

VOLUME 17 ISSUE 3 | SUMMER 2023

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QUARTERLY

Xi and Putin's World Order



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Featuring an Interview with **Elbridge Colby**

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

The theme of the Summer issue of *inFOCUS* Quarterly was supposed to be the effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on world security. But, as it came together, the trends we were—and are—watching are less about Russia/Ukraine and more about the axis of China, Russia, and Iran, with a large dose of Saudi Arabia.

In the essay, Douglas Feith focuses on the Biden administration National Security Strategy and, while there are “praiseworthy elements,” he worries that the administration is not providing for “the kind of military strength that would make US leadership effective.” In the Interview, Elbridge Colby agrees, emphasizing the need for an American strategy that foregoes “forever wars” and focuses on China’s plans.

Guermantes Lailari provides an in depth look at whether and how the US can find allies with which to work. Yurii Poita and Mark Meirowitz respectively consider what each side wants in the new Russia-China relationship, and how France’s historic “be different” foreign policy is likely to fare. Kenneth Timmerman posits a world without an Islamic-ruled Iran.

The nexus of China-Saudi-Iran-Israel is wide-ranging. Hussain Abdul-Hussain dissects the Saudi view of the

region and considers whether the US should be worried about the Saudi-China deal, and Brandon Weichert puts China’s quest for technology in a regional context. David Weinberg worries that Biden administration policy may squander the possibility of Israel-Saudi peace

Shoshana Bryen, JPC Senior Editor, reviews *Danger Zone* by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, raising three questions: Is there a “peak China?” If so, is China passing through it now, creating a “danger zone” before US intelligence thinks there will be one? And can/will the US restore its military deterrence capability and strengthen its alliances in time? Read it and let us



know what you think.

No matter how hard I try, I can’t help wanting to title this issue “Double, double, toil and trouble; fires burn and cauldrons bubble.” With a nod to Shakespeare and the witches.

If you appreciate what you’ve read, I encourage you to make a contribution to the JPC. You can use our secure site:

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Sincerely,

Matthew Brooks
Publisher

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The Biden Administration's National Security Strategy

by DOUGLAS J. FEITH

The Biden Administration's national security strategy, as released to the public at the end of 2022, has some praiseworthy elements, stressing, for example, the "need for American leadership." But it does not take its own words seriously enough. Its discussion of "leadership" is confusing, and the administration is not providing for the kind of military strength that would make US leadership effective.

■ A Word on Precision

A strategy should not use vague and ambiguous language (let alone mind-numbing repetition). Having said that no nation is better positioned than the United States to compete in shaping the world, as long as we work with others who share our vision, the strategy declares (the italics are mine), "This means that the foundational principles of self-determination, territorial integrity, and political independence *must* be respected, international institutions *must* be strengthened, countries *must* be free to determine their own foreign policy choices, information *must* be allowed to flow freely, universal human rights *must* be upheld, and the global economy *must* operate on a level playing field and provide opportunity for all." The fuzziness — incoherence — of using the word "must" should be obvious.

For example: "The United States must . . . increase international cooperation on shared challenges even in an age of greater inter-state competition." But "some in Beijing" insist that a prerequisite for cooperation is a set of "concessions on unrelated issues" that the US government has said are unacceptable. So, the strategy effectively declares that cooperation with China is a "must" even when China says

we cannot have it. In other words, the word "must" doesn't really mean "must." In this case, it expresses no more than the administration's impotent preference.

This strategy is 48 pages long. It uses the word "must" 39 times. To drive home that President Joe Biden is not his predecessor, the strategy constantly emphasizes allies and partners. It uses the word "allies" 38 times and "partner" or "partnership" an astounding 167 times. Meanwhile, it does not use "enemy" even once. Two of the three times it uses the word "adversary" it is referring to "potential" rather than actual adversaries. The third time, it says only that America's network of allies and partners is "the envy of our adversaries."

■ Enemies and Hostile Ideology

The strategy identifies, correctly in my view, America's "most pressing challenges" as China and Russia. China is described as the only "competitor" with both the intent and power to "reshape the international order." Russia is called "an immediate threat to the free and open international system," while the Ukraine war is rightly characterized as "brutal and unprovoked." The discussion of enemies, however, is euphemistic and misleading and does not give explicit guidance on confronting them. Alluding to China and Russia, it talks of "competing with major autocratic powers" as if everyone in the "competition" is playing a gentlemanly game with agreed rules. That creates a false picture of the problem.

The strategy states that China "retains common interests" with the United States "because of various interdependencies on climate, economics and public health." In discussing "shared

challenges"—such as climate change or COVID—it implies that Chinese leaders see these challenges the same way the administration does, but the well-known recent history of Chinese secretiveness about COVID, for example, refutes that assumption.

There are references to pragmatic problem-solving "based on shared interests" with countries like China and Iran. The strategy does not explain, however, what US officials should do if such cooperation is inconsistent with other US interests. Should they work with China at the expense of opposition to genocide against the Uyghurs? Should they work with Iran at the expense of that country's pro-democracy resistance movement?

Iran and North Korea are called "autocratic powers," but being autocratic is not the key to their hostility and danger. Rather, it is that they are ideologically hostile to the United States and the West.

There are two passing references to "violent extremism," though no discussion whatever about anti-Western ideologies. US officials are given no direction to take action to counter such ideologies. The strategy is entirely silent on jihadism and extremist Islam.

■ Ties to Allies and Partners

While it properly calls attention to the value of America's "unmatched network of alliances and partnerships," the strategy does not deal adequately with questions of when the United States should lead rather than simply join its allies. It does not acknowledge that there may be cases when the United States is required to go it alone. President Biden is quoted as telling the United Nations, "[We] will lead. . . . But we will not go it alone. We will

lead together with our Allies and partners.” But what if American and allied officials disagree? Sometimes the only way to lead is to show that one is willing to go it alone.

Failing to distinguish between leadership and followership is a major flaw. While asserting that America aspires to the former, the strategy declares that “we will work in lockstep with our allies.” Such lockstep would ensure that the United States is constrained by the lower-common-denominator policy of our allies. If President Biden really believes what he is saying here, he is telling his team to refrain from initiatives that any or all of our allies might reject. Instead of soliciting ideas from administration officials that would serve the US interest even if they require campaigns to try (perhaps unsuccessfully) to persuade our allies to acquiesce, his strategy discourages initiative and efforts to persuade. That is the opposite of leadership.

The strategy says that “our alliances and partnerships around the world are our most important strategic asset.” But that is not correct; our military power is. This is a dangerous mistake. Our alliances can be highly valuable, but to suggest that they are more important than our military capabilities is wrong and irresponsible.

The document says, “Our strategy is rooted in our national interests.” This assertion is at odds with the insistence that America will not act abroad except in concert with our allies and partners. The strategy claims that “Most nations around the world define their interests in ways that are compatible with ours.” That, however, is either banal or untrue. Our European allies have important differences with us regarding China, Iran, Israel, trade, and other issues. Before the Ukraine war, they had major differences with us regarding Russia.

The strategy says, “As we modernize our military and work to strengthen our democracy at home, we will call on our allies to do the same.” What if they do not heed the call? For decades, US



Joe Biden giving a campaign speech before his election as US President. (Photo: Gage Skidmore)

officials complained vainly that NATO allies underinvested in defense, confident that the United States would cover any shortfalls—what economists call a free-riding problem. Along similar lines, the strategy declares that America’s alliances “must be deepened and modernized.” But how should US officials deal with allies who act adversely to US interests, as Turkey has so often done under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—in buying Russian air-defense systems, for example—and as the Germans did, before the Ukraine war, in increasing their dependence on Russian natural gas?

Interestingly, on strengthening the US military, the strategy does not say that US allies have to agree or cooperate. It says, “America will not hesitate to use force when necessary to defend our national interests.” This part of the document reads as if it had different authors from the rest.

■ **Nuclear Deterrence**

The strategy makes an important point about nuclear deterrence as “a top priority” and highlights that America faces an unprecedented challenge in now having to deter two major nuclear powers. It makes a commitment to “modernizing

the nuclear Triad, nuclear command, control, and communications, and our nuclear weapons infrastructure, as well as strengthening our extended deterrence commitments to our Allies.” But the administration has not allocated resources to fulfill its words on deterrence and Triad modernization.

■ **Promoting Democracy and Human Rights**

“Autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad,” the strategy accurately notes, adding that, around the world, America will work to strengthen democracy and promote human rights. It would be helpful if it also explained why other countries’ respect for democracy tends to serve the US national interest. This is not obvious and many Americans, including members of Congress, show no understanding of how democracy promotion abroad can help the United States bolster security, freedom and prosperity at home.

The strategy does not explain how its championing of democracy and human-rights promotion can be squared with its emphasis on respecting the culture and

sovereignty of other countries and not interfering in their internal affairs. Nor does it explain how officials should make trade-offs between support for the rights of foreigners and practical interests in dealing with non-democratic countries. Officials need guidance on such matters. The public also would benefit from explanations.

The administration just announced that Saudi Arabia's crown prince, who is also prime minister, has immunity from civil liability for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who worked for *The Washington Post*. The strategy does not shed light on how the relevant considerations were weighed. It says the United States will make use of partnerships with non-democratic countries that support our interests, "while we continue to press all partners to respect and advance democracy and human rights." That's fine as far as it goes, but it does not acknowledge, for example, that we sometimes have to subordinate human rights concerns for national security purposes, as when President Franklin Roosevelt allied with Josef Stalin against Adolf Hitler. A strategy document should be an aid in resolving complexities, not a simplistic list of all the noble things we desire or wish to be associated with.

■ Refugees

Regarding refugees, it is sensible that the strategy reaffirms the US interest in working with other countries "to achieve sustainable, long-term solutions to what is the most severe refugee crisis since World War Two—including through resettlement." But there is no mention of why US officials should press Persian Gulf states to accept more refugees from the Middle East, given that those states share language, culture, and religion with those refugees.

■ Willing Ends Without Providing Means

The strategy does a lot of willing the end but not specifying or providing the means. As noted, the administration is

not funding defense as it should to accomplish its stated goals. On Iran, the strategy says, "[W]e have worked to enhance deterrence," but US officials have been trying to revive the nuclear deal that would give Iran huge financial resources in return for limited and unreliable promises.

The strategy says, "We will support the European aspirations of Georgia and Moldova We will assist partners in strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, and economic development in the Western Balkans. We will

The strategy does not explain how its championing of democracy and human-rights promotion can be squared with its emphasis on respecting the culture and sovereignty of other countries and not interfering in their internal affairs.

back diplomatic efforts to resolve conflict in the South Caucasus. We will continue to engage with Turkey to reinforce its strategic, political, economic, and institutional ties to the West. We will work with allies and partners to manage the refugee crisis created by Russia's war in Ukraine. And we will work to forestall terrorist threats to Europe." But these items are presented simply as a wish list, without explanation of the means we will use, the costs involved, or the way we will handle obvious pitfalls along the way.

■ Setting Priorities

A strategy paper should establish priorities, but this one simply says we have to do this and that, when the actions are inconsistent with each other. It is, line with the quip attributed to Yogi Berra, "When you get to a fork in the road, take it." It says we should act in the US national interest, but we should also always act with allies and partners. We should oppose Chinese threats, but always cooperate

with China on climate issues. We should pursue the nuclear deal with Iran even when Iran is threatening its neighbors and aiding Russia in Ukraine (and, as noted, crushing its domestic critics). We should insist on a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict while the Palestinian Authority remains unreasonable, corrupt, inflexible and hostile.

A strategy should not set up choices that involve trade-offs and then give no guidance on how to resolve the trade-offs. If it promotes arms control and other types of cooperation (on COVID, for ex-

ample) with Russia and China, it should forthrightly address problems of treaty violations and specify ways to obtain cooperation when it is denied.

Such a document cannot specifically identify all possible trade-offs and resolve them, but it can set priorities and do a better job than this strategy does in informing officials on how to handle easily anticipated dilemmas.

■ Strategic Guidance or Campaign Flyer

The administration's strategy combines valid points and unreality. It is unclear whether it is a serious effort to provide guidance, directed at officials, or a boastful campaign document, directed at the public. Mixing the genres is not useful.

DOUGLAS J. FEITH is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. He served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in 2001-2005.

Southeast Asian Reactions to a Taiwan Strait Crisis

by **GUERMANTES LAILARI**

If China moves against Taiwan or otherwise expands its borders, what happens to US alliances in Southeast Asia, what can the American military do with other allies and friends to deter Beijing and which side are Southeast Asian countries likely to take?

■ *Positive Security Agreements*

In the last decade, but mostly in the past few years, many Indo-Pacific countries have signed or are considering bilateral and multilateral security agreements. Most of the agreements are with the US and other US-allied countries. Below are highlights of these developments (the agreements are with Washington unless otherwise designated).

Australia

- Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (2007)
- AUKUS: Trilateral security pact signed in 2021 between Australia, United Kingdom, and the US. In March 2023, AUKUS announced Australia would receive three to five US Virginia class nuclear attack submarines (SSNs) until Australia's new SSNs are completed in the 2040s. Technology transfer and collaboration are other key parts of this agreement. Other countries could be added to different, less sensitive, parts of this security pact.
- Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) (2022)
- Trilateral Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) (2017) and GSMOIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) along with Japan and the United States. These

three countries announced at the 2023 Shangri-La conference that they would link their respective radar pictures for missile defense.

- CANZUK (proposed security agreement) Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom

India

- Quad (2007)
- GSOMIA (2002) and supplemental Industrial Security Annex (ISA) (2019)
- Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) (2016)
- Communications Compatibility & Security Agreement (COMCASA) (2018)
- Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Intelligence cooperation (BECA) (2020).

Indonesia

- GSOMIA (in negotiation)
- Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) (in negotiations)
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) "Our Eyes" intelligence sharing initiative (in negotiations)

Japan

- Quad (2007)
- GSOMIA with South Korea (2016)
- Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with Australia (2022)
- Japan-Australia RAA (2022)
- GSOMIA with Australia and US (2023)
- Anglo-Japanese RAA (2023)
- France-Japan defense cooperation agreement (in negotiations)
- South Korea-Japan bilateral defense cooperation agreement (in discussions)

- Japan-Philippines defense cooperation (in discussion)

Malaysia

- US Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System (CENTRIXS) in place

Philippines

- New Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement Sites (2023)
- General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) (in final negotiation)
- Japan-Philippines defense cooperation (in discussion)
- US CENTRIXS in place

Singapore

- Protocol of Amendment to the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding (AMOU) (2019), extended the MOU for another 15 years which enables US access to Singapore's military facilities.

South Korea

- GSOMIA with Japan (2016)
- Washington Declaration (2023)
- South Korea-Japan bilateral defense cooperation agreement (in discussion)

Taiwan

- National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2023 which includes the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act (TERA)

Thailand (most recent agreements)

- CISMOA (2014)
- Acquisition & Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSA) (2014)

Vietnam

In 2018, Vietnam participated for the first time in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military biennial exercise, after sending observers in 2012 and 2016.”

In 2020, the EU-Vietnam Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) will “facilitate Vietnam’s participation in and contribution to the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions and operations.”

China’s Alliances

Besides the formal agreement Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty (1961), China has no publicly declared security agreement except for the Solomon Islands-China Security Pact (2022). Other Southeast Asian countries appear to have secret agreements with China, one example of this is between China and Cambodia, probably signed in 2019, regarding a naval facility being built at Ream naval base for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy. Clearly, Pakistan is an ally of China without a public declaration.

Myanmar is another Southeast Asian country that likely has a secret security agreement, given that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) supported the military coup and is building bases and has intelligence collection sites there.

Laos is also a close Chinese partner with most of its economic activity related to the China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Laos will most likely stay neutral in a Taiwan crisis or support China.

Combined Military Planning, Operations, Training, and Exercises

In a dystopian future, China intends to encircle Taiwan, invade, and block the US military from providing assistance when war breaks out. What practical exercises and preparations can Taiwan and US militaries undertake?

First, US-Taiwan militaries will



China and Taiwan Malaysia Vietnam Brunei Philippines

A map of South China Sea claims. (Image: Voice of America / HueMan1)

be increasing their combined training, exercises, and operations. The most important step is to try to deter China from believing it can conquer Taiwan. Already, the number of US advisors training Taiwanese forces has increased dramatically while Taiwan Army units—believed to be battalion-sized—are training in the US with US Army National Guard units. There is a drastic shift from decades-long American shunning of the Taiwan military owing to fears of Beijing’s reaction.

The second step is to ensure that should deterrence fail, Taiwan, the US and other countries are prepared to prevent the PLA from permanently controlling Taiwan, its islands, and its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Prepositioning Weapons

One important way to push back against China for its ongoing aggression against Taiwan is to preposition weapons in Taiwan and its islands for both US and Taiwanese use. The US can add to Taiwan’s stockpile of key weapons and preposition weapons for its own use in case America ends up defending Taiwan with boots on the ground. Similarly, the US could also preposition weapons and supplies in nearby countries such as Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Palau, and even Australia. The movement of forces or rotating forces continuously to and from these countries will help deter China and enhance the US military’s lethal capabilities in the region.

With respect to deterring China, here are additional actions that the US

and Taiwan can undertake (and in some cases already have):

- Enhanced military training, exercises, and operational planning to deter the CCP from ordering an invasion, blockade, missile strikes or other aggressive actions.
- The US government has approved a loan of up to \$2 billion for Taiwan to buy weapons from US companies.
- In addition to the loan, the Biden

In a dystopian future, China intends to encircle Taiwan, invade, and block the US military from providing assistance when war breaks out.

administration approved a \$619 million arms sale to Taiwan in March 2023 that will include the following weapon systems to increase the lethality and survivability of Taiwan's F-16V aircraft against radars and adversary aircraft: 100 AGM-88B High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missiles; 23 HARM training missiles; 200 AIM-120C-8 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles; 4 AIM-120C-8 AMRAAM Guidance Sections; and 26 LAU-129 multi-purpose launchers.

- The US government needs to apply as much pressure on industry to expedite delivery of the more than \$19 billion in backlogged weapons Taiwan has already purchased. If these are not delivered soon, the president should consider taking stocks from the US inventory or changing delivery priorities.

- In response to pressure from Congress and Taiwan, in May, President Biden approved via his Presidential Drawdown Authority, sending part of a \$500 million purchase of FIM-92 Stinger air defense missiles to Taiwan.

Second, because of the NDAA and its specific requests to support Taiwan, the island should be able to plan,

conduct, train, and exercise for combined operations with the US and other allies in the following areas (not a comprehensive list):

During peacetime:

- Freedom of Navigation operations with navy vessels and military aircraft.
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).
- Counter-smuggling operations.
- Counter illegal unreported and un-

regulated (IUU) fishing operations.

- Counter CCP grey zone operations.
- Combined military exercises.

During peacetime, higher levels of tension, and wartime:

- Counter blockade operations.
- Counter invasion operations.
- Counter missile strikes.
- Conducting special operations.
- Conducting all-domain conventional operations.

- Conducting irregular warfare.
- Countering media, psychological, and legal warfare.

- Command and control of friendly forces.

- Intelligence operations.

Third, the NDAA specifically

encourages the US Department of Defense to allow Taiwan's military to participate in the 2024 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise. This invitation could include, at a minimum, allowing Taiwanese military personnel as observers on US Navy ships and at command-and-control locations in or around Hawaii and vice versa to familiarize each side with standard operational and emergency procedures. At the maximum, the Taiwanese military's joint force (Navy, Army, and Air Force) could participate in pre-planning events and execution with all other participating RIMPAC countries as appropriate next year (2024).

Finally, encouraging Taiwanese naval ships, aircraft, and army to visit Guam, Hawaii, and other US bases in the Indo-Pacific and US forces to visit Taiwan frequently also would enhance combined training, exercises, planning, and operations.

■ Southeast Asian Reactions to a Taiwan Crisis

Southeast Asia consists of 11 countries: Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Thailand might be the one US allied country that does not participate militarily due to the PRC's highly successful political warfare conducted within the kingdom...

■ Most Likely to Support Taiwan

Although many countries would prefer to stay out of the fight, countries such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Singapore (possibly neutral), and Thailand (the last three are Southeast

Airstrip Comparison in the South China Sea

AIRCRAFT CAPABILITIES

-  Cargo plane
-  Surveillance plane
-  Fighter jet
-  Bomber

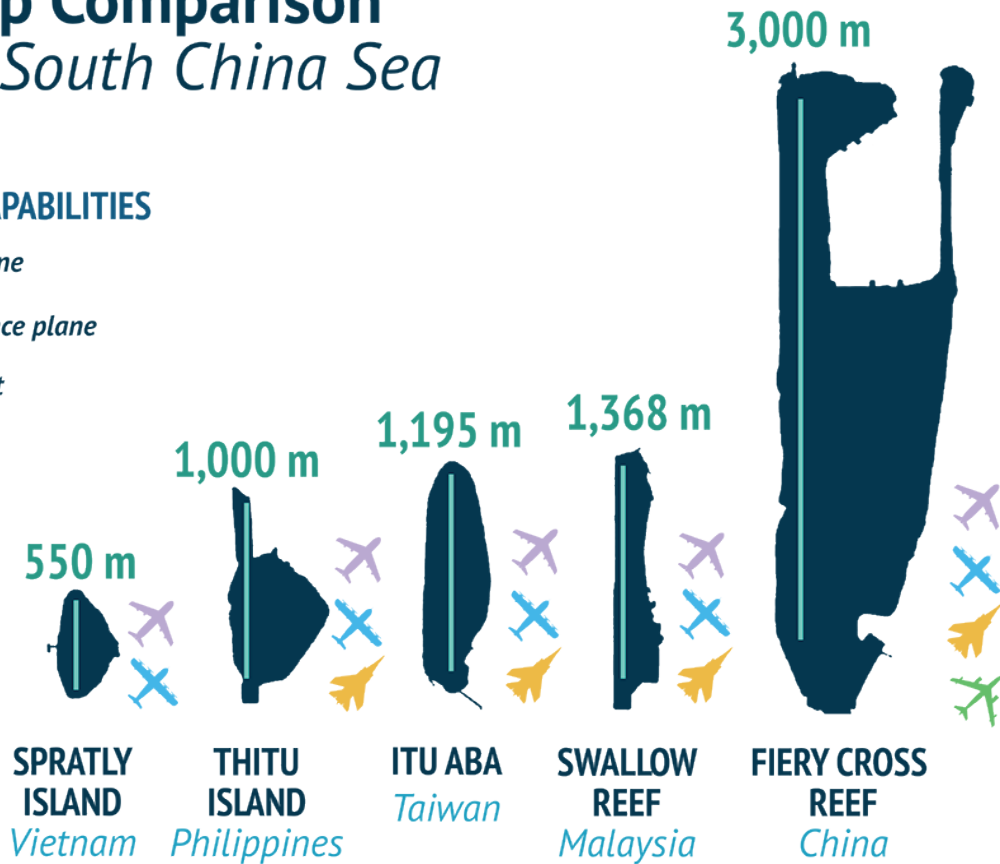


Image: CSIS

Asian countries) will most likely participate at some level in a future conflict due to their close security relationships with Washington. Furthermore, the US has military forces deployed in these countries and the bases they are assigned to will provide logistics support at a minimum. These bases also could be used to conduct strikes against PLA forces attempting to coerce Taiwan.

Of the three Southeast Asian countries above, the Philippines has a stronger relationship with the US and Taiwan than do Thailand and Singapore.

Thailand might be the one US allied country that does not participate militarily due to the PRC's highly successful political warfare conducted within the kingdom and its uncomfortable proximity to China's secret allies: Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia.

Singapore's position supporting Washington and Taipei also could be wobbly now that the island state is, for

the first time, ruled by a pro-PRC administration. In addition, some experts have noted that Singapore always has played both sides for its own advantage and could shift to China because of its small geographic size (275 square miles or smaller than Rhode Island), population of 5.4 million (second densest city in the world), 76 percent of its population is ethnic Chinese, and Singapore is challenged by the CCP's political warfare activities.

The remaining Southeast Asian countries that have territorial and economic exclusion zone (EEZ) interests in what is called the "South China Sea" could resist PLA encroachment. These are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Even then, they are unlikely to go all-in and support the US and its partners. For example, the Malay government might try to negotiate a bilateral settlement with China if it believed that this was its best option.

Very Likely Supporters

Since China most likely will not stop its expansionism after taking Taiwan since Taiwan is part of the CCP's so-called "10-dash line," the following countries will most likely work together to protect their respective national exclusive economic zones from Chinese aggression: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia (maybe), Philippines, Singapore (maybe), and Vietnam.

Although Vietnam is ruled by a communist party, Vietnam has been the victim of numerous PLA attacks along its 800 mile common land border (1979) and its SEAS islands (1974, 1988, 1994, 2012), and PLA harassment of Vietnamese fishing boats and its oil and gas exploration efforts. The Vietnamese are pugnacious, but there are limits to what these countries can do militarily against the PLA either individually or collectively.



Southeast Asian Countries' Alliances (Image: Guermantes Lailari)

■ **Least Likely Supporters**

Mainly due to secret security agreements or heavy economic leverage, the following countries would not support Taiwan and probably not back the US and partners in a crisis: Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and possibly Timor-Leste. These countries could end up being allies of China as hostilities developed and they are forced to choose sides.

The CCP could use these secret allied countries as staging areas for the PLA to attack Thailand or against Southeast Asian nations protecting their EEZs and thereby attempt to draw US military and its allies away from PLA actions against Taiwan—classic divide and conquer strategies.

■ **Can Taiwan and the US Cooperate?**

There are several areas in which Taiwan, the US, and other allied countries could collaborate in the region. These include:

- Conduct contingency planning for possible Humanitarian Assistance and

Disaster Relief (HADR) operations as well as planning for contingencies during heightened levels of conflict/tension.

- Provide for logistics support (supplies), emergency operating locations, and repair facilities for US and allied military aircraft and ships.

- Assist in documenting United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) violations in support of SEAS countries such as Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and other friendly interested countries such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, and European countries.

- Allow US military personnel to visit Taiwan's SEAS islands (Itu Aba Island / Taiping Island and Pratas Island / Dongsha Island – currently designated a national nature preserve). They could discuss reciprocal support during operations, exercises, training, and during wartime.

- Conduct bilateral and multilateral planning, training, exercises, and operations in Southeast Asia.

■ **SEAS Allied Air Bases**

Should China become more aggressive, the Southeast Asian countries could form an alliance with other concerned states and use their current island bases to support military operations as well as using their home country bases. The following countries have militarized their islands:

- Taiwan: Itu Aba Island (Spratly)
- Vietnam: Spratly Island/Đảo Trường Sa
- Philippines: Thitu Island (Spratly)
- Malaysia: Swallow Reef (southern Spratly islands)
- Indonesia: Natuna Besar Island (not in the Spratly islands)

See the comparison of runway sizes of some of the islands compared to one of four of China's illegally occupied islands—Fiery Cross Reef located in the Spratly Islands area.

Parts of Pratas Island are currently designated a Taiwan national nature preserve (two coral reefs, North Vereker Bank and South Vereker Bank) and many environmentalists and perhaps some pro-China politicians in Taiwan do not want to militarize it. The main island already has a 1,550-meter concrete runway (see island photo). However, as China becomes more assertive in its claims inside of the so-called “ten-dash line,” Taiwan should re-consider making Pratas Island military friendly.

■ **Pratas (Dongsha) Island**

Clearly, if the PLA takes Taiwan or even its islands, the it will militarize Pratas Island giving it a strategic location to better control the southern entrance of the Taiwan Strait and as an additional location from which to conduct military operations southward against the Philippines or even against Taiwan.

■ **Conclusion**

Just as today's Italy does not claim the territory of the Roman Empire, and Turkey does not claim the Ottoman Empire's land, the Chinese Communist



Pratas (Dongsha) Island. (Photo: Taiwan Water Resources Bureau)

Party has no right or claim to Taiwan, Southeast Asian seas, the Japanese Senkakus or the Ryukyu Islands, nor parts of India, or even parts of Russia—note recent attempts to rename Russian cities with Chinese names, and territories of the other nations that surround it. Furthermore, the CCP currently illegally occupies Tibet, East Turkestan, parts of Mongolia, land taken during China’s 1979 invasion of Vietnam, and other areas.

As noted earlier, Thailand and Singapore might try to stay neutral despite their defense agreements with the US.

On the other hand, based on the increased number of interlocking defense agreements between Southeast Asian countries and to outside European countries, we are seeing the beginning of a new alliance structure that will greatly complicate China’s plans for Asian domination. For example, the “four foundational” agreements that India and the US have signed provide the legal, diplomatic, and defense infrastructure for them to easily declare an

alliance when both sides determine the need. This formula is in progress with many other countries in the region.

ensure coordination, deconfliction, mutual support, training, exercises, and planning to deter China. Should

...[with the] increased number of interlocking defense agreements between Southeast Asian countries and to outside European countries, we are seeing the beginning of a new alliance structure that will greatly complicate China’s plans for Asian domination.

Taiwan, the US, the Southeast Asian countries, and other allies can greatly enhance their military options in deterring China’s PLA aggression against Taiwan and the SEAS. The United States, Taiwan, and their allies should begin the process now to agree to all four foundational agreements to

deterrence fail and this advice is heeded, these countries will be more ready to confront China and force it to pay dearly for its colonial expansionism.

GUERMANTES LAILARI is a visiting Scholar at National Chengchi University and a retired USAF Foreign Area Officer.

The Russia-China Treaty: What Each Side Wants

by YURII POITA

At the moment, Sino-Russian interaction, especially regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war, looks more or less predictable. For more than a year since Russia's full-scale invasion, China has maintained its so-called pro-Russian neutrality, not transferring lethal weapons to Russia but providing economic, financial, technological, diplomatic, and informational assistance. This format appears to be relatively stable. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statement in February 2023, that China was considering providing lethal aid to Russia in its war against Ukraine, did not become a reality for one reason or another.

Obviously, China is still wary of Western sanctions, and the ideological component of its policy of opposing the West has not yet exceeded rational economic interests. In addition, repeated clear statements by Washington, Brussels and many European capitals that lethal aid to Russia would destroy China's relations with the West, are still a major deterrent to Chinese arms transfers. Even Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in 2023, with his words that "changes are taking place that haven't happened in a hundred years," did not seem to bring breakthroughs in development of the Russian-Chinese partnership. Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's visit to Beijing in May 2023 with the signing of only five contracts also looks modest.

■ *Russian-Chinese treaty*

For now, it can be stated that the Russian-Chinese partnership looks strong from the point of view of ideological anti-Western beliefs, so China will not do anything that could spoil its relations with an important ally—Russia. However, Beijing

is still not ready to act in a united front with Moscow to challenge the West.

Opinions of observers about how Russian-Chinese relations look now vary. Some say that Russia has not achieved the expected help from Beijing in its war against Ukraine, and is de facto turning into an economic vassal and raw material appendage of China. Others argue that Russia has become China's proxy, creating a long-term security and economic problem for Europe and the US, and diverting Western resources from containing China. A third view holds that China and Russia are actually acting in concert to undermine Western dominance and the rules-based international order.

Against the first version is the fact that trade in resources, even if they are cheaper, is primarily beneficial to Russia, as it ensures the survival of the Russian regime and the waging of war against Ukraine. Against the second version is the importance for Russia of strategic au-

tonomy in foreign policy. Therefore, despite its growing economic dependence on China, Moscow still remains a fairly independent player and is unlikely to accept the role of Beijing's puppet. In addition, the Russian war in Ukraine hardly diverted the West's resources from containing China, but strengthened US efforts to build regional military coalitions, including in the Indo-Pacific. The third

opinion looks realistic from the point of view of the mutual interests of Moscow and Beijing to undermine the positions of the West and change the world order, but the lack of trust between Russia and China does not yet allow for alliance. This is especially so since a potential leak of information that Beijing has formed a "Molotov-Ribbentrop pact" with Moscow (and the intelligence capabilities of the US should not be underestimated) would undermine China's position in Europe.

In addition, the situation still looks dynamic, since the results and consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war are difficult to predict. So, Beijing is currently taking a wait-and-see position and will probably make decisions about its cooperation with Russia based on the results of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.

In this case, in the short term, China will face a dilemma: if the Ukrainian counteroffensive is successful, and the Russian army is defeated in Ukraine, how

Some say that Russia has not achieved the expected help from Beijing in its war against Ukraine, and is de facto turning into an economic vassal and raw material appendage of China.

to support the Russian regime to prevent its collapse, and at the same time not to fall under Western sanctions?

■ *"Iranization" of China's Russian Ties*

Answering this question, the Sino-Iranian model of cooperation may seem the most appropriate for Beijing: Beijing provides significant economic support to

Tehran, buying its resources and supplying equipment and technology while the Iranian regime retains independence in its policy in the Middle East. Relatively limited aid to Iran from China, on the one hand, does not enable Tehran to turn into a formidable threat to regional and global stability (for which Beijing could be blamed). On the other hand, such support leaves Iran as a friendly player for China to counter the US. In such a model of cooperation, the risks for China of falling under Western sanctions for cooperation with Tehran are relatively low.

The described “Iranian model” of cooperation between China and Russia looks logical from the point of view of cost-benefits for Beijing, and generally tolerable for the West, for which a Russian-Chinese military-political alliance would be a nightmare scenario.

The “Iranization” of Russian-Chinese relations allows China to continue to balance, simultaneously benefiting from both Russian cheap resources and cooperation with the West, but it does not provide an opportunity to win strategic competition with the United States. Because Russia, in the event of a military defeat, will cease to play the role of a serious challenger to the West.

Of course, we do not know the strategic calculations of the Chinese leadership, especially since the situation still looks dynamic and has many variables that will influence China’s decision to partner with Russia. At the same time, what exists now can be described by the model “Russia is on the front line, China is a strategic rear.”

■ *China as Russia’s “Strategic Depth”*

This format of relations means that in the Russian-Ukrainian war (and in general in post-Soviet politics) Moscow makes decisions, while China provides necessary (currently limited) economic and (partial) technological support.

The advantages of this arrangement for China are that its relations with Russia do not constitute a classic alliance with both partners actually on the front line.

This means the connection allows China to maintain the appearance of neutrality, saying that the Russian-Chinese partnership is normal and not aimed at third parties. It gives Beijing the opportunity not to enter an open confrontation with the West.

In addition, such a model, which in Beijing is called unique and complementary cooperation, makes it possible to blur the boundaries between “own-strangers,” just as Russia did at one time, saying that there was no intention to attack Ukraine

The “Iranization” of Russian-Chinese relations allows China to continue to balance, simultaneously benefiting from both Russian cheap resources and cooperation with the West...

and in this way carried out successful strategic disinformation. This led to the complete unpreparedness of Europe for the invasion. Likewise, China is trying to prevent the crystallization of the opponents’ camp by not calling the partnership with Russia an alliance. This inhibits the division of the world between democracies and autocracies, a division stimulated by Moscow and Beijing’s expansionism.

It appears that this format is not planned and stipulated in advance by both sides. The situation is still dynamic and does not support long-term forecasts and strategies. Moreover, the lack of trust between China and Russia does not yet make it possible to establish a hidden but robust alliance. At the same time, “Russia—frontline, China—rear,” is the approximate formula of relations today.

■ *Russia and China’s Interests*

Of course, Russia understands China’s unwillingness to be a full-fledged military and political partner and to stand side-by-side against the West, or to provide significant military and technical assistance. Therefore, Moscow will probably try to increase China’s “strategic depth” capabilities. This may include, for example, the construction of Chinese industrial sites in

Russia and the production of initially civilian and dual-use products. In addition, it may include the construction of oil and gas infrastructure for the transportation of energy resources from Russia to China. Also, it seems logical to strengthen the railway and road infrastructure between the western and eastern parts of Russia. This would make it possible to increase logistical transfer of material and ensure closer communication along the “strategic rear-frontline.”

For China, this development also looks attractive. In addition to the issue of misleading the West by maintaining formal neutrality as described above, China is increasing its autonomy from the West. This allows it to diversify the supply of vital resources through the Malacca Strait. So, at some point, “frontline and strategic depth” can switch places. If China is preparing to seize Taiwan in the medium- or long-term, it is obvious that American and allied fleets would cut the supply of oil to China from the Middle East and agricultural products from Latin America. Therefore, the developed logistics network between China and Russia (if fully built) would make it possible to create a self-sufficient and closed system that could provide China with the necessary gas, oil, and food. This could include the logistical and transport capabilities of the Central Asian countries, which would also be used in this system.

This possibility appears to be confirmed by the analysis of Zhao Huasheng, one of China’s most renowned Russia experts, former director of the Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies, Fudan University. “With China’s greatest strategic pressure coming from the sea,” he says, “good Sino-Russian relations can

ensure that China has ... a relatively stable strategic rear ... This has enormous strategic benefits for China. The significance of this is invisible and seemingly unremarkable in times of peace, but its strategic relevance to China will be revealed were our country to be faced with a major upheaval coming from abroad.” He adds that “in the event of a major international crisis, Russia would be the most important foreign source of energy—and [perhaps] even the only foreign source of oil—that China could conceivably continue to preserve.”

At the moment, it is impossible to assess whether this scenario will be implemented and to what degree. However, the indicators described above probably will be signs of its formation: the construction of extensive energy, transportation, and food logistics between China and Russia, possibly with the participation of the countries of Central Asia. Since the construction of logistical pathways, and especially pipelines, is a long process, this model (if adopted in Beijing) will probably crystallize over years, under the guise of “normal cooperation that is not directed against third parties.”

■ *Challenges for the West*

For the West, the Sino-Russian “frontline-strategic rear” model looks more or less acceptable in the short term, but problematic in the long term. In the short term, it means China will not provide lethal aid to Russia for the war against Ukraine, but will ensure the survival of the Russian regime, which will be a permanent direct military threat to Europe. In addition, Russia, as a nuclear power and a member of the UN Security Council, is necessary for China as an extremely important partner.

In the long term, China will be able to form its “strategic rear” in Russia and become independent of foreign supplies in its struggle for Taiwan. The Russian-Ukrainian war, in which Ukraine is the “frontline” and the EU and NATO partners are the “strategic rear,” demonstrated an interesting feature—Russia does not strike at the “strategic rear,” which,



Chinese President Xi Jinping visits with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in 2019. (Photo: kremlin.ru)

being under the umbrella of NATO, provides assistance to Ukraine, but does not send troops. Based on this logic, in the event that China launches an operation against Taiwan, the formally neutral “strategic rear” in the form of Russia (with its own nuclear umbrella) and Central Asia would also be protected from strikes by the US and its allies.

In connection with the above, if driving a wedge between China and Russia seems unrealistic, then the West must prevent the strengthening of ties within the framework of the “frontline-rear” and the transformation of the Russian-Chinese partnership into a self-sufficient system. In other words, the existing “rear” should not turn into a “strategic rear.” To this end, with the help of the sanctions regime, the West should prevent or hinder the creation of new energy and transport and food ties between China and Russia as much as possible. China must remain critically dependent on energy imports from the Middle East and agricultural products from Latin America.

Second, it is necessary to prevent or significantly weaken the transfer of production from China to Russia and Belarus, which will reduce the mutual integration

and dispersion of output, which means the stability of the production and supply chains of China and Russia.

Third, it is necessary to weaken trust between China and Russia. Beijing and Moscow, despite having a common interest in undermining US dominance, must always have problematic aspects of the relationship to exploit. This can be done, for example, by publicizing the transfer of Chinese sanctioned equipment and technologies to Russia, especially in the case of the construction of new pipelines. Beijing must understand that supplies to Russia will be detected, and China cannot rely on Russia to keep sensitive information.

In general, the efforts of Western countries on these issues should be coordinated, which will make it possible to achieve a synergistic effect and prevent a serious deepening of Russian-Chinese relations and their transformation into a de facto alliance with distributed tasks.

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A World Without Islamic Iran... Or a World Without America?

by **KENNETH R. TIMMERMAN**

Let's start with a thought experiment. What would today's Middle East look like without the malign influence of the theocratic "Islamic State of Iran?"

Would Israel live with the threat of being bracketed from the north, south, and east by more than 100,000 Iranian rockets?

Would Lebanon tolerate Hezbollah (the Iranian-founded and armed "Party of God") domination of its national institutions, to the point where many Lebanese can no longer use their national banks because they have been blacklisted as terror-supporting institutions?

Would Yemen still be in the throes of a civil war?

Would Iraq continue to be in a constant state of turmoil, with Christians in the north threatened with extinction by Iranian-backed militias, and the central government's authority undermined by the fealty of government ministers to their powerful neighbor to the east?

Okay, so those are easy calls.

A tougher call is Syria, where Iran and Russia combined to help President Bashar al-Assad pretty convincingly defeat ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and its Turkish and Muslim Brotherhood surrogates. Had Iran not intervened there, Shoshana Bryen of the Jewish Policy Center has argued, there probably would not be some 11 million Sunni Muslim refugees. But then again, Syria might look like Libya, where Iran also intervened to sow chaos. Worse, it might be a Muslim Brotherhood state.

Few besides policy wonks realize that the vehicle for the regime's expansion and its terrorist activities—the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps

(IRGC)—was created precisely for the purpose of spreading the Iran's Islamic revolution around the globe.

The IRGC charter can be found in the regime's constitution. Under the heading, "an ideological army," the IRGC was created "for fulling the ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world."

In earlier generations—not all that distant, really—many Americans believed the US armed forces should "spread democracy" around the world (Woodrow Wilson), or "spread freedom" (George W. Bush). But that is a far cry from making Christians or Jews of the peoples living in the lands we set out to free from tyranny.

The IRGC was created specifically to spread Islam, and not just any flavor of the faith, but the Iranian regime's peculiar, Shi'ite millenarian belief that a "supreme leader" appointed by men is actually God's representative on earth. (If that sounds

successor, as president between October 1981 until his elevation as Supreme Leader in August 1989, Ali Khamenei, forged strong personal and financial ties with top IRGC leaders. The morphing of the IRGC from an instrument of the clerical elite to spread its ideology to an instrument of state power largely came about thanks to Khamenei, a two-bit cleric who was never quite convinced he had a strong clerical base, as had Khomeini. So, the IRGC became his base.

Khamenei is the one who encouraged IRGC leaders to run for parliament and to take over state enterprises, to the extent that today by most estimates the IRGC controls more than 70 percent of the Iranian economy. This is one of the reasons the European Union has been so reticent to sanction the IRGC. Doing so would end much of its lucrative business in Iran.

Rep. Claudia Tenney (R-NY) issued a useful and concise report in April

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a bit like Louis XIV, it might be because many of the regime's early leaders studied at French universities, as did Pol Pot and many others responsible for Cambodia's killing fields.)

Thankfully, I suppose, the ideological "purity" of the regime's first decade expired with the death of its founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. His

detailing the misdeeds of the IRGC. Besides striking the United States twice in Lebanon in 1983, its operatives blew up the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992, bombed the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994, planned and orchestrated the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia, and killed more than 600 US combat

troops in Iraq between 2005-2007 using explosively formed penetrators in Iranian-made improvised explosive devices (IEDs) supplied to local militias. They assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and sent senior officers to guide Hezbollah tactics during its 2006 war with Israel. And that's a selective list. They have also attempted to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States in Washington, DC, assassinate former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other Trump-era officials, and have revived hit teams to murder dissidents both in the United States and Europe.

So, a world without the Islamic regime in Iran must also mean a world where the IRGC does not exist. The two—the regime and the IRGC—are a single, symbiotic entity. Neither can survive without the other. Ban the IRGC, or transform it into some kind of national guard, and the regime will cease to exist. Overturn the regime through a popular rebellion, and the IRGC will cease to exist.

This is one of the reasons I call this regime the Islamic State of Iran. Just like ISIS, it sees itself as the original, world-dominating Islamic caliphate, with an ideology—the Quran, or at least the ruling mullah's interpretation of the Quran—and an army to spread it. The only thing “republican” about the Iranian regime are regular elections, which are so thoroughly controlled by the clerical elite the term “rigged” doesn't even begin to describe them. My Iranian friends call them “[s]elections.”

Americans have been slow to take the Iranian regime's expansion around the world seriously. Once the Islamic regime released US hostages on the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration, no one wanted to hear about Iran again (except perhaps for ABC TV's Ted Koppel, who was elevated to prominence by his hostage story coverage).

Even when they blew up our embassy in Beirut in April 1983 (which I reported on for *USA Today*), and in October of that year, the US Marine barracks, President Reagan's defense secretary, Caspar Weinberger, didn't want to hear about Iran.

Twenty years after the attack, Rear

Admiral Ace Lyons made a startling revelation in a Washington, DC, courtroom. He handed a sealed envelope to the judge with the explanation that inside was a copy of the intercept he had seen before the Marine barracks attack, when he was deputy chief of naval operations, in which an Iranian official in Damascus gave the order to surrogates in Lebanon to attack the Marines.

sanctions that it had no other choice but to negotiate. Trump didn't love the Iranian regime, nor did he hate it. He just wanted it to go away as a threat to America. (And for the record, I think Trump was wrong in his assessment. The Iranian regime has shown repeatedly it does not base its decisions on Western cost-benefit analysis.)

Many analysts inside Iran and in the West believe that Kerry saved the re-

After Khamenei balked the first time, Kerry announced substantial concessions: the US agreed to drop its requirement that Iran wait 10 years before installing new generation uranium enrichment centrifuges.

I asked Weinberger about the intercept, and he insisted that he had “never heard of any specific information” about Iranian responsibility for the attack, which is why the US never responded. I asked many others in positions of power at the time and learned that the most likely explanation the intercept never made it into the daily intel feed to the secretary and to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was because it had been blocked from circulation by Weinberger's then-military aide, Colonel Colin Powell. Neither Powell [later General Powell and chairman of the Joint Chiefs, then secretary of state under President George W. Bush]—nor a spokesman would reply to questions about his apparent role in suppressing the Iran intelligence, but that behavior raises a question that lingers in the national security community today: Why is it that so many people in positions of power either seem to love the Islamic regime in Tehran, or fear it to the extent that they will not use US military power against it?

Donald Trump called the 2015 nuclear deal reached by then-Secretary of State John Kerry the “worst deal ever” negotiated by the United States with a foreign power. And yet, even Trump believed it was possible to reach an accommodation with the Iranian regime—once that regime had been convinced by crippling

gime. As the July 2015 deadline for finalizing a nuclear deal approached, Ayatollah Khamenei said “no” repeatedly after Kerry and his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif, announced they had finalized the agreement. Kerry couldn't believe it. The US was prepared to release \$150 billion in frozen oil revenue, provide technical assistance and equipment for Iran's nuclear program, bless Iran's centrifuge enrichment research, and commit to thwart future cyber-attacks on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and the Iranians didn't want it? What more did they need to make it work? And so, each time the US granted the Iranians more concessions the White House ginned up the news media “echo chamber”—as Ben Rhodes, President Barack Obama's deputy national security advisor for communications famously described it—to lecture Americans that the only choice was the deal, or war.

Behind the scenes, the IRGC was doing its best to scuttle the deal because while sanctions were ruining the conservative, relatively pro-Western bazaar class and keeping them from international financial markets, the IRGC and its clandestine sanctions-busting networks were making out like bandits. The IRGC didn't want a deal unless it got something out of it.

After Khamenei balked the first time,



Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. (Photo: khamenei.ir)

Kerry announced substantial concessions: the US agreed to drop its requirement that Iran wait 10 years before installing new generation uranium enrichment centrifuges. Tehran could introduce them whenever it wanted (and it has). Second, the US pledged to prevent the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from carrying out intrusive, no-warning inspections. Third, Kerry pledged the IAEA would never send American inspectors to Iran, ever.

But that was not enough. Just two days before the July 15, 2015 deadline, Khamenei balked again. So, as CNN reported on July 13, Kerry agreed to demands that the US push the United Nations to drop the international embargo on arms sales to Iran, end restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile development, and most importantly, remove the IRGC, its Quds (Jerusalem) Force, and top international terrorists including QF commander Qassem Suleymani from the Treasury Department's sanctions list.

These were monumental concessions, and they had a dramatic impact. Inside Iran, freedom-loving Iranians who had long held out the hope that the US would side with them against the regime understood that the game was over. Just as Obama had done during his famous refusal to condemn the repression of the

anti-regime Green Movement in 2009, the United States was showing it was on the side of the clerics and their enforcers, not the people of Iran.

So why do some Democrats - Obama, Kerry, Biden - to name just the most prominent - want to preserve the Iranian regime at all cost, even when it continues to openly seek the destruction of America and Israel and to brutally repress its own people? What happened to the Democrats' famous commitment to human rights, women's rights, or gender equality?

I've thought long and hard about this. Could it be as simple as political and personal relationships? Both Kerry and Biden have a long history of cultivating pro-Tehran donors and embracing their causes, including - in Kerry's case his daughter's marriage to an Iranian-American whose family maintained deep ties to Tehran. The pro-Tehran agenda forms part of their political culture.

While Obama might have been a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and of political Islam in general, neither Biden nor Kerry are closet Muslims or understand the power of the Islamic revival that has shaken the world since Iran's revolution in 1979.

It could be that left-wing Democrats tolerate the regime's deadly subversions, treat it as legitimate and enable its nuclear

weapons development because, disdaining traditional America themselves, they discount revolutionary Iran's compulsion to destroy this country. The Iranian regime may have different motives and different domestic goals, but it complements the American left in seeking to end the United States as it has existed since World War II. Both want an end to the unipolar international power structure that America has dominated. The American left seeks to accomplish that goal by weakening American resolve, power, and values from within. The Iranian regime seeks to diminish American influence through hard power: terrorism, insurgencies, and subversion of pro-American regimes. And, of course, by becoming a virtual nuclear weapons state, making itself invulnerable to attack.

US policies toward Iran divide members of the public at home, mainly because of what amounts to an unspoken alliance between the American left and the Iranian regime.

When one hears talk about a new nuclear deal with Iran, or about ending US "aggression" or "hostility" toward the Iranian regime, understand that those speaking either denigrate Tehran's threat to the United States, or they also want to end America as we have known it. It's the same cause, with aligned fellow travelers.

Bottom line: A world without Islamic Iran could be a world that American continues to dominate, and in which traditional American values thrive. But a world where Islamic Iran survives and dominates the Middle East could eventually become a world without America.

KEN TIMMERMAN is the President and CEO of the Foundation for Democracy in Iran. His 12th book of non-fiction, *And the Rest is History: Tales of Hostages, Arms Dealers, Dirty Tricks, and Spies* (Post Hill Press 2022) expands on some of the incidents described above. Timmerman was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 and has covered the Middle East for 40 years.

Focus on China

An *in*FOCUS interview with ELBRIDGE COLBY

Elbridge A. Colby is cofounder and principal of The Marathon Initiative. He served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development from 2017 through 2018, during which he led the development of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. He has served in the Department of Defense, Department of State, and in the Intelligence Community working on a range of strategic forces, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and intelligence reform matters. He was interviewed recently by Freddie Sayers, Editor in Chief of *UnHerd*, setting a sharply different focus for American foreign – and especially defense – strategy. Below is an edited transcript.

FREDDIE SAYERS: YOU'RE NEITHER A FULL ISOLATIONIST, NOR A FULL MAXIMALIST—WHAT'S YOUR VISION FOR AMERICAN STRATEGY?

Elbridge Colby: We've had a maximalist foreign policy that has proved disastrous. Americans are really tired of the "forever wars." If you watch Fox News over the course of the day, the ad that leaves the most impression, though maybe not the most common, is the one for wounded warriors, people who were horribly wounded during Iraq or Afghanistan, or were killed in 9/11, or their widows. That is the mindset of a lot of Republican voters. I think there's a real distrust and discontent among them about the foreign policy establishment. So, let's take their cue and be unashamed in asking: "What's in Americans' interests?"

China is clearly by far the most significant challenge to the concrete interests of regular Americans. It's far more formidable economically than anyone else, including Russia, but now also militarily.

The way I look at Ukraine is not in a vacuum or separate from China, but precisely through the lens of China, and recognizing that we are neglecting the scale of the challenge posed by China. Through the defense strategy that I worked on, and other efforts, we have become more attuned to China. But we have not gone far or fast enough. Remember: it's not a self-referential

exercise. If you're an American car company in the 1970s and you're changing to adapt to Toyota, but you don't do enough or do it fast enough, you're going to go out of business—or IBM vis-à-vis Microsoft.

In that context, I would say, yes, we are focusing way too much on Ukraine. I'm not in favor of just simply cutting the Ukrainians off. I think what Russia did and is doing is evil. That's not the primary issue. But if our foreign policy is about Americans' concrete interests, then we're doing too much. We've already spent over \$100 billion. We've sent equipment, which is not easily replace-

the world in 150 years? We were a much larger economy than the Soviet Union. We alone were larger than the three Axis Powers, let alone with the British Empire and the Soviet Union. This is a fundamentally different scale of a challenge. That's the right way to look at this.

FS: PRACTICALLY, IF YOU WERE SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT, WHAT WOULD YOU TELL HIM TO DO?

Colby: I would say, "I don't want to talk about Ukraine right now. We're going to talk about Taiwan and China and

...we are focusing way too much on Ukraine. I'm not in favor of just simply cutting the Ukrainians off. I think what Russia did and is doing is evil. That's not the primary issue. But if our foreign policy is about Americans' concrete interests...

able, which is relevant to the potential fight over Taiwan, and certainly the implications as it reverberates through our defense industrial base are very relevant. This sounds arcane, but it's not. For want of a shoe, the kingdom can be lost. Why are we taking risks on the most significant challenge to the US position in the world and our interests in

Asia first, and once we fix that problem to a satisfactory degree, we'll spend time and political capital and resources on Ukraine."

But I'm not in favor of just abandoning Europe. Instead, we should put a lot more pressure and encouragement on Europe to step up and take the primary role in Ukraine.

■ Europe Must Step Up

Why is the United States providing the vast majority of military and financial support—certainly in the military context, but also in the civilian area? That makes no sense. Europe is a vastly larger economic area than Russia. It has enormous latent military advantages vis-à-vis Russia. A lot of people have been celebrating US policy saying “American leadership is back”—I actually think this is bad. This is a failure, because if anything, it’s suffocated any effort by Europeans to stand up and say, “We’re going to take leading responsibility.”

Americans need to focus on China. We’re not just going to cut the Ukrainians off, but we have to get the Europeans to do what we’ve been trying to get the Europeans to do since Dwight Eisenhower.

It’s the assessment of the US intelligence community that Xi Jinping has ordered the Chinese military to be ready for a successful attack on Taiwan by 2027. It’s not a prediction, but that’s about as much warning as you can expect in the tough world of international politics. That’s four years away—in defense planning terms, that’s yesterday. We actually have very limited things that we can still do to address the threat.

The Germans deconstructed their military, not as a result of World War II, but as a result of “the end of history and the peace dividend.” They had a very large and impressive military when the Federal Republic was seeking to defend itself against the Soviets and the Eastern Bloc. This has been a matter of policy, particularly under former Chancellor [Angela] Merkel—whose legacy will be ashes in her mouth. But the question is: will Germany do it? They’re not stepping up. Their military budget is going to be way below [the NATO target of] two percent of GDP [gross domestic product] again this year. The country that deserves applause, in this respect, is Poland, which is committed to almost five percent.



Elbridge Colby, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development. (Photo: Defense.gov)

FS: WHAT ABOUT THE UK?

Colby: I give it a lot of credit for its ambition. Under Boris Johnson, if I recall correctly, it committed to three percent, but I think that figure has been knocked down over time. It’s great that Britain is more engaged on the continent, precisely because we are going to have to shift to Asia, but the UK has very limited ability to project serious military power to Asia. So, if we’re looking at it from the enlightened, self-interested point of view (invented in the United Kingdom, after all), then we can’t get China and Asia wrong.

If China takes over Asia in a hegemonic situation, which I think is its goal, our interests are going to suffer far more because Asia is a much, much larger economic area than Europe. China is a much larger and more formidable power

than Russia. So, the question is, who’s going to bear the cost?

If Europe presents a future administration with “we just can’t do it, it’s going to take us too much time,” then the president should say, “I’m sorry, you have to bear the consequence of that decision and inability. If you want to change that, we will help you, but we, the American people, are not going to allow China to take over Asia because you won’t take the steps needed to be able to defend yourselves.

“But also, the Russians are having real trouble. They’re not ten feet tall; this is not the Red Army of 1945. The notion that they’re just going to roll over the Ukrainians—you don’t have to accept that, Europe. You’re a huge economic area.” The problem is that Europe is not stepping up.

■ **Duluth, Dubuque, or Denver**
FS: WHERE DOES NATO STAND IN
THIS NEW WORLD?

Colby: During the Cold War, the relative balance of expenditures on defense between America and Europe was closer to 50 percent. But not now. And this is where that establishment and Europe's interests do, unfortunately, align, because the establishment in Washington loves to be the global leader—the Madeleine Albrights, George W. Bushes. “We stand taller; we’re the indispensable nation.” That’s great for that Washington establishment, but that is not what serves the people who are watching the wounded warriors. Why are the American people spending 3.5 percent of their GDP [on defense] while Europeans are spending a mere fraction of that? It’s really insane when you think about it, that the Americans in Duluth, or Dubuque, or Denver are spending 3.5 percent while the Germans—who have more responsibility to provide for collective defense than anybody by orders of magnitude—spend 1.5 percent. People say: “Germans don’t feel threatened.” Do you think Americans do? The only way to make this sustainable is to have a more balanced approach.

FS: WHAT MAKES YOU SO SURE
THAT CHINA IS PLANNING SOME
ATTACK ON TAIWAN?

Colby: I don’t think it’s much of a debate anymore. The leader of the most unified Chinese government since Mao Zedong has explicitly given instructions to the party-army to be ready to attack Taiwan by 2027. And the Chinese pretty much assume that the Americans would come to Taiwan’s defense. That would mean war.

Look at the military they’re building: it is obviously designed to take on, not just Taiwan, but the United States, Japan. They’re clearly developing a global military that looks like the American military: aircraft carriers, space

satellites, nuclear-powered submarines. Their basing architecture: Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, Pakistan, Equatorial Guinea, which is on the Atlantic coast of Africa. I have

operation. To go back historically: the Wehrmacht was much more powerful than the remaining British Army after Dunkirk, but the Germans couldn’t find a way to get across the Channel and sus-

The leader of the most unified Chinese government since Mao Zedong has explicitly given instructions to the party-army to be ready to attack Taiwan by 2027.

no idea what Xi Jinping is going to decide to do. But if it looks like a duck, you know, maybe it’s a duck.

FS: DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE
AN ATTACK RATHER THAN JUST A
BLOCKADE?

Colby: One of the lessons of Ukraine is: don’t screw around. If you’re going to do something, do it right. If you were go-

tain it. That’s the model to think about. But the reason I think they’re not going to do a blockade—which I think they could, it’s not impossible, and that could succeed—is that it would leave a lot to chance. It leaves a lot in the hands of the Taiwanese; it leaves a lot in the hands of the Americans. It cedes the initiative, it cedes the element of surprise, and I just don’t think the Chinese are likely to do that.

One of the lessons of Ukraine is: don’t screw around. If you’re going to do something, do it right. If you were going to send two missiles, send six.

ing to send two missiles, send six. If you were going to capture and try to turn someone, kill him. I think the Chinese are clearly developing the capability to do just that. Yes—it’s difficult to mount and sustain an amphibious and air invasion across the Strait, 100 miles. But it’s not impossible. We’ve been able to do it over the last 75 years. With the exception of the Persian Gulf War, we haven’t, but everybody knew that we could drop Marines pretty much where we wanted in large parts of the world, and that nobody could do anything about it.

But that’s one thing we have in our favor: the difficulties of such an

■ **China as a Cautious State?**

FS: BUT CHINA IS ACTUALLY QUITE
A CAUTIOUS STATE.

Colby: I don’t know how the Chinese have gotten this reputation. [The Communists] won the Civil War through the most brutal means possible. Then they seized Tibet through invasion. They invaded Hainan Island as part of the conclusion of the Civil War, and they were planning on invading Formosa [Taiwan] before they directly intervened in the Korean War with huge amounts of troops and fought the Americans and the British to a



Chinese Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarine. (Photo: Chinese State media)

standstill. They also directly attacked Vietnam in 1979—their ambitions were to go a lot further.

Why would they do it now? I think they actually feel that they need to. Xi Jinping is saying that the United States is trying to strangle China. You see what he's doing with Vladimir Putin and Russia—they regard us as being in an almost existential struggle, which is very dangerous. The reason they would use military force is to secure their place as the world's top economy, and a large guaranteed geo-economic sphere, because they can see what's happening with things like AUKUS and so forth. There's a lot of balancing behavior to check China's overweening ambitions, and if they want to get out from under that, they have a strong incentive to use military force, and they're preparing to do so.

My preferred policy—which is, of course, designed to deter and avoid a war, rather than get into it—is for the United States to be prepared to act decisively and expeditiously to defeat a

Chinese invasion, which would involve anti-ship, anti-air, attacking Chinese ground forces that land on the islands. It almost certainly would involve selective attacks on the Chinese mainland that would be constrained to try to help manage escalation, which would be an

uncertain endeavor. The best thing in this situation is to be as prepared as humanly possible, and not to get close to the marginal edge of a conventional fight—yet that's what we're not doing right now. I think the problem is that if we half-bake it, we could get a situation in which the Chinese [invade], and we offer an unsatisfactory or unavailing

response, which means we're at war with China, but we've lost. That's the worst outcome, and that's actually going to be worse for Europe, because in that situation, there's going to be a giant sucking sound of every US resource going to the primary theatre: Asia.

My preferred policy—which is, of course, designed to deter and avoid a war, rather than get into it—is for the United States to be prepared to act decisively and expeditiously to defeat a Chinese invasion...

■ *American Defense Investment*

FS: THAT MEANS GREATER INVESTMENT IN MILITARY HARDWARE AND DETERRENCE AROUND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?

Colby: I'm in the “speak softly and carry a big stick” department: focus more on military hardware and readiness, and

less on symbolic provocative actions. I think we are peacocking right now, and probably with the strength of a peacock.

I want us to really focus on sharpen-

helping the cause by spending less per capita on defense than the American people do, which is insane. We are really on a knife's edge.

forces vis-à-vis Taiwan, and how resolute the American government and the American people are vis-à-vis this specific conflict.

We should be husbanding the voters' resolve. We should be very careful with their money. I'm acutely conscious of whether the American people will support the defense of Taiwan.

ing that stick, making it a bigger stick, if you will, and doing less in the way of publicity. All these people [American officials] are on the island and making all these statements about Taiwan—"the CCP is evil" and all this stuff. Sure. I sympathize with Taiwan's freedom. But we are in a super dangerous situation and should focus on hitting the gym. In Europe—I'm not picking on Ukraine—we're not anywhere near as disciplined as we want. There are difficulties in resuscitating the defense-industrial base. But that's the world we have to live in. By the way, the American people are not showing a lot of interest in dramatic increases in defense spending. This is not 1980.

FS: ISN'T THAT A PROBLEM? THE AMERICAN PEOPLE MAY NOT BE WITH YOU ON TAIWAN.

Colby: That's exactly the problem and that's one of the reasons I'm so worried about Ukraine. We should be husbanding the voters' resolve. We should be very careful with their money. I think we can do a Taiwan defense. We're already spending almost a trillion dollars on the defense budget. But then, if we're going to do that, we can't think we can fight a proxy war with Russia indefinitely. I'm acutely conscious of whether the American people will support a defense of Taiwan. And the Taiwanese are not

FS: YOU DON'T BUY THE ARGUMENT THAT WEAKNESS ON UKRAINE WOULD SIGNAL WEAKNESS ON TAIWAN?

Colby: It's such a tendentious argument. There's a group now, particularly more on the Left, of people who are Ukraine hawks, who are starting to call for détente with China. I actually appreciate that, because at least we're see-

China's main calculation is going to be the balance of military forces vis-à-vis Taiwan, and how resolute the American government and the American people are vis-à-vis this specific conflict.

ing a choice. You find this particularly among hawks, who say, "We're going to do Ukraine, and it's going to show China and then we're going to pivot." It's a "we're going to win the lottery" sort of strategy.

Obviously, China is looking to some extent, but China's main calculation is going to be the balance of military

FS: IS THERE A CHANCE YOU COULD MAKE CONFLICT MORE LIKELY BY ANTICIPATING IT?

Colby: It's a very serious worry. We are now in a situation, because of our neglect of Taiwan and our Asian defenses more broadly, where the Chinese not only clearly want to subordinate Taiwan but are increasingly in the position where they may be able to do so in the face of our resistance. We are not going to catalyze something that they did not already want. They've been working, since the Third Taiwan Straits Crisis [in 1995-1996], assiduously and carefully and ruthlessly to develop a military to do this. By neglecting our defenses there, we've now brought it into the realm of the possible. So now we're in the situation, frankly, that Britain faced in the late Thirties, where you're under-strength in the primary theatre. Your

choices are: to be weak and essentially ensure failure—you might avoid the war, but at the cost of all your important interests. Or you can arm—but then you might precipitate, at more of an operational and tactical level, a Chinese response to get out from under this.

This is a problem I take very seriously.

America Annoys France. What is Paris's Problem?

by **MARK MEIROWITZ**

France and the United States go back a long way. It was French support of America's Revolutionary War that made all the difference—without French ammunition, troops and naval support, America could not have beaten the British. Ironically, our American Revolution inspired the French Revolution of 1789—which remains to this day the seminal event in the French psyche, evolving into France's civilizing mission—*la mission civilisatrice*—to spread human rights and democracy. Former French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin wrote, “At the heart of our national identity, there is a permanent search for values that might be shared by others.” The French believe that they, like the United States, hold a special place in the world. The relationship between France and the US has had its ups and downs—a few examples:

- The very bumpy relationship of Charles De Gaulle, leader of the Free French, with the major Allies during the Second World War. Roosevelt wrote to Churchill that he was “fed up with De Gaulle.” De Gaulle and the Free French were largely excluded from the postwar planning by Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, and ignored by the US State Department. De Gaulle was not invited to summit meetings at Tehran, Yalta, or Potsdam.

- The 1956 Suez Crisis in which President Dwight Eisenhower pulled the plug on the operation, fearing a backlash from the Arab world.

- In 1959, De Gaulle—then president—decided that France would have its own *force de frappe*, its own nuclear force—US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in 1962 called France's nuclear ambitions

“dangerous ... and lacking in credibility.”

- In 1966, De Gaulle pulled France out of NATO's integrated command and ordered the US to withdraw its soldiers from French soil. President Lyndon Johnson had Secretary of State Dean Rusk ask De Gaulle if that included the American soldiers buried in French war cemeteries—no answer was forthcoming from France. (It was not until 2009 that French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that France would return to NATO's military command).

- French President Emmanuel Macron advocated a “real European army” to protect against Russia, saying, “[f]aced with Russia, which is near our borders and has shown it could be threatening—I want to build a real security dialogue with Russia, which is a country I respect, a European country—but we must have a Europe that can defend itself on its own without relying only on the United States.” President Donald Trump reacted harshly in a tweet as follows: “Very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its fair share of NATO, which the US subsidizes greatly!” Macron, by the way, said that NATO was “experiencing brain death”

- In a move that humiliated France, the United States, in 2021, ditched a deal with France by which diesel subs would be provided to Australia and entered AUKUS—a deal with the United Kingdom to provide nuclear subs to Australia.

■ **Macron as De Gaulle**

President Macron has been following in the footsteps of his hero Charles De Gaulle, applying De Gaulle's ideas on strategy and defense to the contemporary world situation, arguing that

France and the other European states must not become “America's followers.” As the rivalry between China and the US escalates, Macron fears that France will become a vassal of the US. He wants to realize the re-establishment of a European Europe under French leadership, with France as a third force between the superpowers.

Macron has said that France's “role everywhere is to be a mediating power... A diplomatic, military, cultural, educational, national, and European power, and always to be a mediator ... meaning that France never stops making itself heard ... It is not a compromising power, not a middling power, but a mediating power; one which seeks to build this very international order which alone will enable us to make globalization a little more human and humanist.”

De Gaulle “simply steered a course” between “two evils—Soviet or American domination. Whenever the choice [was] stark and unavoidable,” he supported the United States. But when “events” did “not press a clear choice upon him, his course [was] simply to maneuver between a potential enemy and a very irksome friend.” (*De Gaulle - The Implacable Ally*, Roy Macridis, Ed.) Sound familiar? Plus *ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Macron, like De Gaulle, is trying to steer France's path between the superpowers. This has not been an easy task.

■ **Ukraine War and Taiwan**

Regarding the war in Ukraine, it is the United States that has been at the forefront of organizing humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine together with

America's allies, not France. Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has criticized France (and Germany) for a lack of commitment to Ukraine. Ukraine is truly the bright line for the survival of Europe because if it falls to the Russians, all of Europe will be next.

In addition, a rising China and its threats against Taiwan pose a threat to the entire world. When Macron was in Beijing, accompanied by Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, Macron and von der Leyen were unable to punch above their weight against a powerful China. Von der Leyen even had the temerity to tell Xi Jinping that "stability in the Taiwan Strait is of paramount importance" and that that "[t]he threat of the use of force to change the status quo is unacceptable." Xi was not swayed. Bottom line: Macron and von der Leyen made no significant impact on the Ukraine or Taiwan crises in discussions with Xi; nothing changed.

There are no winners here, only losers, and the biggest losers will be France and Europe. If Europe disappears, as Macron apparently fears, it will be due to France's failure to appreciate the need to work with the United States to forge a workable alliance with Europe to deal with pressing global and regional issues.

Considering Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the rise of China, among other causes, Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany has noted in *Foreign Affairs* magazine that the world is facing a *Zeitenwende*, "an epochal tectonic shift."

■ **The Path Forward for France**

Because of these significant global changes, Macron's vision for France as a mediator and world leader will likely not be realizable. Indeed, even the French seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (with a veto) has been challenged by Germany's suggestion that France turn over its UN Security Council seat to the EU. France rejected this proposal, as expected, but this demonstrated the diminished perception of France's influence, even by other Europeans.

France, Germany, and all of Europe must join with the United States to address the impact of the Ukraine war and the threat to Taiwan, among many other global and regional issues. Chancellor Scholz believes that "US President Joe Biden and his administration deserve praise for building and investing in strong partnerships across the globe." Macron should come to understand this as well.

2023) "reaffirm[ed] the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits," expressed concern over human rights in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong and called on China to press Russia to stop its aggression in Ukraine.

Henry Kissinger is of the view that the French approach to international relations is attributable to cultural factors, namely that the French "try to convince you of the inadequacy of your thinking."

Instead of fixating on how France can be the leader of Europe, France should work cooperatively with the other European states to strengthen the trans-Atlantic alliance with the United States.

Instead of fixating on how France can be the leader of Europe, France should work cooperatively with the other European states to strengthen the trans-Atlantic alliance with the United States. This is indispensable to contain China and support Ukraine in its effort to win the war against Russia.

There is no way to completely cure the French malaise. Perhaps the French might recall (as President Johnson did) that American troops sacrificed their lives during World War II so that France and Europe could be free. The French should understand that their best approach is a strong alliance with the US and active participation in NATO and other cooperative arrangements with the US and its allies.

NATO 2030 took note of "Russia and China's challenges to the rules-based international order." The G-7 (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan) Hiroshima Leaders Communique (May

Clearly, no one is convinced. Macron's arguments have simply not been persuasive considering the reality of world events. The era of De Gaulle is over and the time for French hubris is at an end. Why? Because world peace and stability depend on it.

A historian noted as one of De Gaulle's main character traits, "prescience of the future and disdain for those who think only in terms of the present." It is high time for Macron to start thinking realistically about the challenges facing France, Europe, and the world and get on board with the trans-Atlantic alliance and good relations with the United States, recognizing America's pre-eminent leadership position in the world with the power and capability to push back both Russia and China—working, of course, together with America's allies.

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The Saudi-Iran Agreement: Should Washington Be Worried?

by **HUSSAIN ABDUL-HUSSAIN**

While a few statements and photo ops here and there might suggest that Saudi Crown Prince and *de facto* ruler Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) is in the process of replacing Saudi Arabia's traditional partner, America, with China, a look at trade numbers and bilateral investments show that Riyadh has not made of China, Iran, or Russia serious economic partners, let alone in defense and diplomacy. Beijing's non-liberal, non-democratic, non-interventionist world order does appeal to Riyadh, which might be hedging, but so far, the Saudis seem to be sticking to their traditional proximity to America and the West.

■ **Surprise Diplomacy**

On March 11, MBS pulled a surprise. In Beijing, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran met and announced the restoration of diplomatic ties, seven years after Saudi Arabia had severed them in the aftermath of an Iranian mob setting the Saudi embassy in Tehran on fire.

In global relations, surprise seems to be MBS's thing. On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt suddenly cut ties with Qatar and demanded that Doha live up to its promise and end its sponsorship of Islamist organizations. MBS apparently had an even bigger surprise in mind. It fortunately did not materialize. According to late Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Sabah, Kuwait managed to convince Riyadh to stop "any military action" against Qatar.

Four years later, Qatar was still in

bed with Islamists when, again suddenly, MBS was seen on January 5, 2021, driving around with Qatari Emir Tamim Bin Hamad in the historic Saudi town of al-Ula. MBS had apparently turned the page. His disagreement with Qatar was now water under the bridge.

With Iran, MBS's restoration of ties took longer and came only after the war in Yemen had reached a stalemate and after the warring parties had settled for an open-ended truce.

Civil war in Yemen broke out in 2014 when the pro-Tehran Houthi militia toppled the internationally recognized government in Sanaa. Fearing that the Houthis would take hold of the Yemeni army's stock of ballistic missiles, mainly old Soviet Scuds, MBS convinced fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman—to intervene to disarm the Houthis and restore the Yemeni government. Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar offered token support, leaving Saudi Arabia and the UAE to do the heavy military lifting.

War in Yemen dragged on longer than MBS and the UAE had anticipated. When the Houthis depleted their Scud stockpile, they replaced it with explosive

drones and missiles from Iran and continued to attack civilian targets—mainly Saudi and Emirati airports and oil facilities. Starting in 2019, with US assistance, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had brought online air defense systems that managed to shoot down at least half the Houthi drones and missiles, substantially eroding the potency of this Yemeni-Iranian weapon.

In late 2021, the Houthis decided to push eastward to expand the borders of the pocket that they control in Yemen. They attacked government-held territory that is home to Yemen's modest energy reserves. At its peak in 2010, Yemen produced 30 million barrels of oil a year, collecting an annual revenue of \$2 billion that dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh used, before being toppled, to fund his state, entourage, and security agencies. To put the Yemeni oil number in context, consider that Saudi Arabia produces nine million barrels a day.

The Houthi offensive seemed to be winning ground and beating Saudi-supported government forces. The UAE

President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia in December. Xi had many requests for the Saudis, first and foremost to denominate \$90 billion of bilateral trade between the two sides in Chinese yuan instead of the US dollar.

came to the rescue and instructed its well-armed and well-trained militia, al-Amaleeq, (Arabic for "giants") to check the Houthi advance. Al-Amaleeq gave



Ali Shamkhani, Iranian security official (right), Wang Yi, Chinese diplomat (center), and Musaid al Aiban, Saudi Arabia's National Security Advisor. (Photo: China Daily)

the Houthis a beating and forced them to retreat to their pocket. In revenge, the Houthis hit the UAE with explosive drones, most of which were intercepted before they reached targeted oil facilities. A few months later, on April 22, 2022, the Houthis accepted a six-month truce that was renewed indefinitely.

During the early weeks and months that followed the attack on Saudi diplomatic missions, in January 2016, former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani refused to apologize to Riyadh. But by summer of 2016, Iran was sending clear messages of regret. In November, an Iranian court held 20 people responsible for the attack on the Saudi embassy. Rouhani demanded that the perpetrators be punished.

As Iran signaled its willingness to move on, Saudi Arabia dug in its heels until, in April 2021, an Iranian delegation arrived in Baghdad and asked former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to mediate with the Saudis. Kadhimi landed in Riyadh and met with MBS. Less than two weeks later, the delegations of Saudi Arabia and Iran held

the first of five dialogue sessions, all in Baghdad.

In April 2022, Yemen's truce went into effect. It was then that MBS capitalized on Iraqi mediation, which birthed the Beijing deal 11 months later. MBS was only waiting for the right time to declare his surprise restoration of ties with Iran.

The opportunity arose when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia in December. Xi had many requests for the Saudis, first and foremost to denominate \$90 billion of bilateral trade in Chinese yuan instead of the US dollar. Saudi Arabia promised to look into the matter.

Next, the Chinese president discussed Gulf security issues. The Saudis voiced concern over Iranian belligerence, both directly as in the Iranian attack on the Abqaiq Saudi oil facility, in September 2019, and indirectly through Houthi proxies. Saudi Arabia sells China 1.75 million barrels of oil per day, or 20 percent of its output and 15 percent of Chinese crude imports. Given the volume of China's oil imports from Saudi

Arabia, Beijing's interests are best served in a secure Gulf and flowing energy. Iranian attacks on Saudi oil facilities, whether direct or through Yemeni proxies, hurt those interests.

Reports have it that the Chinese president promised to make Iran commit to Saudi Arabia's airspace security. Tehran had signed, in March 2021, a 25-year deal in which Beijing promised to invest \$400 billion in the Iranian economy in return for discounted Iranian energy. Iran's increased economic dependence on China gave Beijing enough leverage to extract an Iranian promise to stop threatening Gulf and Saudi security.

■ **US Looks at the Deal**

As both Riyadh and Tehran enshrouded their agreement with ambiguity, their Beijing pact has raised eyebrows in Washington, with many fearing that Riyadh was changing sides and giving America's rival, China, an advantage in the Gulf region.

In fact, Iranian media went as far as declaring a new security architecture in the Gulf and the birth of a new multipolar world order to replace the current unipolar American-led order. Iranian media reported that Saudi Arabia had applied for membership with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an anti-Western outfit whose membership includes China, Russia, and India. Iran maintains observer status while Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, and Turkey are all dialogue partners.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE seem to have been playing along, pretending to be switching from America's unipolar world to China and Russia's multipolar one. In June, foreign ministers of the two Gulf nations visited South Africa to participate in a BRICS conference. That organization consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and is another one of those international organizations that advocate a multipolar world order to replace the current Western-dominated one.

■ *But are the Saudis Moving?*

But for all the statements and photos, nothing on the ground suggests that any GCC country is about to abandon its partnership with the US-led coalition and join the Chinese-Russian axis, of which Iran is a junior member.

Riyadh has gone to great lengths to eradicate corruption, especially since MBS's accession to power in 2015. Chinese investments in the Middle East have a bad reputation.

Despite all China's pleas, Saudi Arabia has yet to denominate its bilateral trade with China in yuan. Meanwhile, bilateral Saudi-Chinese trade seems to be the only economic link between the two countries. Saudi investments in China remain below \$5 billion, compared to close to \$40 billion in the US. Similarly, Chinese investments in Saudi Arabia are still puny, at about half a billion dollars. For comparison, consider American Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Saudi Arabia that stands at \$11 billion.

The Saudi Arabian economy was designed along the lines of Western economies. Riyadh has gone to great lengths to eradicate corruption, especially since MBS's accession to power in 2015. Chinese investments in the Middle East have a bad reputation. Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) often inflate prices and share kickbacks with local officials. Iraq has been infested with such corrupt deals.

Riyadh, for its part, has been aware of the Chinese business culture of corruption, and has thus minimized its exposure to Chinese FDI, which are small in Saudi Arabia compared to the rest of the region and the world.

With little mutual investment between Riyadh and Beijing, and as the Saudis rebuff Chinese requests to partially dump the US dollar, jumping to

the conclusion that the Beijing agreement with Iran shows that Saudi Arabia is distancing itself from Washington and getting closer to Beijing is premature.

Similarly, dollar figures of trade between Saudi Arabia and Iran have yet to indicate that Riyadh is undermin-

ing the position of a US-led coalition against Iran's destabilizing behavior in the region, including Tehran's sponsorship of terrorism and pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Bilateral trade between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been historically low. Before 2016, trade between the two countries was negligible at \$14 million.

As MBS de-escalates conflicts on all fronts, friends and foes have tried to guess whether his new policy is a prelude to switching sides, from the US-led camp to the multipolar order imagined by Russia, China, and Iran.

Since the Beijing Agreement was signed in March, Riyadh has imported worth \$15 million of steel ingots and grapes from Iran. Neither item is on the US list of sanctions.

And because Washington imposes sanctions on Iran's shipping and naval insurance sectors, Iranian merchandise was shuttled to Saudi Arabia in trucks traveling through Iraq.

American sanctions on Iran also make it hard for exporters to collect their money through Iranian banks, whose links to the global SWIFT

(Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications) system are currently frozen. Instead, Iranian merchants can either collect their money in cash, or open accounts in Saudi banks. And while Iranian Minister of Economic Affairs Ehsan Khandouzi said he expected bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia to hit the \$1 billion mark, such a number seems to be too ambitious.

Since patching things up with Qatar in 2021, MBS has gone on a blitz of zeroing out foreign policy trouble. Observers believe that such policy is a prerequisite for switching the Saudi economy's reliance on oil rent to knowledge and services.

As MBS de-escalates conflicts on all fronts, friends and foes have tried to guess whether his new policy is a prelude to switching sides, from the US-led camp to the multipolar order imagined by Russia, China, and Iran. And while a few statements here and there might show that the Saudi crown prince is indeed preparing to change partners, a look at trade numbers and bilateral in-

vestments suggest that Riyadh has not made of China, Iran, or Russia serious economic partners, let alone in defense and diplomacy.

For the foreseeable future, Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries seem to be staying in the US camp, and there is little to show otherwise, despite all the noise and photo ops.

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Xi Jinping of Arabia

by **BRANDON J. WEICHERT**

China has implemented a deft strategy to peel the Middle East away from the United States. Most observers have fixated on the fact that China is doing this to lay claim to the vast oil and natural gas wealth that exists beneath the sands of the region.

Certainly, this is true.

■ *What China Wants*

Yet, China's plan goes much deeper than just control over the fossil fuel. China wants to partner with and gain access to the budding high-tech development projects occurring throughout the region. In places like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel, cutting-edge scientific innovation is underway that will directly impact the outcome of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is the name experts have given to our current moment of socioeconomic development. It is the creation of new innovations in the fields of biotechnology, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, metamaterials, hypersonic technologies, Fifth-Generation (5G) and Sixth-Generation (6G) communications, to just name some advances. The nation that innovates most in these new domains will be the dominant superpower for the next century.

Previously, the Second and Third Industrial Revolutions were dominated by the United States. This was the true source of America's power and the reason the US has been the world's dominant superpower for as long as it has been.

However, according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), China dominates 37 out of the 44 key areas of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Beijing is now scaling up this

impressive dominance beyond the high-tech sector and applying geopolitics to its quest to be the Fourth Industrial Revolution-controlling superpower (thereby making America and the rest of the world subordinate to Beijing). China's autocrats are looking to *their* west, seeking out new development grounds in the one region that most Americans want little involvement with: the Middle East.

China is the world's second-largest economy (in GDP terms) and the world's largest economy in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Its economy has traditionally grown at an astonishing clip. Even in the recent years, when China was not enjoying double-digit economic

growth rates, its growth was measured to be much higher than America's consistently meager increases.

Yet, China needs new markets to sustain itself. It simply cannot remain totally insulated. Chinese firms have branched beyond their territory, going as far afield as Latin America, Africa, and now the Middle East. More important though, are China's wider strategic ambitions.

■ *Military-Civil Fusion Enters the Mideast*

Chinese firms, in fact, are merely the vanguard of China's growing state power; projectors of China's soft power (which appears more as an iron fist in a velvet glove).

The Middle East has long been considered an American sphere of interest. Costly, brutal wars have been waged by the United States and its allies in the region to ensure its dominant position there. Despite this, for a fraction of the cost, China has slid into the region underneath America's nose just after the United States concluded those wars.

And China is using its technology firms as the spearhead.

For China, the intention is not only to control the greater Middle East. Chinese leaders' ambitions are far larger. The Mideast is, after all, the crossroads of civilization—the place where Asia links with Europe and even Africa, all regions that China wants to have greater

...moving the Middle East into China's expanding sphere of influence will place Beijing in a position to connect all the other regions.

influence over. So, moving the Middle East into China's expanding sphere of influence will place Beijing in a position to connect all the other regions.

It's a silent takeover of Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa through all measures short of war.

In the Chinese context of military-civil fusion (MCF), business isn't just business. It is a vehicle for China's military and strategic ambitions. The connections forged between the region's governments and business elite will ensnare them in a new Chinese security architecture being built before our very eyes.

Military-Civil Fusion is China's strategy for making it the dominant

superpower by linking its civilian and military industrial capacities into a cohesive entity. China already has a world-class manufacturing sector. Its leaders have spent years and billions of dollars and years building a high-tech innovation infrastructure to rival America's.

Chinese firms—notably the country's technology firms—compete globally against those of other countries. The benefit these companies have when seeking contracts abroad is that they bring with them the backing of the Chinese state, making them more competitive than other, private firms.

China's MCF has proven to be highly effective method for expanding and increasing global power relative to that of the United States. This is painfully obvious in the Middle East, where Chinese firms—notably tech businesses—are moving at an alarming rate.

The presence of these firms (as well as other Chinese initiatives to win over the region's great powers) means that America is increasingly at a disadvantage. More disconcerting is how little Washington has paid attention to these developments—or even how America has allowed these developments to occur with its short-sighted foreign policy toward the Middle East.

■ *A Different Approach*

Whereas Americans have used military might and diplomatic pressure, Beijing has taken a more circumspect approach. It wants to link economic and political interests with those of the region's power players. As Beijing's rulers argue, they want a partnership rather than what they claim is American imperialism. After years of US military action, China's appeals are increasingly enticing to the embattled regimes of the region.

From Israel to Saudi Arabia, the Americans have alienated the Middle East's traditional American partners. The Biden administration has made a consistent case against Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman

(MBS) on human rights grounds. The Biden team wants MBS punished for his apparent role in the gruesome murder of *Washington Post* Op-Ed writer (and former spy, according to many accounts) Jamal Khashoggi in 2019.

Beyond that, Washington wants Saudi Arabia to rein in its overall human rights abuses.

However, with each criticism of Saudi Arabia's leadership over human rights matters, Washington drives Riyadh farther away and into the waiting arms of the People's Republic of China, which has no moral qualms about marrying itself to Saudi power in the region. And in the case of Chinese human rights abuses toward the Muslim, Turkic Uyghurs of Western China, the Saudis and the rest of the Muslim states in the region turn a blind eye.

This is partly because the Saudis want to do business with China. Although, it is likely more because the members of the Saudi elite who get sick and require organ transplants receive the organs of Uyghur prisoners in China via the black market and can know that these organs were *halal*—clean according to Islamic religious law, unlike the illicitly harvested organs of China's Falun Gong or Tibetan political prisoners.

■ *Saudi Vision 2030 and China's Rise*

Saudi Arabia is transitioning from an oil-dominated economy toward what MBS refers to as "Saudi Vision 2030." By taking public a large share of Saudi ARAMCO, the country's oil conglomerate, the Crown Prince hopes to create a new Saudi-led Silicon Valley in the desert that would make his country more than just one of the world's leading oil producers.

By 2025, Saudi Arabia is slated to spend \$25.4 billion on indigenous high-tech development, considered the most substantial investment into high-tech development in the world. Analysts have also projected that an additional \$6.4 billion in developing future technologies

will be spent by the Saudis over the next several years.

Saudi Arabia is, by far, the largest market in the region—with a volume exceeding \$40 billion, according to Suparna Dutt D'Cunha of the online publication, *Fast Company Middle East*.

China wants to be on the ground floor. That is one critical reason Beijing waded into Saudi Arabia's dispute with Iran and brokered a peace deal between the two.

The only problem facing Riyadh in its high-tech enterprise is that the Saudi workforce cannot meet increased demand to fill high-tech jobs. Saudi Arabia not only needs to invest in high-tech innovation hubs, but it will also need to invest in massive retraining programs for the population.

This will prove more problematic for Saudi Arabia since its push for high-tech innovation has outpaced the country's commitment to reeducating its workforce.

Not to worry, though. If China can complete its push to reorient Saudi Arabia from the United States and toward China's orbit, Beijing could do for the Kingdom what it has done for many other countries with which it has done business: China can move its own workers into the country, filling in whatever positions in the new high-tech industry are needed, allowing Riyadh to continue its transition from leading oil producer to a major high-tech power.

After the Chinese-brokered peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran, China's state-backed telecommunications firm, Huawei, announced it will move its Middle East headquarters to the Saudi capital of Riyadh.

But that is just the start of China's movement into the Middle East.

■ *China Really Wants Israel*

The Chinese true target is Israel. In that progressive democracy exists one of the world's most advanced high-tech industries. Silicon Wadi (*wadi* is Arabic for "stream bed") is a term used to describe

the various business parks in Israel that have sprouted up over the decade. These areas emulate and work closely with Silicon Valley firms to produce next-generation technology.

Specifically, Israel is pioneering the development of critical biotech and quantum computing advancements that China's rulers are simply ga-ga over. There's also Israel's budding space sector which China has already attempted to gain access to.

Recently, Israeli start-ups in that dynamic nation-state have begun proliferating in nuclear fusion. One firm, NT-Tao, has secured \$28 million in venture capital funding to create a nuclear reactor small enough to fit into a cargo container.

This Israeli firm has attracted the likes of major corporate backers, such as the Japanese automaker, Honda. The automaker's leadership has said its investment into NT-Tao gives the firm "great hope" in terms of the venture's profitability, its potential to innovate this critical technology, and how it can change the world by providing affordable, efficient, nearly limitless clean energy.

China is dying to get more involved in these ventures. By pushing Americans out of the region and replacing US power with that of China via the Military-Civil Fusion approach, Chinese firms hope to gain access to these Israeli ventures. They could be in position to pilfer such innovations (as they have done repeatedly to the United States and the rest of the West), incorporate this new technology into their own base, and use it to further enhance both China's economy as well as its military capabilities relative to those of the United States.

■ *China's Dance*

Because of Israel's American-like tech development practices, the tiny democracy is now a target of what David P. Goldman refers to as "Sino-Forming," that is China's practice of remaking the world in its own image.

We were told by Beijing's

allies (of which there are far more than Washington is willing to acknowledge) that China's entry into the Middle East as arbiter of a new regional order would herald peace and harmony for everyone.

Yet, before the ink dried on the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, Iranian-backed militants from Hezbollah in

By pushing Americans out of the region and replacing US power with that of China via the Military-Civil Fusion approach, Chinese firms hope to gain access to these Israeli ventures.

Lebanon began popping rockets off at neighboring Israel. The Netanyahu government can expect more olive branches like this from China-backed Iran.

That's because China is fomenting this newfound instability. By icing tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, Beijing is creating an axis of autocrats against the democracies—of which Israel is the only one in the region. It's not that China wants to destroy Israel. Beijing wants, through China's Iranian proxies, to pressure Israel's leaders into abandoning their alliance with the United States.

In so doing, Beijing hopes to isolate Israel from its traditional allies and then force Jerusalem to turn to China (and Russia) for help in keeping the nuclear-arming Iranians from destroying Israel.

■ *Beijing's Pound of Flesh*

The price of such a deal would be complete access to Israel's high-tech sector; to turn Israel into a conduit for China's growing high-tech Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) that stretches from mainland China all the way to Israel's Mediterranean coastline. Israel would be absorbed in China's growing

Eurasia-and-Africa-wide trade belt that would empower Beijing at Washington's expense.

By fusing China's impressive high-tech sector with the growing high-tech development sectors of Saudi Arabia and Israel, China not only would ensure its dominance of the geo-strategically vital

Middle East but also would elevate its game in the ongoing race to dominate the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Beijing effectively would make the rest of the world dependent on Chinese-developed high-tech infrastructure in much the same way the Americans made the world dependent on American-developed high-technologies in the previous two industrial revolutions. Without a shot. Forget about Taiwan. China is devouring the geopolitical system. Taiwan's collapse after Beijing finishes eating the world would be assured—and no one could stop Beijing at that point even if they wanted.

Americans, meanwhile, are busy arguing about which gender they are.

As a former president might tweet, Sad!

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White House Sabotaging Saudi-Israeli Peace

by **DAVID M. WEINBERG**

Actors on the US hard left are seeking to scuttle normalization between Riyadh and Jerusalem. They will not tolerate any breakthrough in ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel during the tenure of Prime Minister Netanyahu and certainly not until they get their long-grouched-about Palestinian state.

Worse still is that the Biden administration seems hell-bent on once again offering the mullahs of Tehran a sweetheart deal with the US: the release of \$10 billion or more in frozen Iranian assets and clemency for Iran's near-breakout nuclear advances of recent years, in exchange for Iranian release of American hostages and warmed-over pious Iranian pledges to freeze the Shiite atomic bomb program at a near-breakout point.

Washington expects Israeli acquiescence in the emerging US surrender to Iran in exchange for a series of other things important to Israel. These include US backing for Israel against escalated Palestinian assaults expected this fall in UN forums; toning down US criticism regarding settlement and security matters (at a time when the IDF is going to have to intensify its anti-terrorist operations in Judea and Samaria); an easing of US pressures on Israel in connection with domestic matters (like judicial reform); a warm Washington visit for Prime Minister Netanyahu (which is not just a political concession but rather is critical to Israel's overall deterrent posture); and most of all, significant American moves towards reconciliation with Saudi Arabia (which is critical to

driving a breakthrough in Israeli-Saudi ties).

In a nasty 6,000-word essay in June, *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman tied all these issues together into one big bang-up assault on Israel. He started by comparing the forward-looking agenda of Saudi Arabia under its young leader Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman with the backwardness of Israel under the nationalist-haredi coalition headed by Netanyahu. Friedman then called upon the Biden administration to play hardball with Israel.

"Biden should only invite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Oval Office if he will answer two questions: One, (do you admit to) occupying the West Bank and (are you) committed to resolving its permanent status through negotiations with the Palestinians, or do you see Israel's current control of the Palestinians as the permanent status, never to be changed? We need to know once and for all."

"And two, are you committed to ensuring that any major changes to Israel's court system will be implemented with broad public support to ensure political stability, because the US has a huge interest in its most important military ally in the region not descending into civil war over judicial reform?"

Friedman barked that "For the last 75 years Israel has been a trusted and vital strategic partner of the United States, but that was always based on shared interests and shared values. If those values aren't shared any longer, we need to know that. We need to get behind those Israelis who want to

preserve Israel as a democracy—and keep locking the White House gates to anyone who doesn't."

Now, Friedman takes his animus one step further, applying a bludgeon to the nascent détente between the Jewish state and the most important country in the Arab and Islamic world. He is frightened that "by rewarding Bibi with the ultimate prize of diplomatic relations with Riyadh, the Saudis could cement Netanyahu's extremist coalition in power for years—without any Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in the West Bank."

Simply put, Friedman, and the Biden officials he is fronting for, prefer sandbagging Netanyahu and pumping runaway Palestinian statehood to breakthrough diplomacy that would transform the Mideast. They fancy promoting Mahmoud Abbas and the rickety Palestinian Authority over advancing America's regional strategic interests and Israel's core security interests. And they favor another sell-out US deal with Iranians to a win-win-win deal that draws the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia together.

Alas, delaying Saudi normalization with Israel, and holding back on a courtesy visit to Biden's Washington for Netanyahu until Israel concedes to maximalist Palestinian demands, is a dead-end path for regional peace and stability. It is a recipe for another 100 years of unnecessary Arab-Israeli conflict, and would be yet another prize for the mullahs of Tehran.

Irony of ironies! It is not the Saudis who are placing Palestinian rights in the way of Saudi-Israeli rapprochement,



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, right, meets with then Senior Advisor to the US President, Jared Kushner in Riyadh in 2020. (Photo: Saudi Press Agency)

but rather American pundits and politicians obsessed with the Palestinians (no matter how many wrongs the Palestinians commit).

Every serious interlocutor I know who has spent significant time in Riyadh in recent months says that Saudi leaders no longer insist on Palestinian statehood as a condition for movement toward Israel. The Saudis realize, as did the Emiratis, Bahrainis, and the Moroccans, that current Palestinian leaders are incapable of compromising for peace—and they see no reason to be held back any longer by Palestinian rejectionism.

What the Saudis need are not hackneyed exhortations and stale formulas related to Palestinians. What they need and want are concrete understandings with Washington on security and economic matters, and partnership with Israel.

The sour and rejectionist approach described above is characteristic of the reluctance of progressives to fully embrace the Abraham Accords. Alas, many of them still consider the Accords a Trump-tainted gimmick or a Netanyahu-stained end-run around

the Palestinians, and not an authentic breakthrough for peace and security in the Middle East.

It is hard for them to swallow the fact Arab countries are band-wagging with Israel pointedly because Arab leaders view Israel demonstrably as a force for good, knowledge, prosperity, and stability in the Middle East.

It is even harder for the extremists among them to accept the blunt refutation inherent in the Abraham Accords of the ongoing Palestinian campaign to deny and criminalize the Jewish people's historic rights in Israel.

And the Biden administration? Sadly, it has spent the past three years sitting on the sidelines of this historic transformation.

Instead of embracing the Abraham Accords early-on and investing in their expansion, the administration effectively has sabotaged them. It has prioritized a renewed nuclear deal with Iran while beating up on Israel and Saudi Arabia for their democratic and/or human rights deficits.

For a while Biden's aides even refused to speak the term "Abraham Accords." Only recently has the

administration started talking about appointing a special envoy to drive expansion of the Accords, and only because the Saudis effectively have threatened to bolt their alliance with West.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has cozied-up to Qatar which sits securely in Iran's regional camp, even extending non-NATO major ally status to Doha. And, as mentioned above, it seems about to agree to another bad deal with the mullahs of Iran.

US policy must change. Despite "Trumpian residue" on the Abraham Accords and Palestinian dissatisfaction with the Abraham Accords dynamic — things that clearly bother Biden's people; and even though Saudi-Israeli ties would be a political win for Netanyahu — something that clearly bothers Biden's people too, doubling-down on the Accords should be a priority US foreign policy goal, a "no brainer."

Expansion of the Abraham Accords to include Saudi Arabia might even move peace with Palestinians closer. It would most emphatically signal Palestinian leadership that the time to compromise with Israel has come. Perhaps Mohammed bin Salman might be able to convince Palestinians to accept the Jewish people's historic rights in Israel and reach an amicable settlement.

For this and so many other reasons, Biden administration officials and mainstream Democrats in Congress ought to move beyond their Trump traumas, Netanyahu antipathies, and Iran illusions to get behind the Abraham Accords, bringing Riyadh into the regional peace revolution.

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“Not Everyone Gets in Every Club”

book by **HAL BRANDS** and **MICHAEL BECKLEY**
review by **SHOSHANA BRYEN**

It takes a fairly long introduction to get to *Danger Zone* by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley because China—in spite of or because of Russia’s war in Ukraine—has become a pivotal foreign and defense issue for both the American left and the American right. So, the bottom line first: buy *Danger Zone*, read it, worry about it. Then decide whether you believe there is “peak China” or a danger zone, and that the US can/will restore its military deterrence capability—the essential points the book addresses.

America’s relationship to China before the outbreak of the Wuhan Virus (the proper name of the SARS Cov-2 or Coronavirus) was totally American—Democrat and Republican. Our diplomacy begins with the premise that countries with systems inimical to ours will accept American values, American goals, and crucially, American leadership. The truth, however, is that anti-Western regimes—repressive and/or communist—will happily take all the benefits of the West while pursuing their own goals. Negotiating with them is a fraud—they’ll tell America what it wants to hear and then march along to their own drummers. We tried it with Saddam, Qaddafi, an earlier incarnation of the Taliban, and Bashar Assad, plus a number of “Arab Spring” countries. Find the success. Today, Palestinians, Iranians, Chinese are all willing to take what they can get while they do what they do.

We are inevitably surprised. Consider China.

- We tossed Taiwan from the UN in 1971 in favor of Mao’s communists; the

permanent seat on the Security Council went to the Chinese communists as well. This was meant as a blow to Russian communists, but, well...

- We let China into the World Health Organization. Taiwan continued to participate as “Chinese Taipei” in “observer” status until 2016 and was then dumped. Taipei was deliberately closed out of COVID-19 conversations and remains so.

- We mainly ignored China’s abysmal human rights record, although:

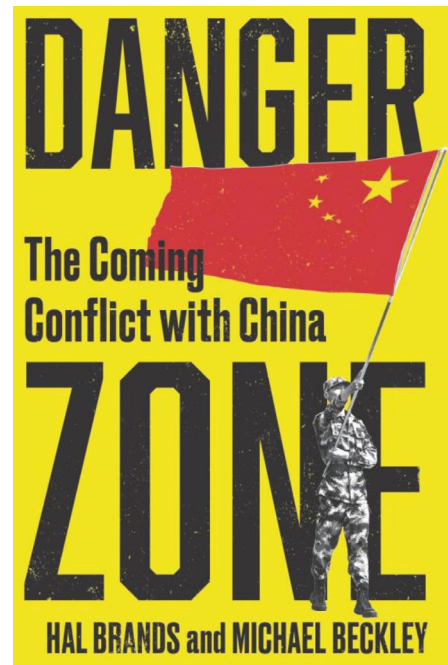
- We did suspend military contact in 1989 after Tiananmen Square massacre, but restored discussions in 1993, and in 1997 invited the Chinese to visit our naval vessels in the Pacific. After a slight retrenchment in the early 2000s, a pro-China “rebalancing” took place in 2011.

- We let China into World Trade Organization in 2001 and sent it US technology and manufacturing capabilities to “help” its economy align with the free market world.

- We ignored Beijing’s rape of the environment (it own and the Global Commons); China ranks 4th on list of ocean polluting countries and is building more coal-fired plants than the rest of the world combined. We’re setting up to ban gas stoves.

Got it?

China’s complicity and secrecy in the wake of the transmission of the COVID virus woke a lot of people to problems inside China and problems with America’s general acceptance of the communist government’s behavior/secretcy/totalitarianism/aggressiveness/anti-Americanism and more.



Some people got there before others. In 2015, *inFOCUS* Quarterly interviewed Ambassador John Huntsman, who noted that [then-US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter] “is about ten years dated

But maybe the Chinese have problems of their own and maybe that makes them even more dangerous in the *near term* than they would have been if Pillsbury had been totally right.

Brands and Beckley make a strong case for smaller, more agile alliances and institutions and agreements.

when he says we share a common architecture with China. We don't share a common architecture. Their aspirations developed a brand new architecture, and I think we need to recognize that and speak about it. They want to develop new institutions and a new architecture to protect their interests, which runs counter to our own aspirations in the region.”

That issue also reviewed *The Hundred Year Marathon*, in which formerly pro-China defense and intelligence analyst Michael Pillsbury had become a “China hawk,” and used his very deep understanding of Chinese government and culture to warn that China was America's adversary. Regardless of our policies toward it—its policies were inimical to the US and the democratic world. We wrote:

Pillsbury explains how clever the Chinese are. Government officials are crafty, thorough, cunning, and smarter-than-your-average (or even above average) American. They are well-versed in Chinese history, folklore and military strategy. They speak in code. They have absolute control of their people and the messaging the people hear. They have a plan; no one deviates. And they will overtake us. Americans have no idea... That doesn't mean Pillsbury 2.0 is wrong, which is why the book should be bought and read.

Here is where *Danger Zone* fits in.

Much more nuanced than Pillsbury, Brands and Beckley cover the range of Chinese internal and external problems, including the food shortages caused by Chinese destruction of its own agricultural resources. “In 2014, Xinhua reported that more than 40 percent of China's arable land was suffering ‘degradation from overuse.’ According to official studies, pollution has destroyed nearly 20 percent of China's arable land.” This goes along with a huge demographic dislocation (not enough women due to a male-centered society and pro-abortion

danger zone.

That is what Gen. Mike Minihan, head of the US Air Force Air Mobility Command, was saying in his perfectly reasonable message to his airmen in February of this year, in which he warned them to prepare for a possible war with China over Taiwan in 2025.

Mark Twain said, “history never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme.” Not quite. Chapter Four is a fascinating review of Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor out of desperation after years of horror-inducing slaughter in China, and a necessary review of the decisions that led to World War I. The chapter on the Cold War is a terrific reminder of where we were then—and where we are not now.

Brands and Beckley have four very good suggestions for America's future defense, if we were still in the 1950s.

- Prioritize ruthlessly.
- Combine strategic purpose with tactical agility and fast track big initiatives.
- A little offense is the best defense.
- Getting to the long game and ensuring you can win it.

There are assumptions built in:

- That everyone agrees on the nature of the problem.

The great failing of the UN, WTO, WHO etc. is that everyone knows everything and gets everything and there is no way to put anyone out.

policy, and a rapidly aging population), colossal debt, declining growth, and, most important, a more hostile geopolitical environment as countries catch on to the downsides of dealing with Beijing.

This, say Brands and Buckley, are indications that “peak China” may be sliding toward panicked and declining China. And, while that may be a boon for the US in the long run, it is the most dangerous in the next decade—the

- That everyone has the same priorities.
- That everyone is willing to go to a war footing, and if we do
- That we have the resources to do what needs to be done.

Truman was spending 9 percent of GDP on defense; we're spending about 3-ish percent now. Yes, GDP is much bigger, so spending is in bigger dollars, but weapons are enormously more expensive now and the “military industrial



Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, US President Joe Biden, and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak at the AUKUS announcement. (Photo: Simon Walker / 10 Downing Street)

complex” that Eisenhower cautioned about has indeed fulfilled his most dire predictions. Prioritization has a lot to do with contracts and contracts have a lot to do with “agility.” The time lags on refilling defense stocks reduced by the war in Ukraine make the point. Fast track?

Furthermore, the personnel part of US defense spending—which barely existed during the draft—is about 25 percent of the budget, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Ask any military person and they’d say they would rather have the soldiers of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) than of the draft, but that comes with a cost. And more than 70 percent of American young people would not make the military standard for enlistment if everyone wanted to enlist, which they don’t. All of the services except the Marines are having a shortfall, the Army’s current one is 25 percent.

Outside the cocoon of defense analysts, even the word “priority” is subject to disagreement. Truman wasn’t paying for “The Great Society,” student loans, or interstate highways. Medicare and Medicaid were signed into law in 1965. Social Security became law in 1935, but the categories were narrower and life expectancy was lower. (Social Security was pegged for

age 65 when the average life expectancy was 62. How’s that for government irony?)

The bit about “playing defense requires a good offence” sounds like starting a small battle on purpose. “The United States cannot get through the danger zone without calculated risk-taking. It must be willing to anger China, bait it into strategic blunders, and selectively roll back its power ... selectively degrading China’s capabilities and blocking its opportunities for aggrandizement.” There is a caveat, “avoid backing China into a corner where its only option is to lash out violently. Urgency, not stupidity.”

Anyone willing to trust the US government to know where to draw those lines because it knows so completely and for sure how China will react to any baiting activity? Um ... no.

So, then what is the value of the book beyond the descriptions and history?

■ *Small Can be Beautiful*

The real value is in the penultimate chapter.

Brands and Beckley make a strong case for smaller, more agile alliances and institutions and agreements. “Not everyone gets in every club,” they write, and

they are SO right. The great failing of the UN, WTO, WHO etc. is that everyone knows everything and gets everything and there is no way to put anyone out. Iran was elected chair of the UN Human Rights Council. North Korea is on the board of the WHO. Enough said.

It is possible to create a high-tech group of democracies to thwart China’s high-tech development. It is possible to approach countries that are currently feeling the heavy boot of China’s Belt and Road Initiative as China seeks repayment of loans that were designed to push poor countries into ceding their resources to China. It is possible to expand the Five Eyes intelligence group (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and AUKUS (the Pacific-oriented Australia, United Kingdom, United States alliance). Supply chains, chip factories and more. Selective alliances plus an aggressive public information program and hacking the systems of China and other authoritarians—they’re doing it to us now; to retaliate would be helpful and would help people around the world differentiate the giant America from the giant China.

■ *Conclusion*

The other great value in the book is the understanding that, in the end, even if we pass safely through the danger zone and it becomes clear that China will not be the world’s hegemon, all will not be peaceful. Postulating a new Cold War of a sort, there will be a long period of an unhappy China. It may have different leadership or a different set of priorities, but it is unlikely to be our friend. Russia wasn’t and isn’t.

That’s the best we can aspire to. On the other hand, we did it before. We can only hope we find our Harry Truman, George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, George Kennan, John Kennedy, and more to lead us.

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■ *A Final Thought ...*

The World's Controlling Interests

A bizarre series of new and/or deepened relationships around the world — often including countries that had long been at odds or at war — has emerged in the past year and a half. Every new relationship and the consequences they produce are the result of the withdrawal of the United States as the lynchpin of relations and alliances on the world stage. And into the vacuum the US created pours ... well ... nothing good.

In the Middle East since the 1950s, the US had maintained freedom of the seas, security for the export of oil, and more or less managed relations among states. Like every empire, the US had both successes and serious failures. But now it appears to be leaving. And China and Russia are entering.

In South America, then-Secretary of State John Kerry's revocation of The Monroe Doctrine told Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela that they were safe in their relations with Russia, then with Iran, and increasingly with China. Brazil's government allowed an Iranian tanker to dock in Rio and openly considers replacing the dollar with yuan for international use.

In Africa, for all of the planning, coaxing and demanding that the administration is doing to wed America's future

to EVs, there appears to be little understanding of how or where the batteries that will power the cars are made.

In 2021, 79% of all lithium-ion batteries that entered the global market were produced in China, which also controls 61% of global lithium refining for battery storage and electric vehicles and 100% of the processing of natural graphite used for battery anodes. The Democratic Republic of Congo supplies about 70% of the world's cobalt, another essential mineral, but 80% of its industrial cobalt mines are owned or financed by Chinese companies and are replete with child labor and hideous conditions for everyone.

China is working to align its domestic and international interests, including showing its military capabilities by militarizing islands in the Pacific and threatening Taiwan.

When it turns to other countries, China doesn't talk about "rights" or "democracy" or "global climate change." Compare that to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's proud announcement that, "I press the Saudis on LGBTQI issues in every conversation." Or the US slamming Israel over the internal issue of judicial reform. Then ask who will be receptive to whom?