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The U.S.-China Cold War Is a Myth

The 20th century's great standoff doesn't explain the emerging dynamic between Washington and Beijing.

By Hunter Marston

This week, the U.S. Navy conducted drills with ships from Southeast Asian countries in the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea—an apparent sign of Washington's renewed interest in the region and in challenging China.

Close U.S. partners such as Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong have warned of growing tensions between the two superpowers and urged restraint by both sides. Washington has been deepening security and diplomatic relations in the region, even with former adversaries such as Vietnam, which has been locked in a tense maritime standoff with China since July.

In recent years, the notion of an emerging second Cold War, this time between the United States and China, has gained credence. As early as 1995, China scholar David Shambaugh warned of deteriorating relations in an article titled, "The United States and China: A New Cold War?" Last year, Cold War analyst Graham Allison, the Douglas Dillon professor of government at the Harvard Kennedy School, warned of a "new cold war," and articles published in the Economist, Foreign Policy, the Washington Post, and across the mainstream media have built on this narrative. But the Cold War paradigm is not the best way to understand today's strategic landscape.

The security environment is far more benign than that of the Cold War, and middle powers—countries with more moderate power and influence—have far more agency to shape great-power competition to suit their interests. Southeast Asia is a prime case in point. The region was at the heart of the Cold War era's so-called hot wars—calamitous U.S. interventions in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that have shaped the outlooks of a generation of counterinsurgency and strategic analysts in Washington. Today, it sits at the geographic nexus of Chinese and U.S. influence, and is the site of emerging military friction. But the dynamics are very different.

Characterizing U.S.-China competition in Cold War terms risks embedding a limited framework into U.S. strategic thinking. Worse still, Washington runs the repeat danger of coming to view Southeast Asian nations as dominoes that will fall to one side or the other, rather than as autonomous partners with their own divergent interests.

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Today's international security environment is far more tranquil than that of the Cold War. Unlike the devastation of the wars in Syria and Yemen, along with the humanitarian crisis associated with massive displacement, U.S.-China competition has so far been nonviolent, occurring predominantly along economic and technological axes. Compare this to the Cold War, when the United States waged a proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and U.S. troops fought and died in Korea and Vietnam.

Stephen Wertheim, a scholar at the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University, warned in a recent New York Times op-ed that the emerging "cold war [with China]

could plunge the United States back into gruesome proxy wars around the world and risk a still deadlier war among the great powers." However, that outcome is far less likely now than it was during the Cold War. For one, the Vietnam War was born from a hard-fought struggle for independence from colonial occupation. Today, even the weakest powers in Southeast Asia display more ability to hedge between competing great powers.

U.S. and Chinese interference in other countries' internal affairs is far subtler and less destructive than U.S. and Soviet methods once were—in part because of international law and the transparency born of new digital technology and expanded internet access. That is not to say that the motives of contemporary great powers are altruistic: The Trump administration vocally advocated for a quasi-coup in Venezuela and has steadfastly supported the repressive monarchy of Saudi Arabia, while Beijing doles out hefty financial support to friendly dictators who support Chinese interests, such as Hun Sen in Cambodia. The Chinese Communist Party has also overtly pressured small countries such as the Solomon Islands to abandon diplomatic ties with Taiwan in exchange for investment and infrastructure loans.

Decades ago, middle powers such as India and Pakistan could play the United States and Soviet Union off of one another to their advantage—to an extent. Under Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia successfully balanced the United States, Soviet Union, and China, preserving his country's neutrality throughout the 1960s until Gen. Lon Nol launched a coup overthrowing Sihanouk in 1970.

Today, such countries have more options. Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage compares them to "knights" on a chessboard, as opposed to "pawns." For example, since a military coup in 2014, Thailand has been grappling with a domestic political crisis and civil-military tensions. The Obama administration limited contact with the junta led by Gen. Prayuth Chan-Ocha and suspended security assistance. Meanwhile, Bangkok has cultivated warmer ties with Beijing, for instance by purchasing three Chinese submarines and granting Chinese telecommunications company Huawei's bid to roll out 5G internet technology in the country. In response the Trump administration has hosted Prayuth on a White House visit in 2017 and in 2018 agreed to deepen trade ties. The United States and Royal Thai Navy coordinated closely during this week's naval exercises in Southeast Asia.

Likewise, the Philippines under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte has swung in a more illiberal direction and pushed back against its traditional alliance with the United States while cultivating positive ties with China. Beijing has promised multibillion-dollar investment projects, and Manila has floated the possibility of joint oil exploration with Chinese companies in Philippine waters in the South China Sea. In a radical departure from the Obama administration, U.S. President Donald Trump has praised Duterte's brutal war on drugs, which has killed more than 5,000 civilians, and worked to bring Manila back into the fold.

There are also important differences to consider between Soviet and Chinese ambitions. Despite Chinese President Xi Jinping's vision of a "community of common destiny" connected by his $1 trillion infrastructure push, the Belt and Road Initiative, China's near-term goal is regional primacy, not global hegemony (even if debate remains over Beijing's long-term goals). While there are worrying signs that Xi has been trying to inculcate the notion of a "Chinese dream," or the resurgence of empire, and to exert influence over members of the Chinese diaspora around the world, China's central objective—to displace the United States as the dominant regional power—is relatively modest compared to the Soviet Union's. And China's government may not

want a sudden change in the balance of power. Until Beijing feels it has more capacity to provide for regional security, it stands to benefit from the gradual diminution of U.S. primacy. American power provides a degree of stability in Asia, a public good even China can appreciate.

China isn't just aiming to erode the United States' military edge—by militarizing artificial islands in the South China Sea and enhancing its presence by stationing troops at a naval base in Cambodia, for instance. Beijing has actively promoted a new model of power for other countries to emulate, and it has seen a steady rise in perceived influence. According to a new survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, nearly half of Southeast Asians say China has the most influence strategically and politically, while 73 percent say China has the most economic influence.

Today, economic power is arguably more important than military power for competition. While military might is still essential to the relative balance of power between the United States and China, Beijing has demonstrated how economic strength translates into global influence. It has used the power of the purse to woo unsteady allies like the Philippines and Thailand away from the U.S. orbit and cause more steadfast allies such as Australia and South Korea to sometimes put Beijing's interests above Washington's. In the long run, influence is a much less costly means of achieving strategic goals than military power (or conflict).

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Because China is a different kind of superpower than the Soviet Union was, the United States must compete differently. The Cold War preoccupation with military spending no longer makes sense: Washington already spends more than twice what Beijing does on its military. By privileging the military lens, Washington risks misusing strategic resources that should be devoted to new economic initiatives.

The United States has pulled back from international trade agreements and berated partners such as Vietnam for taking advantage of the open trading system. Despite this squandering of trust and goodwill, America still retains a considerable soft power advantage over China in Southeast Asia. However, if Washington intends to maintain regional influence, it should start from the premise: Do no harm.

Trump's obsession with trade deficits, which fail to capture the overall health of bilateral trade, has led him to lambaste emerging partners that could otherwise have assisted the United States with its China strategy. Southeast Asian nations are hungry for economic opportunities and eager for trade with both the United States and China. The Trump administration should abandon its preoccupation with bilateral trade deals, which are time-consuming, burdensome, and offer fewer payoffs than multilateral pacts do.

To that end, the White House should also add further substance and detail to its "free and open Indo-Pacific" vision, which Trump outlined in a speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO Summit in Vietnam in 2017, prioritizing sovereignty, "fair and reciprocal trade," and freedom from coercion. In order to provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road, Washington must put forward an economic program for the region backed by funding and personnel. Trump should continue to nominate and fill the positions of top diplomats working on Asia.

One promising indication of U.S. commitment to Asia came with the release in June of the Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, which offered a clear and concise statement of the

challenges the United States must confront there. The report warns that Beijing is seeking to "reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations."

Washington has a major opportunity at the upcoming East Asia Summit in November to demonstrate its goals. If the United States wants to maintain support among Southeast Asian partners for its vision of a rules-based regional order, it must speak to them on their own terms rather than apply an outdated Cold War lens to today's more complex competition. If Trump opts to skip the summit like he did last year, Southeast Asian countries will likely conclude that they are not a priority for the United States. In that case, they will inevitably move further into China's orbit, hastening an era of diminished U.S. influence.

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