

# Red and Blue Tides

The ebb and flow of competing strategies in the Indo-Pacific region

by LtCol John W. Black

America's national security depends on a stable, cooperative, and prosperous international order. To stay politically and economically relevant, the United States must continuously assess threats and adapt to changes that affect its status in the international order. Unfortunately, within the last two decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) or, more specifically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) within the PRC, has evolved into a primary competitor for the United States.<sup>1</sup> CCP words and actions have undermined U.S., ally, and partner interests and increased instability in the Indo-Pacific region. If left unaddressed, CCP actions and behaviors increase the probability that a strategic miscalculation may plunge the Indo-Pacific into nation-state conflict, which would negatively impact the United States and the Indo-Pacific region. This article will identify U.S. interests, identify CCP actions that have threatened U.S. interests, identify what a U.S. response to CCP actions might look like, and identify key focus areas that we (as security cooperation practitioners) can discuss with our allies and partners to generate shared understanding and synergy to more effectively influence and shape CCP actions.

U.S. interests are broad and varied. Enduring American interests include protecting the American homeland and people, assuring access to domains and markets, maintaining favorable (regional) balances of power, and promoting American values (i.e., unalienable rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness; competition, diversity, equality, independence, and self-determination). American spirit can be rallied, forged into a collective national will, and driven toward action when American honor and interests are trampled. For

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example, think about the statements, "Remember Pearl Harbor" and "Remember 9/11." The most recent U.S. *National Security Strategy* (published in 2017) identified four pillars to protect and advance U.S. interests: (1) protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life; (2) promote American prosperity; (3) preserve peace through strength; and (4) advance American interests.<sup>2</sup> With these American interests in mind, what CCP actions have threatened U.S. interests?

Since the turn of the century, numerous CCP actions have undermined U.S. interests and threatened the Indo-Pacific region's stability and prosperity. These actions include, but are not limited to, the following:

*Diplomatically*, the CCP has used diplomatic and economic coercion to politically isolate Taiwan, a sovereign democratic nation,<sup>3</sup> to politically advocate for baseless claims such as "territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas are Chinese core interests,"<sup>4</sup> and to silence critics of CCP policies. Interestingly, in 2014, President Xi Jinping attempted to persuade President Barack Obama to adopt a "new type of great power relations" with the PRC, which (in effect) sought to influence the United States to turn its back on its allies and partners.<sup>5</sup>

*Informationally*, the Peoples Liberation Army's 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy* identified four kinds of war the PRC would prepare for, including an "anti-secessionist war" over Taiwan and wars over disputed

territories and waters.<sup>6</sup> In 2014, the Peoples Liberation Army adjusted its strategy to "winning informatized local war."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, a speculative writing titled *Unrestricted Warfare*, written by two Senior Colonels who were subsequently promoted, identified, and advocated for the use of all means (military and non-military, lethal and non-lethal) to compel the United States to accept the PRC's interests.<sup>8</sup> The CCP has used many of the means identified in authoritative and speculative works to advance its interests and undermine U.S. interests. CCP intellectual property theft has cost the United States between \$250–600 billion a year.<sup>9</sup> The CCP has strategically messaged negative things such as "the U.S. is in decline," "it's time to build a de-Americanized world," and "it's time for a new international reserve currency (the yuan) to replace the U.S. dollar."<sup>10</sup> The CCP pledged not to militarize the islands in the South China Sea but did.<sup>11</sup> The CCP has interfered in the elections of Australia, Taiwan, and the United States, although it claims to adhere to the principle of non-interference.<sup>12</sup> The CCP also withheld coronavirus information from the World Health Organization and destroyed medical information that may have helped curb or slow the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.<sup>13</sup>

*Militarily*, the CCP has built high-tech weapons, including aircraft carriers, long-range anti-ship and theater ballistic missiles, fifth-generation fighters, and enhanced its cyber and space warfare

capabilities to support its active defense strategy, which has been mislabeled by Americans as the PRC's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) or counter-intervention strategies. In simple terms, the PRC's

the South China Sea Arbitration, the CCP demonstrated it has no intention of abiding by established norms, rules, and common law when it does not serve its interests.<sup>17</sup> This was reiterated in Jan-

acting like a great power. Those same people would likely identify occasions when other great powers, including the United States, ignored various rulings.

These combined actions and behaviors confirm that the CCP is aggressively employing its elements of national power to achieve strategic, operational, and tactical advantages in the Indo-Pacific region. These things also signal the CCP's intentions to do whatever it wants despite objections from (and at the expense of) other nations, including the PRC's neighbors and the U.S. CCP actions endanger American people (including more than 5,000 Americans in Taiwan and 375,000 U.S. Department of Defense personnel in the Indo-Pacom region), interests, security, prosperity, and values. To prevent CCP activities from destabilizing the Indo-Pacific region, and potentially plunging the region into conflict and a downward economic spiral, how should America respond?

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***In simple terms, the PRC's active defense strategy is a layered continental defense strategy designed to allow the People's Liberation Army to accomplish designated military objectives that support PRC political objectives.***

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active defense strategy is a layered continental defense strategy designed to allow the People's Liberation Army to accomplish designated military objectives that support PRC political objectives. Although PRC documents do not specify PRC intentions, one can assume the strategy is intended to set conditions to restrict foreign naval access to the South and East China Seas, keep foreign offensive capabilities far away from the PRC and Taiwanese coasts, functionally dislocate the U.S. operational center of gravity (U.S. combined-joint forces), and threaten nations by placing them in the CCP's weapons engagement zones. The CCP has aggressively employed gray-zone tactics with maritime vessels (civilian and military) to bully Philippine, Vietnamese, Indian, Japanese, and U.S. ships in the South China Sea and East China Seas.<sup>14</sup>

*Economically*, the CCP has used dollar diplomacy to gain access to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island nations, including several nations that have Compacts of Free Association with the United States, and economic coercion and debt diplomacy (like a carrot and stick) to advance its interests.<sup>15</sup> Within the past several years, the CCP has economically coerced Australia, Japan, Mongolia, Palau, and South Korea for pursuing policies deemed harmful to CCP interests.<sup>16</sup>

*Legally*, by rejecting and ignoring the Hague Convention's ruling on the Philippines versus China (PCA case number 2013-19), also known as

uary 2021 when the CCP passed the China Coast Guard Law, authorizing its ships to "take all necessary measures, including the use of weapons."<sup>18</sup> Some people in the PRC will likely hint "law is often the weapon of the week," so by rejecting the ruling, the PRC was



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America should play to its strengths. The United States and ally responses should look like the rainbow flag; it should be colorful, inclusive, and hopeful by incorporating its diverse alliance and partner network. The U.S. response should be based on the fact that its alliance and partner network is the center of gravity and a critical strength for U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. alliance and partner network allows the United States to work with, by, and through its allies and partners to safeguard mutually beneficial interests and goals, including freedom of navigation, access to the global commons and economic markets, intelligence sharing (to facilitate decision making and counter transnational threats), and protection from nation-state military/paramilitary coercion. The U.S. bilateral security architecture in the Indo-Pacific comprises mutual defense arrangements with Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. This security architecture has underwritten security in the Indo-Pacific since the end of World War II. Because of its existence, countries in the Indo-Pacific developed internal political and economic systems that lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. The alliances have enabled the United States to deploy military troops and assets throughout the Indo-Pacific. Without the alliance network, the United States and its allies and partners would not have maintained a credible deterrent capability to encourage constructive and rules-based behavior in the region. It is useful to consider what may have occurred in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia had the United States had not maintained a forward presence in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, several countries would likely have developed nuclear weapons to counter China's growth, communism would have spread into Southeast Asia, and interstate conflict would have occurred because of political-economic disputes in or around Taiwan, the East China Seas, the South China Seas, and the China-India border region. The alliance/network-enabled forward presence assures allies, maintains peace and stability, deters aggression, supports freedom of navigation, facilitates bilateral

and multilateral partnership, increases interoperability, builds partner capacity in pursuit of mutually beneficial interests and objectives, and increases stakeholder burden-sharing in a fiscally constrained environment. The alliance network is symbiotic and synergistic to the alliance and partner system participants. Security, stability, and prosperity are beneficial for every country in the Indo-Pacific, including China. Without U.S. ally and partner support, the United States cannot realistically protect its interests in the Indo-Pacific.

By working with, by, and through each other and multilateral institutions, the United States and its allies and partners can strengthen the resiliency of the existing rules-based international order. By taking a whole network approach, the United States and its allies and partners can holistically and synergistically employ all elements of national power to improve the security, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region. What should the United States discuss with its allies and partners to generate solidarity and synergy to respond to CCP actions and behaviors effectively?

*Diplomatically*, we must ensure we are physically present to discuss and better align our individual and collective strategies to improve the resiliency, stability, and tensile strength of the existing rules-based international order. U.S. diplomatic absence at key regional meetings hurts the United States and its allies. Collectively, we must assure each other and the region, deter aggression, maintain free and open sea/air/cyber lines of communication, and posture our nations to respond to destabilizing actions rapidly. We are stronger together.

*Informationally*, we must be clear, open, respectful, and transparent regarding our interests and boundaries. We must actively and empathetically listen to our allies, partners, and competitors to ensure we understand what is essential to each other and the region. We must share critical information to facilitate better awareness and decision making. Candid, clear, and respectful communication is especially important when discussing divergent views and disagreements between each other's interests. When and where we can, we

should seek to collaborate and build consensus. When and where we cannot, we should ensure the other stakeholders know why. We must provide a reliable and secure alternative to PRC-sponsored 5G networks. We must ask CCP leaders to keep previous promises and to clarify current policy differences that diverge from previous CCP policy. Although our former political administration did not urge it, advocating for human rights, democratic self-governance, and universal freedoms (i.e., speech, religion, assembly, etc.) may serve as a beacon of hope for oppressed people.

*Militarily*, we must seek to improve combined and joint interoperability and security-related capability development. Every nation must be free to govern itself without fear of coercion or outside interference. By working with, by, and through our allies and partners, we can tailor capability development programs and improve stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. Maintaining political support, including access agreements, geographically distributing force posture, and improving the lethality, survivability, and sustainability of combined-joint forces and capabilities will be critical to maintaining the peace. Collectively, we can maintain a relative balance of power over competitors.

*Economically*, we must find a way to work with, by, and through our allies and partners to offer alternatives to the CCP's Regional Economic Cooperation Partnership and One-Belt, One-Road Initiative. Both can be helpful and harmful to the region. The United States, Japan, and Australia Blue Dot Network Initiative provides an opportunity for economic development. Although current domestic support for the United States' participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership is low, evolving economic realities may encourage and require the United States to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership to remain economically competitive.<sup>18</sup> U.S. participation would be well received by the existing signatories.

An argument can also be made that the former administration in the United States was nearly as disruptive (at least in the diplomatic, information, and

economic realms) toward several U.S. allies and partners as the CCP was. The current administration must repair damaged relationships to reduce unnecessary friction and strain on the alliance and partner network. Too much (internal and external) pressure on the network may exceed the load capacity of the system, causing it to rupture at a time that the United States and its allies and partners need it the most.

An argument can also be made that the PRC does not have to be a competitor. This argument is valid; however, before the PRC gets removed from the competitor category, the CCP needs to dramatically alter and change its course, especially in regard to the words and actions it directs at the United States and its network of allies and partners. Despite the United States and the CCP having several strong (and potentially 'wicked' or unsolvable) disagreements (i.e., the differences we place on the importance of human rights and individual freedoms, the CCP's oppressive treatment of certain portions of its population [non-Han Chinese, mainly Tibetans and Uyghurs], the CCP's unlawful claims to territory in the East and South China Seas, etc.), there are areas that the United States and the PRC can cooperate. Several of these areas include, but are not limited to, the following: climate change, counter-drug/piracy/proliferation/terrorism/trafficking, cyber, transnational crime, economic and infrastructure development, job creation/training, academic exchanges, and humanitarian assistance/natural disaster and pandemic response. If the United States and the PRC can cooperate in these areas, regional stability and prosperity could be improved, and further bi/multilateral areas of cooperation could be explored. Furthermore, the American and Chinese cultures can continue to harmoniously interact to the benefit of both cultures and the world.

In conclusion, America's national security depends on a stable, cooperative, and prosperous international order. CCP actions with the last two decades have threatened America's national security and undermined U.S., ally, and partner interests. CCP actions and behaviors

have increased instability and the likelihood that a strategic miscalculation may occur in the Indo-Pacific region.

To prevent the environment in the Indo-Pacific region from deteriorating further, America needs to work with, by, and through its network of allies and partners. By holistically and synergistically leveraging the strengths of each other, the United States and its network of allies and partners can more effectively influence and shape the CCP's actions to benefit the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region. By leveraging and optimizing the network, America and the Indo-Pacific region can reap the benefits of increased collaboration and cooperation. Failure to do this increases the chance that fear, honor, and interest miscalculations between China and its neighbors or China and the United States may plunge the region into a conflict, which would negatively impact millions of people's lives and potentially torpedo President Xi Jinping's China Dream.

#### Notes

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