lowered threshold for the use of nuclear weapons.

The Indo-Pacific is also replete with many potential conflicts arising from historical animosity, territorial and maritime disputes, nationalism and egregious human rights violations. **The region is currently mired in fluid and**

unstable strategic landscape, absent the genuine historical reconciliation about the unfortunate history. Unbridled nationalism coupled with rampant populism could wane the dynamism that this region has relished during the last several decades.

What can be done to secure the peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific amid the myriad risks and challenges ahead? There certainly is no panacea to address these complex vectors neatly, yet there are some valuable efforts that could contribute toward a thriving, just and peaceful Indo-Pacific. The most important priority is to prevent the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing from degenerating into a spiral of suspicion and escalation leading to open war. The two countries must spare no efforts to manage their bilateral relations by setting up guard rails, and sustain strategic communications to avoid unintended collision and conflicts.

The Biden-Xi summit in San Francisco last November was a right move in this direction but domestic politics in the two countries can unnecessarily ramp up the confrontation in rhetoric if not in substance. Many countries in the region are mindful that when the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled. The US and Chinese leaders would also do well to remember that a war between them could precipitate a nuclear Armageddon.

All major stakeholders in the region must join hands to work out a minimum code of conduct to safeguard peace, freedom and prosperity in the region. The minimum common denominators like the United Nations Charter, international law, the rule of law and the respect for human rights should guide and constrain the conduct of all states in the region. To ensure continued dialogue and communication even amid strained relations, it would be desirable to create an all-inclusive platform on dialogue and rule-setting in the Indo-Pacific, as Europe did with the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) during the Cold War. As the Helsinki process underlined the importance of human rights in their quest for peace and security in Europe, the Indo-Pacific should give priority to the promotion of human rights in the region.

The sustained joint efforts to secure minimum common denominators, create regional architecture and motivate regional rule-making can facilitate a peaceful change and eventually establish a Pax Consortis regional order. The proliferation of regional and global is-

sues of transnational nature also calls for close collaboration despite competition and confrontation among major powers.

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In this long and challenging process, **the role of middle powers such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, Canada, Indonesia and New Zealand is crucial** in playing the balancing role for the maintenance of a sound and stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific. Sharing common values and driven by common interests to protect the liberal international order, they should create a forum at which they seek close collabora-

tion to bolster the liberal international order and **engage the Global South whose voice assumes growing weight in global governance.**

Close cooperation and linkage between the Indo-Pacific and Europe are necessary to deter the axis of disruption in Eurasia. The grave threat to the security of Northeast Asia and Europe posed by the Russo-North Korean strategic convergence highlights the urgency for cooperation. Beyond mere recognition of their security indivisibility, the two regions should move to take joint actions to stabilize Eurasia in the face of rising menace.

It is welcoming to see many new initiatives in this vein intensify recently. The regular meeting between NATO and the AP4 countries in the Indo-Pacific, namely Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, is a good example of such joint efforts. The increased number of joint naval and air

exercises, the conclusions of reciprocal access agreements between states in the two regions, the joint surveillance activities against North Korea's sanctions violations and Germany's recent accession to the United Nations Command can further partnership.

Lastly, states in the Indo-Pacific should do their utmost to maintain their economic vitality from diverse headwinds. **Today, we are witnessing an increasing number of adverse forces trying to undermine the free trade system.** While eliminating non-level playing fields to make international trade fairer is important, this should not be a license for protectionism or preferential industrial policy. Excessive securitization of trade, fragmentation of supply chain, and creeping encroachment upon free trade by exploiting gray zones in the fields of labor, climate change and the environment must be inimical to regional thriving.

The defunct WTO regime must be resuscitated at an early date to play the role of rule-setter and dispute settlement mechanism. In the arena of de-risking for economic security, objectivity and transparency should be guaranteed to minimize its adverse impact upon international trade and investment and prevent its misuse or overuse.

Various hurdles are ahead on the road to peace, freedom and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. The current strategic environment in flux is not favorable for the region to weather them. We must return to the time when the international community first conceived and created the liberal international order from the ruins of the Second World War. **In the spirit of progress, human dignity, solidarity and collaboration, we in the Indo-Pacific, together with the other parts of the global community, should strive to prevent wars and sustain economic dynamism.** ■

VIEWPOINT

The Fading Pax Americana

How the International World Order Became the House of Cards

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The global dominance of the United States was unchallenged following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its power had

been predominant and growing since World War I, superseding the old European nations, with an alternation of engagements and withdrawals. This culminated in America's self-affirmation as the "indispensable nation", both as a global power and as a democracy, when the West won the tense competition with the USSR and the communist regimes in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The paradox is that just as the international community, faced with global challenges such as climate change, more than ever needs an efficient system of governance, now such a governance becomes more elusive.

9/11 was then a watershed moment that deeply shook up America, both domestically and as an actor in the international arena. It was also a watershed moment for the international dynamics worldwide.

Three elements have subsequently contributed to a sea change.

First, the failure of the interventions in Iraq and then in Afghanistan had significant consequences inside and outside the US. Domestically there was a growing reluctance to get involved abroad, in particular through a massive cultural change of the Republican Party from Reagan to Trump. This has translated into a marked reluctance to risk any new military involvement abroad. Internationally, there was a certain loss of credibility, not only of the United States but more broadly of the West, which was accompanied by the accusations of double standards by the South, even when the countries pointing the fingers are rife with their own double standards.

Second, the increase in assertiveness and the rise to international prominence of the "revisionist powers" (those looking to change the international distribution of power and for territorial gain), in particular China but also Russia, has filled the vacuum left by the lack of strategic action of the West. In parallel, the United States and the West have repeatedly neglected to take decisive action in crucial situations to support values essential to them. In the launch by Moscow of its own military operations (in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine), two aspects have played an important role: the impression given by the West that it would not stand up to protect its

own principles (the "red line" against Assad and his use of chemical weapons against his own people in 2013); and the development of the hybrid forms of warfare/influence like in Africa (use of "private" militias) or increasingly on the front of disinformation (manipulation of information).

Third, the collapse of the multilateral order, which had been mostly created and shaped after World War II by the Western powers (including the focus on Human Rights and Democracy) and the growing difficulty for its central body, the UN Security Council, to assume its global responsibilities. This has been exacerbated after Russia, one of its permanent members, decided to blatantly violate the most sacred prin-

ciples of the international community.

The long statement issued by the Presidents Xi and Putin in Beijing just before the invasion of Ukraine is the so-called political program of those "revisionist" powers. The message of this statement, aimed mostly at the audiences in the South, was "we are entitled to have our own conception of democracy and human rights. The so-called global South is indeed the audience to convince. It consists of countries in circumstances very different from the West, all naturally determined to use this competition to the best of their interests, some of them having the capacity to carve out a very influential position in this new world.

