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Six Lessons from a Decade of Asia Strategy Simulations

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Young Strategists Forum

Summary

How can the United States and its allies and partners succeed in the Indo-Pacific and better prepare for long-term competition in the region? Since the US rebalance to Asia began, the German Marshall Fund of the United States has brought together rising experts from Asia, Europe, and the United States to examine this question through a series of workshops and simulations conducted via the Young Strategists Forum (YSF). The discussions that have taken place during these sessions suggest six lessons about effective long-term strategies for the Indo-Pacific.

First, trying to maintain the status quo is neither realistic nor strategic. Established powers tend to describe their objectives in terms of maintaining the status quo. This aim is not just unrealistic, but often deprives them of the ability to adjust the existing order in potentially beneficial ways. US leaders must present a vision of the future that is defined by looking forward not backward.

Second, the United States needs to calibrate its responses to near-term crises with an eye to mobilizing the largest possible balancing coalition in the long run. In the simulations, US teams often miss short-term opportunities that could yield long-term benefits. Thinking strategically sometimes means allowing other countries to recognize that they face a serious threat today and cannot simply rely on the United States to solve problems.

Third, overreaching by China presents opportunities for the United States. Over the last decade, China's growth in power has been accompanied by increased assertiveness, in YSF simulations and in real life. China's behavior creates opportunities for US and other leaders to create and expand coalitions that can push back against it.

Fourth, acknowledging the reality of impending multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific can benefit the United States. US experts, including participants in YSF simulations, often tend to see the competition in the Indo-Pacific as largely bipolar between the United States and China. Regional actors, however, typically regard the Indo-Pacific as increasingly multipolar. By championing the rise of new power centers, the United States can foster a regional order that is broadly supportive of its interests yet less dependent on US guarantees.

Fifth, focusing on “swinging” states as well as “swung” states pays dividends for the United States. Over the last five years, the United States has done an impressive job of bringing together those countries that are most willing to push back against China. But the region's “swinging” states—those that have not yet made a clear alignment decision—deserve more attention. Quick wins with these actors are unlikely, but sustained engagement today can set the stage for realignment tomorrow.

Finally, building robust coalitions requires US leadership. Many of the lessons we have learned over the last decade have to do with the importance of recognizing that other countries have greater capacity for independent action than is often acknowledged by US observers. That does not mean that US leadership is unimportant—in fact, YSF simulations suggest that it is critical if other states are to join coalitions to push back against China. The United States often labels its various allies as “lynchpins” or “keystones” in the region, but the fact remains that the most effective regional groupings are still reliant on its coordinating role, especially when it comes to China.

Introduction

A decade ago, US President Barack Obama stood before the Australian parliament and announced a “deliberate and strategic decision—as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping the region and its future.”¹ He committed to a robust agenda in Asia to promote regional security, prosperity, and shared values. Promises included a bolstered US military presence, passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and new efforts to cooperate with the region’s democracies. Obama asserted that “[t]he United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay,” but he also acknowledged that “it’s impossible to know what lies beyond the horizon.”²

Indeed, few could have imagined what the next decade held in store. Despite repeated promises to rebalance to Asia, the United States continued to be distracted. Conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and now Ukraine have sapped its strength or divided its attention. Rather than striking new regional trade deals, the United States withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and engaged in an ineffective trade war with China.³ And divisions at home worsened as some US politicians undercut the democratic principles the country has been trying to support abroad. As a result, a decade after the rebalance was announced, “Washington has not delivered on its promised ‘pivot’ to Asia,” as Michèle Flournoy, one of Obama’s leading defense officials, concluded.⁴

China, however, did not stand still. A decade ago, some prominent observers were hopeful about the direction in which Beijing was heading and expected President Xi Jinping to be a reformer who would

“spearhead a resurgence of economic reform, and probably some political easing as well.”⁵ Unfortunately this did not come to pass. While China’s economy and its influence continued to grow, Xi consolidated his power within the Communist Party while engaging in genocide in Xinjiang and repression in Hong Kong. He proved more willing than his recent predecessors to use force and coercion abroad as well, resulting in heightened tensions with Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, and South Korea, among others. The China that emerged from the last decade is more powerful and less patient, and Xi is now all but assured to install himself as General Secretary of the Communist Party for a third term later this year.

Despite repeated promises to rebalance to Asia, the United States continued to be distracted.

Other Indo-Pacific countries have been caught in the middle of these countervailing trends. In recent years, perceptions of China have turned increasingly negative across the region.⁶ Yet, in one survey, three-quarters of Southeast Asian experts now see China as the most important economic power in the region, and over half say it has the most political and strategic influence as well.⁷ Echoing concerns broadly felt throughout the region, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has noted, “it is unclear whether the United States will continue to shoulder the burden of maintaining international peace and stability.”⁸ The Biden administration has promised to build a “lattice-work of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions,” but if the results of the last decade are any indication,

1 Barack Obama, [Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament](#), The White House, November 17, 2011.

2 Ibid.

3 Chad P. Bown, [China bought none of the extra \\$200 billion of US exports in Trump’s trade deal](#), Peterson Institute for International Economics, February 8, 2022.

4 Michèle A. Flournoy, [“How to Prevent a War in Asia,”](#) Foreign Affairs, June 18, 2020.

5 Nicholas Kristof, [“Looking for a Jump-Start in China,”](#) The New York Times, January 5, 2013.

6 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, [Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People](#), Pew Research Center, June 30, 2021.

7 Sharon Seah et al, [The State of Southeast Asia 2022](#), ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, February 16, 2022.

8 Lee Hsien Loong, [“The Endangered Asian Century,”](#) Foreign Affairs, July/August 2020.

US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region needs a fundamental rethink.⁹

How can the United States and its allies and partners get back on track in the Indo-Pacific and better prepare for long-term competition with China? Since the rebalance to Asia began, the German Marshall Fund of the United States has been exploring this question through a series of workshops and simulations. Each year from 2012 to 2019, the Young Strategists Forum (YSF) has brought together rising experts from Asia, Europe, and the United States to examine key strategic questions that now occupy Atlanticists and Asianists alike. These meetings have sought to better understand the dynamics that will shape the Indo-Pacific over the next few decades.

The discussions that have taken place during these sessions, and especially those emerging from the simulation exercise conducted at each meeting, suggest that a tremendous amount of work remains to be done to prepare the United States and its allies and partners for long-term success. This paper sums up the YSF experience of simulating strategic competition in Asia and explains how the United States and its allies and partners can learn these lessons before it is too late.

Background

The Young Strategists Forum was established to bring together rising experts from Asia, Europe, and the United States to discuss strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. Participants have included government officials as well as leading scholars, practitioners, and businesspeople.¹⁰ Those in attendance have come from Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Norway, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the

United States.¹¹ Several former members of the group are now in senior positions around the world, advising national leaders on Asia policy.

The purpose of YSF has been to deepen understanding about how changes in power and policy are likely to alter regional dynamics in Asia. The event usually spans four days, beginning with an initial discussion, followed by a day-and-a-half simulation, and concluding in meetings with various government and business leaders. The simulation, which was developed and innovated over the last decade, is intended to model regional interactions over the next 20 years. Participants are divided into five teams, each with three to six players. These teams have usually represented China, India, Japan, Indonesia, and the United States—five of the countries in the region whose power is expected to change the most in future decades.

As explained in greater detail below, each simulation typically evolves through seven phases (see also box):

- Phase 1—country teams meet to plan their strategies for the simulation.
- Phase 2—teams must resolve a crisis that occurs 5 years in the future.
- Phase 3—teams rebalance their resource allocations for the next decade.
- Phase 4—teams must resolve a crisis that occurs 15 years in the future.
- Phase 5—teams rebalance their resource allocations for the next decade.
- Phase 6—teams must resolve a crisis that occurs 25 years in the future.
- Phase 7—participants meet to discuss lessons learned from the simulation.

The simulation is composed primarily of two types of turns: crisis rounds (Phases 2, 4, and 6) and rebalancing rounds (Phases 3 and 5). Crisis rounds test how

9 The White House, [Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States](#), February 2022.

10 As one YSF member noted recently, many YSF members are no longer young, and certainly not junior. A list of prior participants can be found at The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, [Young Strategists Forum](#).

11 YSF was established by Dan Kliman and the authors. It was later organized by Sharon Stirling and Joshua Walker.

Simulation Phases

Phase 1—Strategic Planning: Participants are given an initial briefing that describes the world at the beginning of the simulation. Teams then meet separately to agree on their strategic objectives for the simulation. These objectives are not provided to teams, but rather developed by the participants based on their understanding of the country they are representing. In most cases, teams include at least one individual who is either a current policymaker or scholar who studies that country's foreign policy.

Phase 2—Crisis 5 Years in the Future: Participants are briefed on a crisis that they must work to manage; for example, a deadly maritime clash between South China Sea claimants. Participants from different teams are permitted to interact, but those interactions are limited. Allied teams can talk as much as they desire, but others are only allowed to interact once per round if they are members of an institution (such as the East Asia Summit). At the end of this phase, all teams meet together to brief each other on their actions and jointly decide how they believe the crisis would have been resolved.

Phase 3—Rebalancing Resource Allocation: Each team is provided a new increment of resources for the next decade, adjusted based on relative power trends and the resolution to the first crisis. As described below, resources can be spent on various military assets, alliance commitments, international institutions, or foreign aid. Each team can also enter into one trade agreement per rebalancing round and choose to apply sanctions to other countries. Each team must agree on how it will allocate its resources for the next decade.

Phase 4—Crisis 15 Years in the Future: Participants are briefed on the results of the rebalancing round as well as on a new crisis, which occurs ten years after the first one. By this point, the resources of the United States and Japan have typically increased in absolute terms but declined in relative terms, especially compared to China and India. The second crisis often involves dual crises—one in East Asia and another in South Asia—meant to test how teams manage simultaneous challenges. As with the first crisis, the group jointly decides the outcome of the second one.

Phase 5—Rebalancing Resource Allocation: Based on relative power trends and the result of the second crisis, each team once again receives a new allocation of additional resource points. As with the initial rebalancing round, teams can divide these resources among military capabilities, alliances, institutions, and aid, while also making decisions about trade and sanctions. This round often sees India and Indonesia (and sometimes China) continue to benefit from sustained economic growth, while the other slower-growing countries decline in relative terms.

Phase 6—Crisis 25 Years in the Future: Participants are briefed on the results of the last rebalancing round and presented with a final crisis. This often revolves around Taiwan, forcing teams to decide whether to intervene and how best to do so. Once again, teams can interact in a limited way as they seek to decide how best to resolve the crisis. At the end of this turn each team presents its approach and the group decides how the crisis would have ended.

Phase 7—Lessons Learned: Participants meet as a group and discuss lessons learned from the simulation. Each team presents its initial strategy and assesses the degree to which its objectives have been accomplished. Teams question one another about specific decisions and then conclude by debating what could have been done differently.

well players adhere to their long-term strategies once confronted with difficult short-term trade-offs. Crises are designed to provide each team with a hard choice. For example, countries might have to decide whether to violate an air or maritime quarantine zone decreed by another team or support an operation by an ally or partner. Crises simulated have included:

- Incidents between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels in the Paracel Islands.
- Incidents between Filipino and Chinese vessels in the Spratly Islands.
- Incidents between Indonesian and Chinese vessels near the Natuna Islands.
- Incidents between Japanese and Chinese aircraft in the East China Sea.
- Clashes between Indian and Chinese forces along the Line of Actual Control.
- Conflict between India and Pakistan along their border in Kashmir.
- Conflict between China and Taiwan across the Taiwan Strait.
- Collapse of the North Korean government.

Rebalancing rounds provide teams with the opportunity to adjust their strategies based on crisis outcomes, changes in relative power, and shifting assessments of the strategies of other players. Teams begin the simulation with an initial allocation of resources, determined by a method described below. (see also Table 1) In rebalancing rounds, each team receives a different quantity of additional resources.

Table 1. Resource Rebalancing Options.

Military Resources

- **Air control capabilities: one point for capability to penetrate and control airspace**
- **Air denial capabilities: one point for capability to deny access to own airspace**
- **Sea control capabilities: one point for capability to control maritime areas**
- **Sea denial capabilities: one point for capability to deny access to maritime areas**
- **Ground control capabilities: one point for capability to penetrate and control territory**
- **Ground denial capabilities: one point for capability to deny access to own territory**
- **Develop nuclear weapons: five points to acquire a secure second strike in ten years; two points to maintain secure second strike**

Diplomatic Resources

- **Make alliance: two points to establish an alliance, allowing crisis communication**
- **Sustain alliance: two points to sustain an existing alliance and its communication**
- **Participate in institution: one point for an institution that allows one interaction per crisis (institutions can be multilateral)**
- **Make trade deal: each team can make a trade deal per round (benefits depend on the economic sizes of each team)**
- **Apply sanctions: each team can sanction others, decreasing resources for both in the next turn (this can be coordinated multilaterally)**
- **Give foreign aid: teams can provide resources to other teams on a one-for-one basis**

Teams are provided an initial allocation of resources across various instruments of national power but can alter these allocations as the simulation progresses in Phases 3 and 5. Resources are represented by resource points, which teams can spend on military capabilities and diplomatic options.

The simulation includes only a small subset of the tools that exist in real life. Military resources are divided into seven capability categories: air control, air denial, sea control, sea denial, ground control, ground denial, and nuclear weapons. The assumption is that denial is cheaper than control, but also that denial systems are harder to move and can only accomplish more limited objectives. Relative capabilities typically serve as background conditions shaping how teams interact with one another; most crises are resolved through bargaining rather than conflict. Resource allocations therefore help players estimate relative strengths and assess risks as they contemplate the use or threat of force.

There have been recurring themes in the past decade of YSF simulations, several of which have implications for the US approach to long-term competition.

Diplomatic resources are among the most difficult tools to simulate. Teams are permitted to form alliances, which allows them to communicate constantly during crisis and rebalancing rounds. Teams can also create institutions, which can be either bilateral or multilateral, and provide the option to meet with other teams once per crisis. Both options come at a resource cost, however, representing the valuable time of senior officials. In addition, economic tools are included, with each team able to make one bilateral trade deal per rebalancing round and thereby increase its future resources. Sanctions can also be applied, decreasing resources for the target and the enforcer. Lastly, foreign aid permits the transfer of resources

from one team to another to allow side agreements during crises and rebalancing rounds.

The initial allocation of each team's resource points is based roughly on the relative amount their country's government spends. (See Table 2.) This takes into account gross domestic product and the ability of governments to extract resources from their societies. These resources are also adjusted for the degree to which a country has global responsibilities that distract from a focus on Asia. As shown below, the United States begins the simulation with the largest number of resources, followed by China, Japan, India, and Indonesia, in that order. Initial investments are intended to roughly mirror reality in terms of military and diplomatic resources. With this in mind, the United States and Japan have the only treaty alliance at the beginning of the game. All countries start as members of one multilateral institution—the East Asia Summit. But the United States and China also have a bilateral institution that permits direct consultations once per crisis. Trade deals and sanctions both begin as a blank slate for all teams, as shown below.

This exercise obviously represents a considerable simplification of reality. The simulation only includes five countries in the Indo-Pacific, albeit five of the largest players in the region. This makes the simulation substantially easier for those powers with global responsibilities and coalition-building missions—particularly the United States.

Simulations can sometimes reflect more about the designers than the participants, but the YSF team has worked hard to allow participants to determine the path of the game by deciding on crisis outcomes and formulating national objectives. Giving the participants as much freedom as possible leads to a wide variety of outcomes. Nonetheless, there have been recurring themes in the past decade of YSF simulations, several of which have implications for the US approach to long-term competition. With the caveat that they are not necessarily representative of real-world decision-making, these results highlight issues worthy of further thought and study.

Table 2. Example of Initial Resource Allocations.

	United States	China	Japan	India	Indonesia
Military	Air Control	4	1	1	1
	Air Denial	1	2	1	1
	Sea Control	5	2	2	1
	Sea Denial	-	2	1	-
	Ground Control	3	3	1	3
	Ground Denial	1	1	1	-
	Nuclear Weapons	2	2	-	2
Diplomatic	Alliances	2	-	2	-
	Institutions	2	2	1	1
	Trade Deals	-	-	-	-
	Sanctions	-	-	-	-
Total Resource Points	20	15	10	9	5

Lessons Learned

Several common patterns that have broader strategic implications have emerged over the last decade of YSF simulations. Teams simulating China often attempt to avoid overreaching in early rounds—adopting something akin to the “hide and bide” strategy that Xi Jinping has now jettisoned—while waiting to assert their power until later rounds.¹² This often includes stepping back from regional disputes as much as possible during early crisis rounds. Teams have described this strategy as an effort to allow China

to focus on building its economy while minimizing friction with other regional states. These teams have often focused on disrupting efforts to encircle China by engaging Indonesia (which serves as a proxy for Southeast Asia in the simulation). By the last round, however, the China team has often become willing to use its growing power to resolve core issues through the use of military force, particularly over Taiwan.

The Indian and Indonesian teams usually focus on economic growth while strenuously defending narrowly defined national interests. They often see alignment with either the United States or China as unnecessary, instead favoring efforts to build their own power while remaining highly autonomous. Despite

¹² John Pomfret, “Xi is leading China’s aggressive new strategy, but he didn’t invent it,” *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2021.

starting the simulation with the fewest resource points, these two teams have the most flexibility in the simulation, as they can align with or against any of the other teams. Meanwhile, the Japanese teams typically focus on maintaining a close alliance with the United States and avoiding isolation by China. Players for all three countries tend to view the region as already becoming more multipolar as India and Indonesia rise.

Finally, the US team typically seeks to maintain the status quo by pushing back firmly against any Chinese efforts to alter the regional order. They often expect their relative power to decline so in early rounds they take a hard line against China while the balance of power is still in the United States' favor. These efforts, however, often backfire. Sometimes they create concern among the other players that the United States is too risk-acceptant or trying to force other countries to choose sides. At other times they create the expectation that China can be balanced largely by the United States and Japan with little help from India and Indonesia. Combined with the frequent desire of the Chinese teams to avoid conflict early, it can often appear that China is ceding ground in the opening stages of the simulation and that the United States is still dominant.

By the end of the simulation though, China has often gained control over Taiwan without the United States firing a shot. In a handful of other cases, the US team has fought a major war with China over Taiwan. Both outcomes represent a failure of US strategy, which leads to the question of how can US leaders and key allies improve their approaches to long-term competition with China.

Lesson 1: Trying to maintain the status quo is neither realistic nor strategic

Each team begins the simulation by identifying a set of objectives and priorities. As noted above, the rising powers often define their objectives in terms of capitalizing on change—seeking, for example, to increase economic power or to win more respect from other countries. In some cases, rising powers hope to gain

control of territory lost to their competitors. Established powers, however, often describe their objectives in terms of maintaining the status quo. Unfortunately, status quo maintenance invariably proves impossible over the long term given underlying changes in relative power. Even worse, this approach provides little guidance about how to manage most short-term crises. As a result, the established powers' desire to maintain the status quo is not just unrealistic, it also often deprives them of the ability to adjust the existing order in potentially beneficial ways. This is particularly problematic for the US team.

In the real world too, long-term visions are impeded by status quo thinking because power dynamics in Asia are changing rapidly, whether US leaders acknowledge that reality or not. Even if it were possible or advisable to slow China's economic growth, this would not equate to maintenance of the status quo. India, Indonesia, and other countries are still growing quickly. And many US allies are likely to struggle to keep up for demographic reasons alone. US leaders must think more creatively about how to capitalize on the rise of potential friendly powers to reshape the region in ways favorable to US interests. Too often, the desire to maintain (or restore) the status quo crowds out innovative thinking about how to use ongoing trends, and even possible crises, to the United States' benefit.

Moreover, a strategy of status quo maintenance is inherently reactive. Ceding the initiative to competitors is seldom a recipe for success in short-term crises. And rivals have little reason to avoid escalation in the first place if they know that the United States always seeks to return to a pre-crisis situation. This gives them a substantial edge since the worst they can do by initiating a crisis is expect a return to the status quo. And if the United States does not impose costs on rivals that cross its red lines, this will encourage them to further challenge the status quo.¹³

13 Michael Green et al. [Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2017.

These quintessential US tendencies have been displayed repeatedly in the simulations and in real life over the last decade. Despite lofty promises from multiple administrations, leaders in Washington have adhered to a largely status quo strategy. They often talk about the importance of maintaining various priorities. Indeed, few US officials have described the world they want in Asia as anything other than what it is today. US policymakers must speak more clearly about their long-term objectives, other than maintaining the status quo, in the Indo-Pacific region and think more creatively about how the United States can adjust its strategy to take account of the shifting regional power balance. Otherwise, the United States is likely to simply muddle through—clinging to the same policies despite decreases in its power and influence.¹⁴ That is a recipe for failure.

When Secretary of State Tony Blinken outlined the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific vision in Jakarta in December 2021, he noted that President John F. Kennedy had spoken at the same university in 1962 and commented that, "For all that's changed in the nearly 70 years since President Kennedy spoke those words, it's remarkable how much that vision aligns with the one we share."¹⁵ A vision must lay out objectives for the future, which means looking forward, not back.

Lesson 2: The United States needs to calibrate its responses to near-term crises with an eye to mobilizing the largest possible balancing coalition in the long run

Because US teams in the simulations are so often determined to maintain the status quo in the short term, they frequently miss opportunities to gain long-term benefits. They usually resolve to stop China from altering the status quo early in the simulation, which means they are often willing to take substantial risks in

the short term. This typically appears quite successful early on but often fails to protect US interests in the long run.

In YSF simulations the US team often unintentionally scares other teams, particularly those that are not prepared to align against China, by taking a hard early line. Indonesia and other states that are not aligned with the United States or China often see US efforts to confront China as overly provocative. After all, other rising states are frequently willing to entertain the notion that a rising China should have more say in regional dynamics if its power continues to grow. A United States that appears determined to maintain its primacy at all costs can therefore appear shortsighted, backward-looking, and even irresponsible. This leads non-aligned countries to fear Washington's over-reactions as much as Chinese provocations, thereby undermining US efforts to create a balancing coalition.

Perceptions of an overly forceful early US response can also lessen the willingness of other countries to take a hard line against China. If the risk of escalation is high, why not leave that task to the United States, particularly if it is willing to bear the greatest part of the burden on its own?¹⁶ Conversely, witnessing a minor erosion of the status quo often accelerates efforts by other states to balance against China. Such developments increase concerns about China's actions, while also demonstrating the need for other countries to assist the United States in pushing back against its aggression.

There are real risks for the United States if it seems to be hanging back in countering Chinese probes in the hope of mobilizing greater support from others in the region. If it appears too timid or entirely disengaged, other countries could conclude that balancing is hopeless. This might also embolden leaders in China to look for additional opportunities for revisionism. But there is a trade-off here too. US leaders have to choose between maximizing their chance to

14 Joshua Rovner, "[How Long Can Biden Muddle Through on China?](#)" War on the Rocks, January 26, 2022.

15 Antony J. Blinken, "[A Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#)," US Department of State, December 14, 2021.

16 Evan A. Laksmana, "[Buck-passing from behind: Indonesia's foreign policy and the Indo-Pacific](#)," The Brookings Institution, November 27, 2018.

maintain the status quo in the near term or preserving an acceptable position in the long term. Maintaining stability in the long term requires cooperation with other countries that are worried about China's actions. Building habits of cooperation in the long term often means demonstrating that there are downsides to buck-passing in the short term.

If the United States helps shield other countries from these realities for too long, it can find them unable or unwilling to respond when power differentials are more in China's favor. Therefore, thinking strategically sometimes means allowing other countries to recognize that they face a serious threat today and that they cannot simply rely on the United States to solve problems on its own.

Lesson 3: Overreaching by China presents opportunities for the United States

Over the last decade, China's growth in power has usually been accompanied by increased assertiveness in both the simulations and real life. In the early YSF instalments, simulations generally introduced crises related to the South China Sea, Taiwan, or the Sino-Indian border. Participants from the region often responded by saying that they found these highly unlikely. At the time, they were right. In the real world, China had not yet reclaimed features in the Spratly Islands, Ma Ying-jeou had just been reelected president in Taiwan, and India was entering into a coordination mechanism with China on border issues.¹⁷ If anything, leaders in Beijing appeared to be engaged in positive outreach to several regional players. In YSF simulations, US players were often taken aback when close treaty allies were unwilling to participate in efforts to counter Chinese aggression.

17 Andrew Higgins, "[Ma Ying-jeou, Taiwan's pro-China president, wins reelection](#)," The Washington Post, January 14, 2012; Mira Rapp-Hooper, [Before and After: The South China Sea Transformed](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 18, 2015; Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, [India-China Agreement on the Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs](#), January 17, 2012.

But, since then, China's actions in real life have fundamentally altered the views and moves of simulation participants. In recent years, it has clashed with India, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, while putting pressure on other neighbors such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, and Taiwan.¹⁸ China has also used economic pressure against Australia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Norway, South Korea, and others.¹⁹ These moves have forced a recalibration among regional states, with substantial implications for long-term dynamics.²⁰

China's real-life actions have made simulation participants representing other countries far more willing to balance against it. In earlier YSF simulations, the United States often found itself alone in pushing back against China, with even US treaty allies often unwilling to pick sides. However, in more recent simulations, players representing non-aligned countries—India and, to a lesser degree, Indonesia—have been willing to contemplate cooperation in groupings intended to counter China. In other words, running the exact same simulations in 2012 and 2022 would result in very different results. And, to the extent that China continues to aggressively pursue its interests, this will likely drive other countries to contemplate similar postures.²¹

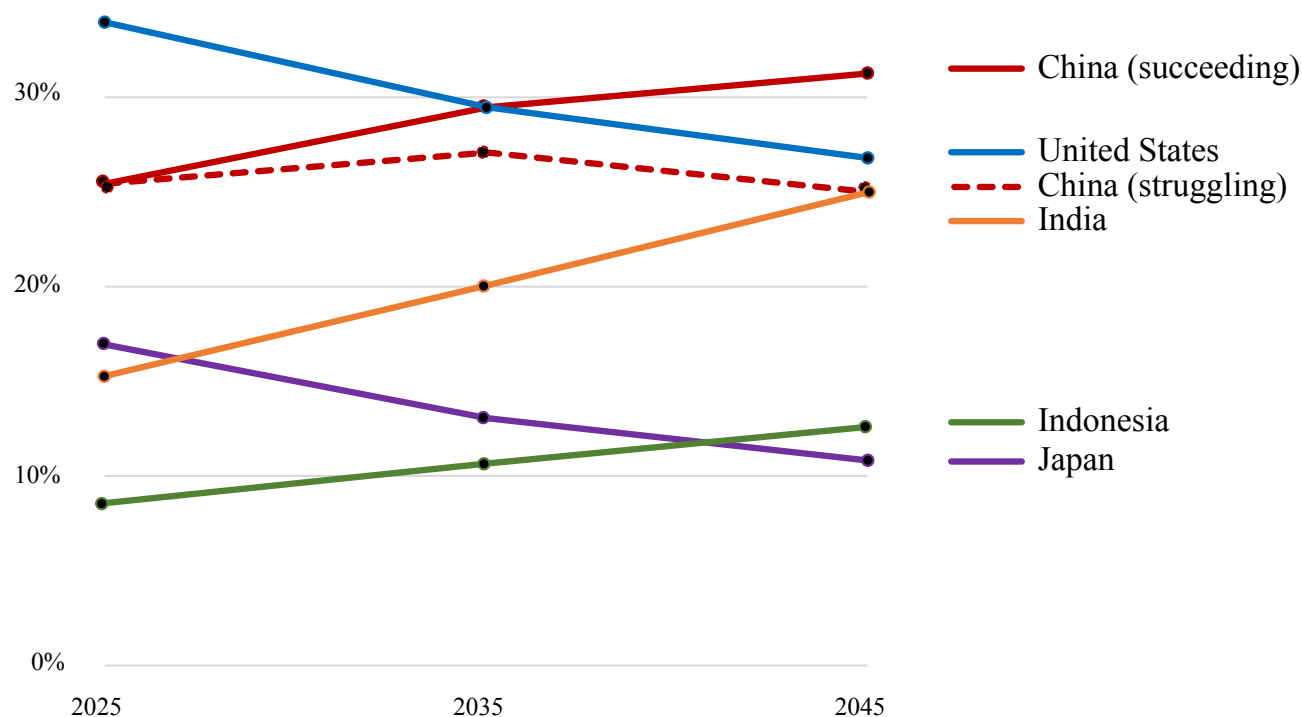
These trends may not continue, however. Although China's "wolf warriors" have been active in recent years, leaders in Beijing could decide that they have pushed

18 Ronald O'Rourke, [U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress](#), Congressional Research Service, January 26, 2022.

19 Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Edoardo Saravalle, [China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures](#), Center for a New American Security, June 11, 2018; Aaron L. Friedberg, "[The Growing Rivalry Between America and the Future of Globalization](#)," Texas National Security Review, Winter 2021/2022.

20 Bonnie S. Glaser, [Time for Collective Pushback against China's Economic Coercion](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 13, 2021.

21 Center for Strategic & International Studies, [Survey Findings U.S. Allies & Partners](#).

Figure 1: Projected Power Changes (Illustrative Example from 2020 Simulation).

some neighbors too far.²² A new round of “smile diplomacy” might slow or reverse recent trends.²³ But all signs suggest that Xi is become more, not less, confident and assertive.²⁴ As long as China continues to use its leverage more actively, this will create opportunities for US and other leaders to build coalitions that can push back against its growing assertiveness.

Lesson 4: Acknowledging the reality of impending regional multipolarity can benefit the United States

Americans often see the competition in Asia as largely bipolar—mainly between the United States and China. The Trump administration’s use of the term “great-power competition” tended to encourage this

perception.²⁵ Regional actors, however, typically see the Indo-Pacific as increasingly multipolar. For many Americans, a shift away from primacy to bipolarity is viewed negatively, and a shift toward multipolarity makes US players even more uncomfortable. But if several of the other poles are largely in agreement with the United States on key issues, then why not encourage and accelerate their rise?

Figure 1 shows the change in the balance of power from the last simulation, which is similar to that of earlier iterations. These power shifts are based on economic projections relying on various demographic, economic, environmental, and political assumptions.²⁶ There are many unknowable factors—particularly in China where data is highly unreliable and the range of its plausible trajectories appears unusually large—so

22 Jessica Chen Weiss, “China’s Self-Defeating Nationalism,” Foreign Affairs, July 16, 2020.

23 The Economist, “Smile diplomacy,” March 31, 2007.

24 Jude Blanchette, “Xi’s Confidence Game,” Foreign Affairs, November 23, 2021.

25 Jim Mattis, *Summary 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, US Department of Defense, 2018.

26 PricewaterhouseCoopers, *The World in 2050: Will the shift in global economic power continue?*, February 2015.

the simulations have sometimes assumed that China will grow rapidly and other times that it will struggle economically. These divergent paths are indicated by the full and dashed red lines in the chart. Regardless of the path, however, China remains one of the region's most consequential players in economic terms and the same is likely to be true in reality.

The fastest relative growth rates over the next few decades, however, are seldom in China. Instead, it is developing countries like India and Indonesia that generally drive long-term changes in relative power dynamics in Asia.²⁷ These rising powers want respect and acknowledgement from great the incumbent powers.²⁸ They also want to remain free to make whatever choices best fit their interests and values, without overbearing pressure from others.

Although participants in simulations sometimes fail to recognize it, the United States is well positioned to enable this freedom of action, particularly since it does not have territorial or maritime disputes with any of the emerging powers. China, on the other hand, has to manage ongoing disputes with not only Japan, India, and (increasingly) Indonesia, but also Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.²⁹ Moreover, in the real world, polling data shows that many in these countries see China as overly assertive, thereby threatening their national autonomy.³⁰

China increasingly wants to be at the center of the regional order in Asia. This means not only displacing the United States and overshadowing its allies in the region, but also ensuring that other rising powers are

kept in check.³¹ Wise US leaders can use this to their advantage by championing a regional approach that is more accepting of the rise of new power centers. In the long term this can lead to a regional order that is broadly supportive of US interests yet less dependent on US guarantees. Strong democratic powers in Asia are good for the United States and bad for China in the long term—US leaders should not let their desire to maintain the status quo obscure this reality.

Lesson 5: Focusing on “swinging states” as well as “swung states” pays dividends

Over the last five years, the United States has done an impressive job of bringing together those countries that are most willing to push back against China. The Trump administration championed the Quad with Australia, India, and Japan.³² The Biden administration has built on this progress while also pressing ahead with Australia and the United Kingdom in the framework of the AUKUS security pact.³³ These are real successes and deserve praise. But in the long term, it is also important that the United States invest in the region's swing states—those countries that have not yet made clear alignment decisions.³⁴

Australia, India, Japan, and the United Kingdom are key partners for the United States, but in some ways they are low-hanging fruit. Albeit to varying degrees, they have already chosen to align with the United States and against China on security matters. They have good reasons to do so. Three of the four have major territorial or economic disputes with China, and three of the four are close treaty allies of the United States. These states are in a sense “locked in” to competition with China and cooperation with the United States. Working with Washington makes

27 Richard Heydarian, “[Steady progress will soon eclipse Indonesia's invisible-nation status](#),” Nikkei Asia, May 3, 2021.

28 Harsh V. Pant and Chirayu Thakkar, [The United States and India: Multilaterally Abridged Allies](#), Council on Foreign Relations, August 23, 2021.

29 Bonnie S. Glaser, [The Genesis of Chinese Thinking on Sovereignty: A Conversation with Bill Hayton](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 2021.

30 Shigeto Sonoda, “[Asian views of China in the age of China's rise: interpreting the results of pew survey and Asian student survey in chronological and comparative perspectives, 2002-2019](#),” Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies, 2021.

31 Yun Sun, “[China's Strategic Assessment of India](#),” War on the Rocks, March 25, 2020.

32 Ravi Agrawal, “[Why the Quad Is the One Alliance Trump Cares About](#),” Foreign Policy, October 8, 2020.

33 The White House, [Background Press Call on AUKUS](#), September 15, 2021.

34 The German Marshall Fund of the United States, [Global Swing States](#).

sense for each and, barring a major crisis, it is hard to imagine any fundamentally change in their alignment decisions.

Therefore, in allocating scarce resources, US leaders should look not only to these countries, but also to those that are more likely to swing one way or the other. Countries that are still making their alignment decisions deserve more attention than they have received. Engaging countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and various Pacific Islands is no easy task. Many are wary of US pressure. They see their interests and values as somewhat different from those of the United States.³⁵ But successful diplomacy can still yield real results. Each country wants US investment, which is vital to their continued development. Yet all hope that they can avoid having to choose between the United States and China.³⁶ This provides an opening for greater US engagement, but one that must be conducted delicately.

Quick wins with these actors are unlikely, but sustained engagement can succeed. India provides a perfect example of why early engagement is necessary, even if it does not pay off for decades. In the simulations, Indian participants have often been wary of cooperating with the United States in early rounds. Sustained US efforts to engage India do pay off, however, if China overreaches in a crisis. This pushes Delhi to adopt a more overt balancing approach, just as it has in real life. Indeed, when the Bush administration reengaged India 15 years ago, Delhi was at first unprepared to go as far as the United States wanted.³⁷ Yet the US effort has paid dividends in recent years through bilateral engagement and the Quad. In YSF simulations and in real life, China's overreaching in

territorial disputes created conditions that allowed India to shift its approach to the United States and China.

These types of realignments are only possible when the United States has engaged with potential partners early and often, even if sometimes seemed that its efforts were unlikely to bear fruit. Sustained engagement can pay off handsomely if Beijing overreaches. Given that China shows no signs of backing down in territorial disputes with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and others, it would be foolish for Washington to write off these key players.³⁸ Setting the stage today can help to make these states more willing to realign tomorrow if circumstances change.

Lesson 6: Building robust coalitions requires US leadership

Many of the lessons learned over the last decade of YSF simulations have to do with the importance of recognizing that other countries have greater freedom of action than is often acknowledged by US observers. Yet, that does not mean that US leadership is unimportant. In fact, the simulations suggest that leadership by the United States is critical if other states are to build coalitions to push back against China.³⁹ When US leaders appear not to have a clear strategy, other states may feel that they have little choice but to accede to China's emergence as the preponderant regional power.

The United States often labels its various allies as "lynchpins" or "keystones" in the region, but the fact remains that many of the more effective regional groupings are reliant on Washington's coordination, especially when it comes to China. One need look no further than the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to see how difficult coordination in Asia can

35 Kathrin Hille et al, "[The Trump factor: Asian allies question America's reliability](#)," Financial Times, June 14, 2020.

36 Jonathan Stromseth, [Don't make us choose: Southeast Asia in the throes of US-China rivalry](#), The Brookings Institution, October 2019.

37 Ashley J. Tellis, [India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the United States](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 14, 2005.

38 Gregory Poling, [On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea](#), Oxford University Press, June 21, 2022.

39 Michael J. Green, [By More Than Providence](#), Columbia University Press, January 2019.

be without a clear leader.⁴⁰ The United States therefore has a critical coordinating role that no other state can play on its own. One reason is that, while their economic interests overlap, few regional actors share specific security interests. In the simulations, Japan generally prioritizes the East China Sea and Senkaku Islands, India focuses on the Sino-Indian border and Indian Ocean, and Indonesia thinks primarily about the Natuna Islands and South China Sea. The challenge of coordinating countries with diverse security interests gets even more complicated when one considers the countries not included in the simulations and the fact that Vietnam remains most worried about the Paracels, the Philippines about the Spratlys, Taiwan about the Taiwan Strait, and South Korea about the Korean Peninsula.

Without the United States helping tie these countries together, it often proves difficult for different regional players to jointly push back against China. In several simulations, China has been able to “buy off” other players by agreeing to back down in one territorial dispute in exchange for an agreement by that country not to align against China in other areas. South Korea’s “three noes” are a recent real-life example, whereby it effectively agreed to forswear certain types of trilateral cooperation with Japan in exchange for a truce in its dispute with China.⁴¹

The United States may no longer enjoy the same margins of advantage in Asia that it once did, but YSF simulations suggest that its leadership is still critical.⁴² While countries in the region would prefer not to be forced to choose between Washington and Beijing, they do tend to recognize the value of a central organizer and coordinator in the region. China cannot

bring together most regional players in this way since so many of them are deeply concerned about its long-term intentions. But unless the United States steps up to the plate, China may be able successfully to execute a divide-and-conquer approach in the region.

Conclusion

The Young Strategists Forum was started to teach rising experts about the need for cooperation among US, Asian, and European experts in the Indo-Pacific region. Connecting specialists from these different regions has paid dividends, as evidenced by the excellent papers they have produced on strategic issues in the Indo-Pacific.⁴³ The results of many of the simulations have also turned out to be strikingly similar to events that have occurred in real life over the last decade. YSF has proven to be a useful laboratory as well as a training ground for a rising generation of strategists.

Six lessons stand out. First, trying to maintain the status quo is neither realistic nor strategic. Established powers tend to describe their objectives in terms of maintaining the status quo. This aim is not just unrealistic but often deprives them of the ability to adjust the existing order in potentially beneficial ways. US leaders must present a vision of the future that is defined by looking forward rather than backward.

Second, the United States needs to calibrate its responses to near-term crises with an eye to mobilizing the largest possible balancing coalition in the long run. In the simulations, US teams often miss short-term opportunities that could yield long-term benefits. Thinking strategically sometimes means allowing other countries to recognize that they face a serious threat today and cannot simply rely on the United States to solve problems.

Third, overreaching by China presents opportunities for the United States. Over the last decade, China’s growth in power has been accompanied by

40 Shuxian Luo, [ASEAN running out of time to recast role as buffer in US-China great power competition](#), The Brookings Institution, December 8, 2021.

41 Bonnie S. Glaser and Lisa Collins, [“China’s Rapprochement with South Korea: Who Won the THAAD Dispute?”](#), Foreign Affairs, November 7, 2017.

42 Ryan Hass, [The case for continued American leadership in Asia](#), The Brookings Institution, December 29, 2017.

43 The German Marshall Fund of the United States, [Young Strategists Forum](#).

increased assertiveness, in YSF simulations and in real life. China's behavior creates opportunities for US and other leaders to create and expand coalitions that can push back against it.

Fourth, acknowledging the reality of impending multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific can benefit the United States. US experts, including participants in YSF simulations, often tend to see the competition in the Indo-Pacific as largely bipolar between the United States and China. Regional actors, however, typically regard the Indo-Pacific as increasingly multipolar. By championing the rise of new power centers, the United States can foster a regional order that is broadly supportive of its interests yet less dependent on US guarantees.

Fifth, focusing on “swinging” states as well as “swung” states pays dividends for the United States. Over the last five years, the United States has done an impressive job of bringing together those countries that are most willing to push back against China. But the region's “swinging” states—those that have not yet

made a clear alignment decision—deserve more attention. Quick wins with these are unlikely, but sustained engagement today can set the stage for realignment tomorrow.

Finally, building robust coalitions requires US leadership. Many of the lessons learned over the last decade through the Young Strategists Forum over the last decade have to do with the importance of recognizing that other countries have greater capacity for independent action than is often acknowledged by US observers. That does not mean that US leadership is unimportant—in fact, YSF simulations suggest that it is critical if other states are to join coalitions to push back against China. The United States often labels its various allies as “lynchpins” or “keystones” in the region, but the fact remains that the most effective regional groupings are still reliant on its coordinating role, especially when it comes to China. The United States remains the hub around which these coalitions form, so sustained US leadership is vital in the Indo-Pacific and around the world.

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