

Decoding the Confrontational Streak in U.S.-China Relations

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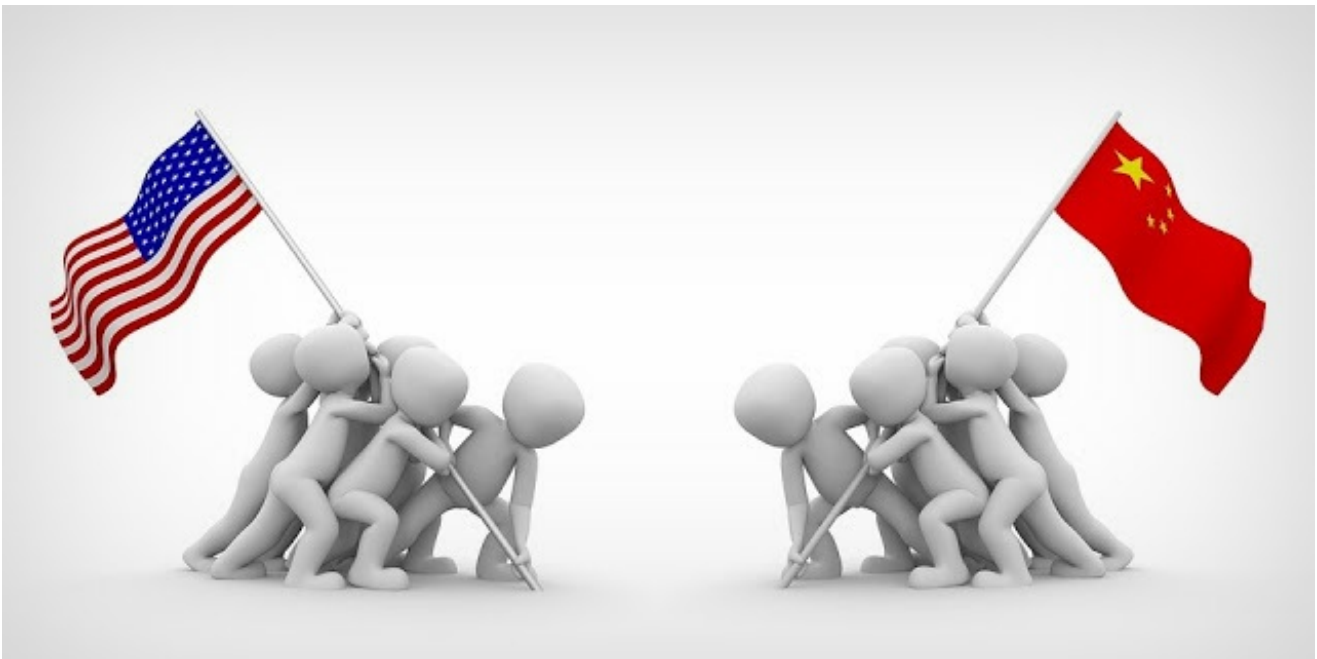


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The recently released **Missile Defence Review report** by the Pentagon, is aimed at addressing the challenges posed by the development of the advanced cruise and hypersonic missiles by China. The development of the missile capability and technology as part of Chinese Military modernization is considered not only as offensive in nature, but also as a means of **denting U.S. primacy** in the Indo-Pacific region. Few days back, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged the **Chinese armed forces to be ready for a battle**, which was viewed as a response to the U.S. President Donald Trump signing the **Asia Reassurance Initiative Act**. In addition to this, due to China's assertive nature especially in the Western Pacific, U.S. has announced to conduct its **first missile drill in Okinawa**, which forms a part of the first island chain of China. The shape of things in US-China dynamics portends a relationship which, despite economic interdependence, will be defined by increasing competition and confrontation.

The United States views China as a strategic competitor, as reflected in major policy documents like the **National Security Strategy (NSS)** and the **National Defense Strategy (NDS)**. Moreover, Vice President **Mike Pence** speaking at the Hudson Institute last year singled out China as a revisionist power attempting to challenge America's influence in the international system and heralding a new great power competition. China-US strategic competition has been most prominently seen in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the Western Pacific, where **China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies** are proving a challenge to sustaining U.S. forward presence in the region. Both the powers are also jostling and elbowing each other to acquire more **space** and influence.

Despite the U.S. and China making efforts to resolve their trade war, the top two economies of the world being at loggerheads with each other for so long shows inherent divergences. Both countries have been **slapping tariffs** on each other. Many opine that China **has not been opening its market** for the U.S. products and companies, while at the same time also taking away the jobs from the American hands. The other concern in the policy community of U.S. is that China is not playing **a fair game** in the International trade, and is not obeying the rule-based order. Despite both, the countries being the **largest trading partners** of each other, the possibilities of a conflict brewing between the two is no less. Because **history bears testimony** where despite economic interdependence between the nations, **politics, and nationalism** have often overwhelmed economics.

China's assertive behavior, particularly in the South China Sea, has invited **bipartisan support** in the United States towards putting more and more tariffs, along with the **demand for reciprocity**. The concerns have also been raised regarding the **Made in China 2025 initiative**, which will further enhance the economic muscles of China to challenge U.S. pre-eminence. This initiative is further shaping the hostile environment between U.S. and China, which is aimed at **challenging the technological leadership of U.S.** in areas such as robotics, artificial intelligence, aviation, advanced information technology, and others. Can Washington accommodate the growing aspirations of Beijing, without compromising on its own interests?

U.S.-China tension has been further accentuated by the differences in the understanding of **freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS)** on both sides. China's practice of building **artificial islands**, and using them as platforms to conduct military exercises have raised concerns across the region, despite repeated demands by the U.S. about **halting the militarization**, which has often led to U.S.-China confrontation. China also mentions that it will not allow the **U.S. to cause a disturbance** in its waters. Recently, the U.S. Destroyer **USS Decatur** came nearly 40 meters close to a Chinese ship in the disputed South China Sea. Another incident of confrontation between the two largest navies of the world took place last month when the U.S. projected its right to move freely in the global commons by sailing the **USS Chancellorsville**, near Paracel islands. China regarded this as a threat to its national

security and responded by sending its navy. On the other hand, U.S. considers such Chinese activities a challenge to its dominance in the Pacific region and has witnessed more than **sixteen unsafe incidents** in air and sea between U.S. and China.

Today, U.S.-China relationship is the most consequential one in the international system the future of which depends on the power symmetry and asymmetry in areas including the political, economic and the strategic dimensions. Despite the two economies being intertwined, incidents of increased competition and confrontation cannot be ignored. Various such incidents ranging from those affecting the freedom of navigation operations in the global commons to developing of the offensive missile system is seen to be aimed at challenging U.S. dominance in IndoPacific, thereby affecting its forces abroad and allies and partners. It remains to be seen how Washington accept and accommodate the rise of another power in the international system without compromising and conceding its pre-eminence.

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