

The Rise of China: Asian Perceptions and Strategic Responses with Special Reference to the North Korean Threat

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A World Order in Transition and Asia

The beginning of economic reforms by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and China's subsequent rise as the world's second largest economy was one of the most significant developments in the post-World War II era and defined the geo-economic plateau of the late 20th century. In 2018, China has not only risen economically, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has become the most powerful military force in the Asia-Pacific. If current military reforms proceed as planned under President Xi Jinping—the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong—the PLA stands to not only contest U.S. supremacy in the region since the end of World War II, but eventually, matching and perhaps even replacing the United States as a hegemonic power.

This has not yet happened but America's uncontested strategic supremacy from the end of the Cold War in 1990 until the 2000s following the collapse of the former Soviet Union through the accelerated rise of China is over. The so-called "unipolar moment" or the period from America's unilateral global dominance to a more multipolar world. As Charles Krauthammer wrote in July 1990:

This surrender [the fall of the USSR and German unification] marks a unique historical phenomenon, which might be called the moment of unipolarity. The bipolar world in which the real power emanated only from Moscow and Washington is dead. The multipolar world to which we are headed, in which power will emanate from Berlin and Tokyo, Beijing and Brussels, as well as Washington and Moscow, is struggling to be born. The transition between these two worlds is now, and it won't last long. But the instant in which we are living is a moment of unipolarity, where world power resides in one reasonably coherent, serenely dominant, entity: the Western alliance, unchallenged and not yet (though soon to be) fractured by victory.¹

Nearly thirty years since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, a truly multipolar world has

¹ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/07/20/the-unipolar-moment/62867add-2fe9-493f-a0c9-4bfba1ec23bd/?utm_term=.c5c6e6227771

yet to appear but the liberal international order that was shaped and led by the United States and its Western partners (including key allies in the Asia-Pacific) is undoubtedly weaker and fractured than ever before. Some scholars have alluded to the rise of a so-called “Eastphalian order” as a distinct manifestation of the “Westphalian order” that has dominated the international system for the past 300 years. “The idea of ‘Eastphalia’ communicates that conditions have emerged in which Asian countries have a say in world affairs not dictated by, or subordinated to, Western ideas and interests....The growth in power and importance of China, India and Asia as a region draws attention to how Asian countries would use their power to influence global affairs.”² Notwithstanding the problems of the current liberal international order and the cumulative rise of Asian power, this isn’t synonymous with an Asian-centric world order.

Still, the liberal international order has been under attack on multiple fronts. The “victory” of the West following the end of the Cold War was equated by many as the on-going supremacy of the Western-dominated world order. “But it turns out that many people in many places care more about national identities, historic enmities, territorial symbols, and traditional cultural values than they care about “freedom” as liberals define it.”³ The critical question is whether China has the political acumen to assume greater political responsibilities in the international arena at a time when China confronts massive socio-economic change. Indeed, while it is undeniable that China has harnessed and will continue to produce more hard power than at any time since the PRC’s founding in 1949 and that the Chinese Communist Party remains unchallenged at home, these two critical developments are highly dependent on the party’s ability to maintain performance legitimacy or providing the people with higher living standards, steady employment, and greater civil liberties within certain limits.

As the Chinese economy no longer grows at double-digit rates and may actually be far lower than the 6.5% growth in GDP that Beijing announces, the fact remains that social and political unrest is going to increase while China remains at the apogee of its power. This is the central dilemma that Beijing faces and a dilemma that is not likely to dissipate anytime in the near future. China’s ability to displace the United States as the principal hegemon in the Asia-Pacific might be possible over the longer term especially in military terms but China is unlikely to assume global leadership unless and until it begins to transform its political system.

Waning U.S. Influence in the Indo-Pacific

² Sung Won Kim, David P. Filder, and Sumit Ganguly, “A World Led by India and China,” *Forbes*, November 14, 2008, https://www.forbes.com/2008/11/14/eastphalia-geopolitics-india-oped-cx_sk_df_sg_1114kimfidlrganguly.html#1601c5c01e59

³ Stephen M. Walt, “The Collapse of the Liberal World Order,” *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/26/the-collapse-of-the-liberal-world-order-european-union-brexit-donald-trump/>

One of the biggest debates in international politics over the past two decades has been whether Asia will ultimately replace the West as the principal global driver, and over time, if it would emerge as the dominant hegemon. Particularly since the advent of the Trump Administration and the emphasis on American unilateralism and retrenchment, key facets of the liberal international order and specifically, the role of the United States as the world's policeman, have come under increased scrutiny. Right after Donald Trump was inaugurated in January 2017, it was noted by Murray Carroll that "the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, however, has called into serious question the role of the US in the Paris Agreement, the direction of international cooperation on climate change, and moreover, the role of the US in the liberal international order and its cohesiveness moving forward. On climate change, for example, Trump and his cabinet vacillate between outright denial and "lukewarmism" (open to the possible existence of climate change but denial of its importance or the urgency of a response)."⁴

As he promised during the campaign, Trump pulled the U.S. out of the Paris climate accord, opted out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade agreement that was at the heart of the Obama Administration's Asia policy, and more recently, decided to discard the Iranian nuclear agreement. On May 8, 2018, Trump said that "the Iran deal is defective at its core. If we do nothing, we know exactly what will happen...In just a short period of time, the world's leading state sponsor of terror will be on the cusp of acquiring the world's most dangerous weapons."⁵ Yet at the same time, Trump stressed that a major deal with North Korea could happen following the April 27, 2018 inter-Korean summit between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Over-arching U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific has waned under Trump's short watch because he has amplified haphazard and contradictory policies towards allies, partners, and adversaries across the region. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump chastised key allies such as Korea and Japan for being free riders on maintaining U.S. forces (which isn't true since Japan assumes 80% of the cost-sharing burden and South Korea's share is 55%) and even remarked that a nuclearized Japan and South Korea might not be a bad idea. Since January 2017, Trump has pulled out of the TPP, allowed high-level U.S. officials to visit Taiwan, imposed steel and aluminum tariffs on key U.S. allies including Japan, renegotiated the free trade agreement with South Korea, supported Filipino President Duterte's extra-judicial killings of thousands of alleged drug dealers and users, chastised China for expanding its military

⁴ Murray Carroll, "Trump and the Prospects of an Illiberal International Order," Oxford Research Group, January 26, 2017, <https://sustainablesecurity.org/2017/01/26/trump-and-the-prospects-of-an-illiberal-international-order/>. Officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the agreement was signed by the P5+1 (Germany) and Iran. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran was deemed to be in compliance. However, the Trump Administration decided that the agreement had too many loop holes.

⁵ Anne Gearan and Karen DeYoung, "Trump pulls United States out of Iran nuclear deal, calling the pact 'an embarrassment,'" *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-will-announce-plans-to-pull-out-of-iran-nuclear-deal-despite-pleas-from-european-leaders/2018/05/08/4c148252-52ca-11e8-9c91-7dab596e8252_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.63433fab8793

presence in the South China Sea, and threatening to pull out U.S. forces from South Korea. As Hugh White noted:

His trip to Asia was not enough to prop up US regional leadership. On the contrary, America's position in Asia would be stronger today if he had stayed at home playing golf on his own courses, rather than undertaken the 12-day trip which ended this week...Much of the blame for that lies with Trump himself, and the coterie of economic nationalists who crafted his message on trade. That message starkly repudiated the commitment to free trade which has been the bedrock both of Asia's remarkable economic achievement and of America's central role in it. Trump's visit to Asia dealt America out of the region's economic future.⁶

White also noted that rhetoric and empty gestures such as a U.S.-Japan-India-Australia quadrilateral cooperation can hardly be construed as sound policy and that "it makes no sense any longer to imagine that China's bid to replace the US as East Asia's leading power can be deflected by mere phrase making or cosy meetings between officials...[and] no matter who is president, the US will fail to resist China's skill-full and relentless campaign to ease America out of Asia, and take its place."⁷ To be sure, it is far too early to write off the United States from the Indo-Pacific but it is undeniably true that despite the U.S. pivot to Asia that was highlighted the Obama Administration, the policy lacked meaningful resources and tangible augmentation of U.S. power in the region. While the Trump Administration has increased defense spending, deep cuts in the state department's budget, inconsistent U.S. stances on trade, encouraging protectionist policies, and absence of any cohesive strategy, American influence has never been so weak since it assumed center stage after World War II.

As Daniel Blumenthal of the American Enterprise Institute has emphasized, "those who believe in an inevitable Chinese takeover of Asia may not be wholly wrong. But that is not because China is overtaking the United States in wealth generation; far from it. Rather, it is because Beijing is taking advantage of an American political system unwilling to deal with its fiscal problems and provide for the common defense against the country's most challenging threats."⁸ Other commentators have stressed that Trump's emphasis on "Making America Great Again" is, in reality, global retrenchment just at a time when China is more than willing to assume a much more robust role in Asia and increasingly, across the world. "In Asia generally, the tectonic plates of global change are inching forward, threatening America's unchallenged superpower status, and President Xi is the force keeping them moving."⁹

⁶ Hugh White, "Why the US is no match for China in Asia, and Trump should have stayed at home and played golf," *South China Morning Post*, November 15, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2120010/why-us-no-match-china-asia-and-trump-should-have-stayed-home>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Daniel Blumenthal, "China seeks to Surpass U.S. Influence in Asia," *RealClearWorld*, April 26, 2017, https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2017/04/26/china_seeks_to_surpass_us_influence_in_asia_112314.html

⁹ "In Asia, Trump confronts the decline of the American empire," Nic Robertson, *CNN*, November 3, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/03/opinions/asia-trip-trump-confronts-limits-of-american-empire-opinion-robertson/index.html>

Moreover, Asia also faces unparalleled challenges:

*Despite all those dreams of Asia's glittering future, it's unlikely to resemble the peaceful prosperity of Europe, nor is it likely to see a continuation of U.S. hegemony or a repeat of the China-centered system of centuries past. It's likely, however, to involve population decline, economic contraction, heightened nationalism, and rising waters — a future, in short, filled with troubles and dangers of every sort. Although Washington still commands considerable power in the region, it could stand back, Trump-like, and just watch everything unravel. Or, alongside Beijing, it could make a serious investment in a new organization of security and economic cooperation, in which the United States and China would be equal partners, the region could have its collective say, and the new nationalism would be deprived of its major *raison d'être*. Without such a supranational vision that could bring the region together around the twin threats of climate change and economic inequality, one thing is essentially guaranteed. The Asia to come won't look shiny and new like some Hollywood movie. The future may not look like Asia at all, but more like Europe circa 1913, at the edge of conflict and cataclysm.¹⁰ (Emphasis added).*

Real or False Peace Between the two Koreas

Since January 2018, the two Koreas have made path-breaking breakthroughs although it remains far from certain if the “Olympic Thaw” can be sustained into tangible results leading to genuine reconciliation and institutionalization of confidence building measures. In a sign that a major was in the making, Kim Jong Un sent his sister Kim Yo Jong as a special envoy during the opening ceremony of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games in South Korea on February 9, 2018. This was the first time that a member of the Kim Family dynasty visited South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Korean and foreign media portrayed Kim Yo Jong's visit as an ice breaking moment in inter-Korean ties since she is the second most powerful person in North Korea. An alternate member of the politburo and director of the powerful Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP).

North Korea adroitly gained the upper hand in the propaganda wars between the two Koreas when Kim Jong Un became the center of world attention. Kim is the world's most brutal dictator as evinced by the killing of his uncle Jang Seong Thaek, the assassination of his half-brother Kim Jong Nam, and the killing or purging of hundreds of officers in the armed forces and officials in the KWP. But the April 27, 2018 inter-Korean summit at the Peace Village in South Korea provided Kim Jong Un with powerful optics that portrayed him as a “bold leader” who was different from his grandfather and his father. Substantively, President Moon Jae-in

¹⁰ John Feller, “Who Will Take America's Place in Asia?,” *Huffpost*, June 1, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/who-will-take-americas-place-in-asia_us_59302997e4b010df62cc0205#

and Kim Jong Un issued a joint declaration that contained general principles rather than specific commitments including provisions emphasizing reduction of military tensions by reciprocal and parallel steps, exchange of separated families, implementation of previous agreements in enhancing economic cooperation, and the reaffirmation of the non-aggression agreement that was part of a broader South-North Basic Agreement signed in 1991.

Insofar as the nuclear issue was concerned, the communique stated that “South and North Korea confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. South and North Korea shared the view that the measures being initiated by North Korea are very meaningful and crucial for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and agreed to carry out their respective roles and responsibilities in this regard. South and North Korea agreed to actively seek the support and cooperation of the international community for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”¹¹ The declaration was heralded as a significant milestone in inter-Korean ties and while Kim stated that he was committed to denuclearization and the joint statement reflected it, there was nothing new in terms of more concrete steps towards the dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons.

North Korea has always insisted that the nuclear issue should be directly negotiated with the United States and Kim Jong Un made another unprecedented gesture when he invited President Trump to hold the first U.S.-North Korea summit. South Korea’s director of National Security Affairs Chung Eui-yong and director of the National Intelligence Service Suh Hoon visited Washington, D.C. on March 9 and briefed President Trump and his aides on the outcome of the inter-Korean summit and delivered Kim Jong Un’s invitation to Trump.¹² Unexpectedly, Trump agreed on the spot to accept Kim’s invitation. Subsequently, Trump announced that the first-ever U.S.-North Korea summit would take place on June 12, 2018 in Singapore.

Trump’s point man for high-level talks with North Korea is Mike Pompeo—the former CIA director and current secretary of state. After his second visit to North Korea, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that if North Korea committed to denuclearization, the United States would take regime change off the table and offer security assurances.¹³ As Trump announced that there would be a U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore, he stated that “I think he [Kim Jong Un] did this because I really think he wants to do something and bring that country into the real world. I really believe that.”¹⁴ But former director of the CIA John Brennan stated that “I do think that Kim Jong Un, who I despise because of the brutality he

¹¹ “Full text of joint declaration issued at inter-Korean summit,” *Yonhap News Agency*, April 27, 2018, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2018/04/27/0200000000AEN20180427013900315.html>

¹² Ankit Panda, “South Korean Envoy: Trump Accepts North Korea’s Invitation to Meet Kim Jong Un,” *The Diplomat*, March 9, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/south-korean-envoy-trump-accepts-north-koreas-invitation-to-meet-kim-jong-un/>

¹³ “Pompeo: US firms could invest in North Korea and Kim may get ‘security assurances,’” *The Guardian*, May 13, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/13/pompeo-us-firms-invest-north-korea-kim-jong-un-security-assurances>

¹⁴ David Nakamura and John Wagner, “Trump announces June 12 summit in Singapore with North Korean leader, U.S. prisoners released,” *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-announces-june-12-summit-in-singapore-with-north-korean-leader/2018/05/10/8f1ad3ac-5438-11e8-9c91-7dab596e8252_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3b12a87b4595

has put upon the North Korean people, unfortunately I think he has been masterful in how he has manipulated perceptions and how he has manipulated and quite frankly duped Mr. Trump.”¹⁵ Regardless of the on-going euphoria in South Korea and especially the Moon Administration that Kim is genuinely committed to giving up his nuclear weapons as well as inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), it remains unknown if Kim Jong Un is ready to go down the path of denuclearization.

As the United States and South Korea conducted their annual air force military exercises called Max Thunder, Pyongyang announced that the exercise was a provocation designed for a future invasion and cancelled a working-level meeting with South Korean officials. Moreover, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan announced that “if the U.S. is trying to drive us into a corner to force our unilateral nuclear abandonment, we will no longer be interested in such a dialogue and cannot but reconsider our planning to the DPRK-U.S. summit.”¹⁶ Such announcements are most likely being made to strengthen North Korea’s position going into the summit, as a signal to the Moon government that inter-Korean ties could suffer depending on what Trump chooses to do, and for domestic consumption to bolster political support to highlight the fact that Kim Jong Un is not going to bend to U.S. pressure.

If the U.S.-North Korea summit proceeds as scheduled, both sides will gain political dividends since Kim will be first North Korean leader to meet with a U.S. president and Trump will attempt to craft the summit as a “major breakthrough” that only happened because of his strategic acumen. Although marginal progress could be made such as North Korea’s announcement of denuclearization with reciprocal U.S. measures such as toning down joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises, the political opportunity costs for Kim Jong Un is much too high should he agree to the complete, verifiable, irreversible, and dismantlement (CVID) of his nuclear weapons program. But regardless of the fact that Kim Jong Un is much more aware of the outside world than his father, the critical question is whether he is genuinely prepared to accept CVID.

If Kim is prepared to undertake a fundamental shift in North Korea’s security policy by accepting CVID, he would have to under the following unprecedented steps: (1) accept the most intrusive and extensive verification regime including inspections and monitoring of all known and unknown nuclear and ballistic missile facilities; (2) convince the Korean People’s Army (KPA) which has been the backbone of the Kim Dynasty since 1948 that Kim is prepared to give up all nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles including ICBMs given that while the KPA’s conventional forces number 1.1 million, it is a backward force that is hollowed out; (3) convince his people that notwithstanding seven decades of constant anti-American

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anna Fifield, “North Korea expands threat to cancel Trump-Kim summit, saying it won’t be pushed to abandon its nukes,” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/north-korea-threatens-to-cancel-summit-with-trump-over-military-drills/2018/05/15/04a15a5e-5878-11e8-8b92-45fdd7aaef3c_story.html?utm_term=.98a3ebf6ec04

propaganda that seeps into every facet of North Korean life including the daily reminder that America's hostile policy towards North Korea and ever-growing sanctions are responsible for the plight of the North Korean economy; (4) agree to full normalization of relations with the United States (and Japan) which would significantly weaken the regime's rationale for maintaining constant vigilance against North Korea's arch enemy, the United States; and (5) if Kim undertakes fundamental economic reforms such as emulating Vietnam or even China, that he is confident in controlling the political, social, economic, and technological infusion of information at an unprecedented rate into North Korea.

For the world's most totalitarian regime in the world, such steps would be tantamount to raising a white flag with potentially very negative repercussions for the North Korean regime. Kim's major concern is ensuring the survival of the Kim Dynasty and is entirely feasible that he is thinking about undertaking a fundamental U-turn in North Korea's economic system. But if Kim undertakes such steps, it remains highly in doubt whether he would be able to control secondary and tertiary consequences such as the loosening of surveillance on North Korean citizens, unbridled corruption in the party, the army, and the bureaucracy and the fact that even today, North Korea is surviving only because of the proliferation of black markets and critical food and fuel support from North Korea. In the end, even if Kim Jong Un wants to introduce unprecedented economic reforms into North Korea, he would have to also dismantle the Gulags, open North Korea to foreign capital and technologies, undertake much greater opening to the outside world, and allow his people to see alternatives. All things considered, such moves would lead to greater instability in the North Korean system and ultimately, a point of no return that could have grave consequences for the Kim regime.