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different points of view.*

The UKNCC Guest Contributor Programme offers contrasting 'short, sharp reads' for those seeking a fuller exploration of key questions. This edition explores the question:

***"Is China's primacy over the Western Pacific already a reality?"***

*Authors, alphabetically by surname:*

- *Rupert Hollins, UK Defence Attaché Beijing, 2012-2018*
- *ZHOU Bo, Senior Fellow, CISS, Tsinghua University, China Forum Expert  
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## "Is China's primacy over the Western Pacific already a reality?"

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### **A Dream**

The Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation has two centennial goals. The Communist Party's centenary was on 1st July. New China's foundation centenary is in 2049. This should be the apotheosis of China as a great power, exercising comprehensive national strength – political, diplomatic, economic, trade, tech, fintech, information and digital, cyber and space, innovation; and military, too. China is already impacting the world in all these dimensions.

### **Dreaming with Chinese Military Characteristics**

The People's Liberation Army, ever the Party's army, now has a global mandate. Military might is both by-product of, and pre-condition to, national greatness. For President Xi, a strong country and strong military go together.



China's economic power underwrites wholesale reform and modernisation of its armed forces. The aim: by 2049 to have "world-class armed forces". State-directed, state-subsidised, strategies such as Military-Civil Fusion, and advances in AI, quantum technologies, new, emerging and disruptive technologies will speed it there.

### Sphere of Primacy

China says it will never be a world hegemon. Conventional analysis of China's ambitions is that it seeks at least a regional primacy and global leadership - in other words, dominance centred on Asia-Pacific

and a global leadership a little more accommodating. We can leave this as a moot point for now. Let's imagine, in China's shoes, what the military dream might look like in the Western Pacific.

### The Meaning of the Dream

It irks China that its region is divided between a Chinese economic and a US security sphere of influence. US Indo-Pacific Command has over 377,000 military and civilian personnel. US Forces Japan number 54,000 military personnel, US Forces in South Korea 28,500.

A 'good' dream for China might look like withdrawal of US forces east of the International Date Line, the end of US defence agreements in the region, no assistance to Taiwan, cessation of close-in reconnaissance flights, and the halting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. With the US out, its partners and allies melt away, and regional states are powerless to resist China's pursuit of national interests, especially in the East and South China Seas.

### Dream, Not Yet Reality

That dream is not yet reality. The military balance is still in the US's favour. Its defence budget is about three times China's, though that advantage is attenuated by China's lower costs, especially for military wages, off-balance-sheet funding and shortcuts in research and development unhelpful to other states. China is not fibbing when it says the "PLA still lags far behind the world's leading militaries", by which it really means the US. One example, take expeditionary capability. China is still working on Carrier Strike Groups, Amphibious Task Forces, strategic air lift, refuelling assets and "strategic strongpoints" from which to project power globally. Whereas the US for decades has operated with these capabilities, and forward-positioned and sustained armies, fleets, marine expeditionary forces and air forces.

### Realising the Dream

China is steadily realising its dream. On quality, Chinese shipbuilding, integrated air defence systems and cruise and ballistic missiles are already top-notch. On capability, Chinese and US nuclear forces and ballistic missile defences are in an action-reaction cycle for dominance.





On deployable power projection, USPACOM is feeling Chinese push-back in the Western Pacific. In July 2020, USAF Deputy Commander USPACOM predicted Chinese military overmatch compared to INDOPACOM's assigned (not all US) forces. He said China has "home field advantage" within the first island chain (Kuril Islands, main Japanese archipelago, Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, northern Philippines archipelago and Palawan, Borneo and bending up to Vietnam). In March 2021 Commander INDOPACOM, worried about an unfavourable military balance, said the US needed to "regain the advantage" quantitatively and qualitatively. "America's day begins in Guam", he said. He could have added he does not want it to end there.

### Exercising Primacy

China's formula for a relationship with the US is "no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation". We would expect China to use Sun Tzu strategy to win without fighting. A strong military, able to fight and win is, paradoxically, a military that does not have to fight to win. Deterring the use of hard power against it, China exploits other levers of national power to achieve its goals.

China is skilled at getting its way without triggering an armed conflict. There is assertiveness, but not a fight. The term "grey zone" operations is in common use now to describe the activity. A prominent example is in the South China Sea, where instead of fronting up with grey-hulled warships which are obviously intimidating, China employs Maritime Militia in blue-hulled look-alike fishing trawlers and white-hulled China Coast Guard vessels, symbols of peace-time maritime law enforcement, but actually belonging to Chinese armed forces. If there were a fight, it would be a close call. US forces would be at stretch, Chinese forces would have deep field strength. China's Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2AD) strategy holds at risk intervening forces. This strategy is being extended to the second island chain (from Tokyo through Guam and Palau, down to Indonesia's Irian Jaya). Ominously nicknamed ballistic missiles are the DF21D "carrier killer" and the DF26 "Guam killer". Taiwan is the most likely flashpoint between the US and China, perhaps also the litmus test of military primacy in the Western Pacific. A failed invasion by China or a failed intervention by the US would be a strategic shock.

Opposed amphibious landings are notoriously difficult and will be so in Taiwan which has been preparing for them. Conventional and nuclear warheads are only a 6 to 8-minute bus ride away on Chinese short range ballistic missiles, but that will leave a mess and an angry population for their occupation forces. Once combat has started, containing it to a local war is unlikely. Off-ramps for two nuclear superpowers to prevent escalation to their homelands may be hard to find. Chinese leadership are rational and calculate risk. Most policy statements emphasise "peaceful reunification".

### Rude Awakening or Nightmare

The dream may stop with a rude awakening or turn into a nightmare. A Japan without the US might re-arm and become a nuclear power. A de-nuclearised, unified Korean peninsula could turn antithetical to China. The international situation is even more complicated for China. China blames the US. US, EU, Germany, and France each have their Indo-Pacific strategies. In the Integrated Review, the UK has announced its tilt to the Indo-Pacific. India, Japan and Australia are adapting strategic outlooks on Indo-Pacific.

China is the underlying reason. NATO calls China a systemic challenge; the EU calls China partner, competitor and systemic rival; the G7 calls out unilateral attempts to change the status quo and increased tensions. The US is not taking anything lying down. Its 2021 Innovation and Competition Act is a recent addition to four years of interagency, whole-of-government, measures to tackle the China challenge.

### Swapping the Baton and Assassin's Mace?

China's metanarrative is that the "east is rising, the west is declining", an historical determinism. China expects the US to hand over the baton of Western Pacific (even Asia-Pacific) primacy and global leadership. However, the US is rallying. The Pacific Defence Initiative doubles down on military primacy. If it doesn't work, and one day China seizes the baton of military primacy, China will have to let go of the assassin's mace. This is the instrument of the weaker military power asymmetrically to overwhelm the stronger. US forces, now becoming dispersed, distributed, more dynamic, lethal, re-invested and re-focused for the strategic competition, may just be that mace.

### About the Author

*Rupert Hollins is a retired Royal Navy Officer who served for six years in Beijing, from 2012- 2018, as the Defence, Naval and Air Attaché. During a 32-year career at sea and ashore, in the UK and deployed on operations, and in a variety of logistic, staff, legal and defence diplomacy appointments.*



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## *"Is China's primacy over the Western Pacific already a reality?"*

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July 2021

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In 1999, Gerry Segal, then Director of Research at the International Institute of Strategic Studies, made a considerable splash with his essay "Does China matter?" in Foreign Affairs. Touching upon the economic, political and strategic issue of China, his overall conclusion was that China's importance had been greatly exaggerated. For Mr Segal, China is but a small market 'that matters little to the world, especially outside Asia'.

Two decades later, Mr Segal must be turning in his grave to see how his argument has made him a laughing stock. Rather than "a small market", China is now the largest retail market, consumer market, e-commerce market, luxury goods market and even new car market in the world. It is also the largest trading nation, industrial nation and the largest exporter in the world and the largest trading partner to around 130 countries. In the last four decades, no challenges have seemed able to stop China's advance by leaps and bounds, be it the Asian financial crisis or Trump's trade war with China, for instance.



Amid the ravaging pandemic, China looks like the eye of global storm, the safest haven on earth. It was the first to suffer from the pandemic, but also the first to recover from it, being the only country to have registered economic growth in 2020.

It is helping others, too. According to the Associated Press, by the end of February, China has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccines to more than 45 countries. Inoculation with Chinese vaccines has already begun in more than 25 countries.

However impressive these facts might be, it is wrong to conclude that the 21st century will be Pax Sinica. In fact, even in East Asia, China's home ground, China's primacy is not fully evident.

By contrast with Europe that is bound together by a common culture and religion, Asia has been diversified and pluralistic from day one with distinctive geographies, diversified cultures and religions. No matter how in centuries past, the Chinese thought China was the cultural, political or economic centre of the world and their sovereign had a right to rule "all under Heaven," China never attempted to control the whole of East Asia. Deference to the Middle Kingdom and exotic gifts from tributary states were all that the Ming and Qing emperors wanted.

There is no doubt about China's economic primacy in East Asia. In August 2010, China overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy. According to the UK-based Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), China will overtake the US to become the world's largest economy by 2028.

With the US absent from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) - the biggest trade bloc in history that accounts for about 30% of the world's population and 30% of global GDP - and with China's expressed interest in joining the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) just days after RCEP's conclusion, Beijing looks a firm leader in multilateralism.

East Asia won't be Sino-centric. Even if there is talk of a "Greater China" that encompasses mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan and sometimes Singapore, there are no signs that the Chinese wish to export their ideological or development model.

If a sphere of influence means that a state has a level of cultural, economic, military, or political exclusivity in a region in which other states show deference to the power, then East Asia won't look like China's sphere of influence under scrutiny. DPRK has anyway developed nuclear weapons anyway despite China's disapproval. Japan, Republic of Korea and Thailand are American allies.

Some ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia and Brunei have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Would an ever-rising China make the world a better place? This is the ultimate question for the 21st century. Even those most critical of China cannot deny that China's rise in the last four decades is peaceful — a rare phenomenon for any rising power. China has no war since its reform and opening up in 1979.

Therefore, the brawl resulting in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese servicemen in the Galwan Valley in the border areas between China and India in June 2020 was most unusual and unfortunate, to the extent that Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said that bilateral trust was "profoundly disturbed".

But the fact that the two troops chose to use fists and wooden clubs to fight in a stone-age manner showed they knew they should not shoot at each other under any circumstances to violate a tacit agreement.





In this regard, a kind of maturity and rationality still prevailed. Since the Chinese and Indian troops have withdrawn from the border areas that each claimed to be its own and a de facto buffer zone established, the situation has de-escalated. Hopefully, the deadly brawl will provide useful lessons for the two governments in finding out new ways to enhance confidence-building, such as setting up a hotline between the border troops.

The real challenge in East Asia is not how China will deal with its neighbours and vice versa – they know how to deal with each other through thousands of years of historical engagement. It is how China might coexist with the US, a non-Western Pacific nation but a self-claimed guardian of the “free and open Indo-Pacific”.

China suspects the US wants to confine Chinese influence within the Western Pacific while the United States suspects a stronger China is trying to drive it out of the region. Looking down the road, the great power competition initiated by the Trump administration will only become more fierce in days to come.

The question is whether competition will slide into a confrontation that neither wants. Risk reduction for Beijing and Washington is difficult for two reasons if one looks into the history of the Cold War. First, during the Cold War, there were clearly separate spheres of influence dominated by Washington and Moscow that allowed them to avoid direct confrontations.

But between China and the United States, there isn't even a buffer zone. Nowadays American naval vessels regularly sail through the waters off Chinese islands and rocks in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Second, the United States and the Soviet Union were balanced by mutually assured destruction. This is not found between Beijing and Washington. But in the Western Pacific, the gap in military strength is shrinking in China's favour thanks to the advances of the PLA in the past decades. As a result, Washington is investing more militarily in the region and calling on its global allies and partners to gang up on China. This in turn would irk Beijing and make the situation more volatile.

There is no guarantee the US would win in a military conflict with China in the first island chain that stretches from Japan to the Philippines and the South China Sea. But should it lose, the consequence would be a domino effect: The US would lose prestige and credibility among its allies and partners in the region; The alliance would fall apart and it would have to pack and go home.

Short of global military presence though, China's influence is already felt worldwide, especially through such mega-projects as the Belt & Road Initiative which is the largest project on infrastructure in human history. A global China doesn't need to seek dominance anywhere. Instead, it needs to think globally and act responsibly in line with the great responsibility that is intrinsically associated with great powers.

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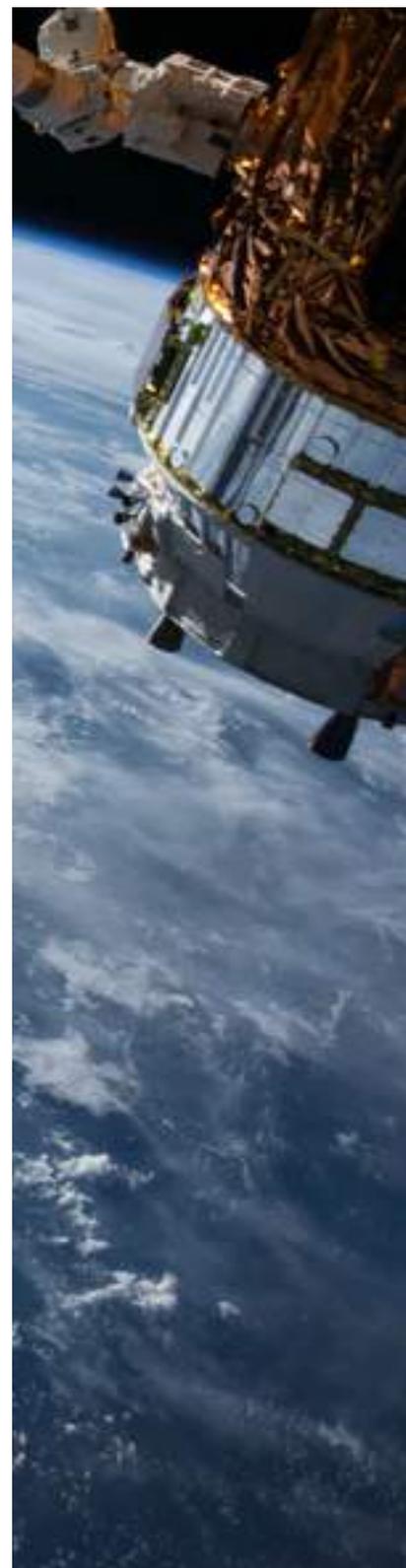
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