

US-China Relations – Consensus on Strategic Competition:

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Last October, US Vice President Mike Pence devoted an entire speech at the Hudson Institute, a prominent US think tank, towards the various levers of strategic competition with China. At the time, [Pence stressed](#): “America had hoped that economic liberalization would bring China into greater partnership with us and with the world. Instead, China has chosen economic aggression, which has in turn emboldened its growing military. Nor, as we hoped, has Beijing moved toward greater freedom for its people. For a time, Beijing inched toward greater liberty and respect for human rights, but in recent years, it has taken a sharp U-turn toward control and oppression.” Pence’s speech was followed by a strong critique of China’s predatory lending practices and approach through the Belt and Road Initiative, during his presence at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Leader’s summit in Papua New Guinea last November.

But it is important to somewhat disconnect – in this case – the rhetoric from the executive branch and that of the broader policy elite in Washington. This point has also been made clear through the National Defense and National Security strategies that label China as a strategic competitor. According to [the NSS](#), “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.” [The National Defense strategy](#) also follows on this line: “China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea.”

The “China awakening” is not a result of a stronger posture from the White House but rather is a logical and incremental response that is felt throughout much of the policy community in the United States. Indeed, alongside economic opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region, there are a number of key challenges to the rules and order in the region that have underpinned security and prosperity for the littoral states. In the South China Sea, Beijing continues to practice salami-slicing tactics aimed at ensuring its de-facto control of much of the key water way through extensive land reclamation, the imposition of military equipment and the diplomatic splitting of states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Meanwhile, Beijing also continues to raise regional concerns through its constant incursions into the maritime and airspace surrounding Japan’s Senkaku islands, also claimed by China and referred to as the Diaoyu, in the East China Sea.

These concerns in the maritime realm are not limited to the East and South China Seas. In the Indian Ocean region, there has been a build-up of Chinese infrastructure development in critical areas such as deep ports in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. These moves have acutely informed the decision-making of policy-makers in India, who are wary of China’s long-term geopolitical motivations in Delhi’s periphery. Indeed, regional geopolitics is also shaping the strategic shifts in thinking as many states in the region – such as Japan, Australia, India and the US – remain concerned about China’s growth and push outside its borders, evidenced by initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The regional environment has magnified the difficulty of the US-China relationship and has further exposed long-standing risks on the economic and trade front that are now playing out (such as forced technology transfer, the role of state-owned enterprises, intellectual property theft, etc.). Frankly put, those feeling that they can wait out US-China tensions, or seem them as a variable associated with President Trump, are underestimating the real challenges in this relationship – shared through a bipartisan and wide-ranging consensus – over the coming years.