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AGGIE JOURNAL
ON THE UNITED STATES, CHINA,
AND THE WORLD ORDER

**POLS AGGIE JOURNAL
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Volume 1, Issue 1 (Fall, 2024)

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- Mary Beth Rayburn
- Mark Jonah Snyder
- Ivan D. Teter

POLS Aggie Journal on the United States, China, and the World

Order showcases undergraduate research on the dynamic relationship between the United States, China, and the global order. The journal is overseen by Qiang (Steven) Wu, the instructor of the course that explores these critical topics.

Each edition features four of the best-written papers from the class, selected to recognize and celebrate students' efforts in producing high-quality research. These papers are published on the instructor's personal website to encourage academic excellence.

The journal is published biannually, during the Fall and Spring semesters.

Editor-in-Chief:



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The Road to De-dollarization. By Emma Ko

INTRODUCTION

De-dollarization is a contentious debate in political and international affairs literature. It refers to the widespread process of using a currency other than the dollar, such as the renminbi, to denominate international financial transactions (Ize & Yeyati, 2006). If this were to occur, the U.S. would face not only a drastic loss of power, as controlling the most-used currency props up its economy and gives its Economic Statecraft leverage, but also a likely hegemonic shift away from a world order where the U.S. is dominant (Ozoh, 2024). Suffice it to say, the U.S. has a vested interest in maintaining the dollar's dominant position. However, there are scholars who argue that the U.S. has nothing to fear in the de-dollarization quarter.

There is some validity to this argument. Currently, the U.S. enjoys a dominant position in the world order, with the dollar denominating a majority of transactions and serving as a reserve currency for most of the world—two measures of currency dominance. Additionally, the next-closest currency is the Euro, a currency used by nations typically favorable to the U.S. and aligned with the U.S.-led system. Yet, there is still concern. As the Atlantic's *Dollar Dominance Monitor* points out, many rising economies, such as Brazil and India, are making efforts to find alternatives to the dollar. Furthermore, in recent years, BRICS, a collection of countries typically opposed to U.S. dominance, has grown in membership. This brings up the research question I will address in this paper: How does the appearance of an organization actively seeking de-dollarization impact the dollar's dominant position?

In this paper, I seek to examine how the appearance and goals of BRICS+ as an actor hostile to the U.S.-led world order, and specifically to the U.S.'s dominance through the dollar, could hasten or worsen the decline of the dollar. First, I establish through an examination of the current

literature that it is possible to de-dollarize despite U.S. hegemony. I also find in the literature a unique push by BRICS countries to hasten this process or, more specifically, to de-dollarize. I then move on to an analysis in two parts. The first part uses historical examples of defunct currencies to create a checklist of naturally occurring conditions under which the dollar could lose its power. The second part examines how BRICS+'s current efforts and future capabilities could either capitalize on or bring about these conditions to hasten the decline of the dollar. Finally, in the conclusion, I provide some policy recommendations for combating the hostile actions of BRICS+ if not the natural decline of hegemonic power. I also discuss the most persuasive counterarguments to my analysis and offer rebuttals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To explore the analysis and address the question, *how does the emergence of BRICS impact de-dollarization*, it is essential to first examine the dynamics of hegemonic shifts and the organization of BRICS itself. Few would argue that empires last forever. Even nations once thought immutable, such as the Romans or, more recently, Great Britain, experienced declines in power over time. Despite arguments that the dollar has historically outlasted other dominant currencies (Vicquéry, 2022), the United States is unlikely to be an exception; a shift in global hegemony seems inevitable. However, whether hostile nations can accelerate this process remains an open question. To address this, we will review the existing literature on the potential decline of American hegemony, the structure and motivations of BRICS, and their capacity for influencing de-dollarization.

What is BRICS, and Can It Challenge Dollar Dominance?

Oddly, BRICS—a coalition often positioned as a counterbalance to the Western, U.S.-led order—was initially conceptualized by an English economist. In 2001, Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs identified the growth potential of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. In 2009, these countries

convened their first official summit, and South Africa joined in 2010, forming BRICS (BRICS, “Evolution of BRICS,” 2023). Over 40 additional countries, including Iran, Argentina, Cuba, and Egypt, have since expressed interest, creating a bloc that represents over a quarter of the global economy and 40% of the world’s population (Reuters, 2023).

Officially, BRICS aims to cooperate in politics, security, economic prosperity, and cultural exchange (BRICS, “Three Pillars of Cooperation,” 2023). Unofficially, it serves as a potential alternative to the Western-led financial system, especially in economic matters (Darnal, 2023; Gabuev & Stuenkel, 2024). However, as with any multinational coalition, member states’ goals vary in scope and intensity. BRICS provides an option for countries unwilling or unable to align with Western institutions like the IMF or SWIFT (CFR, 2023; Green, 2023).

BRICS Members’ Stances on De-Dollarization

Among BRICS members, attitudes toward de-dollarization are generally positive but vary.

- **Brazil** has made de-dollarization a state policy, influenced by its history of currency crises. President Lula has advocated for a BRICS currency as an alternative to the dollar (Simon, 2023; Yeyati, 2021).
- **Russia**, following financial sanctions and exclusion from SWIFT, is a strong proponent, with longstanding de-dollarization policies (Shagina, 2022; Chen, 2023).
- **India** takes a more cautious approach. Despite conducting some trade in Indian rupees (State Street, 2023; Bardhan, 2023), India’s leadership does not foresee the dollar being dethroned in the near future (Jie, 2023; Liu & Papa, 2022).
- **China**, while less openly confrontational than Russia, has actively promoted alternatives to the dollar and sought to distance itself from U.S.-led financial systems (Barry, 2023; Banik & Das, 2024).

- **South Africa** does not have a strong de-dollarization agenda but broadly supports rhetoric against U.S. financial dominance (Liu & Papa, 2022; Arnold, 2024).

The literature highlights a clear trend of negative attitudes toward the dollar among BRICS countries, driven by a combination of historical grievances, geopolitical ambitions, and economic pressures. While the extent of their commitment to de-dollarization varies, the underlying sentiment within the bloc reflects a shared interest in reducing reliance on the U.S.-dominated financial system. Structural challenges like the Triffin Dilemma, combined with BRICS' increasing alignment on exploring monetary alternatives, suggest that de-dollarization is not merely theoretical but a tangible possibility. However, the literature also emphasizes the complexities and internal divergences within BRICS, indicating that while individual nations may pursue their own paths, cohesive and unified action remains limited. This suggests that although the dollar's dominance faces credible challenges, its decline is not assured and BRICS is not yet in a position to upend the world order.

ANALYSIS

Part 1: Conditions for Natural De-Dollarization

Examining how the dollar became the dominant currency is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it's important to discuss what factors contribute to its position because it's the loss of those factors that will contribute to the dollar's decline. Although there are many things that scholars believe contribute to a dominant currency, these can be widely summarized into two main groups: economic dominance and international confidence. The rise of the U.S.'s strength and influence on a global scale, evident after WWI and solidified after WWII, is concurrent with the rise of the dollar's dominance—and for good reason. This increase in geopolitical power was accompanied by economic dominance as well as a projected image of power and stability.

Conversely, a significant loss of geopolitical power—or, in other words, a hegemonic shift—would lead to the U.S. losing these key factors and, by extension, the dollar losing its place as the dominant currency. In the following analysis, I will examine each of these conditions and how losing each would contribute to the decline of the dollar. Handily, there are plenty of historical examples of currencies to inform analysis on these conditions. For example, the Dutch Guilder, which is now defunct in favor of the Euro, was once a widely used currency during the 17th and 18th centuries (Ateba, 2023). More recently, the British Pound Sterling was used internationally during the height of the British Empire, whereas now it makes up 4.9% of global currency reserves compared to the Euro's 19.8% share (Siripurapu & Berman, 2023). As the analysis will show, these examples demonstrate how losing economic dominance, losing global confidence, and losing control of widely used bolstering institutions contribute to the decline of a dominant currency.

Decline in the U.S.'s Economic Dominance

A decline in economic dominance reduces a nation's ability to distribute its currency to the world. This is because economic dominance enables a country to widely distribute its currency and ensure that people continue to use it. For example, a nation with a globally powerful economy sends out more exports to a wider range of countries—exports that are typically denominated in the sending nation's currency. Economic dominance also gives the nation the leverage and ability to construct trade deals and loans in its currency. In other words, the more economic dominance a nation enjoys, the more widespread its currency becomes. Widespread use of currency is important for currency dominance not only because it means many people use the currency, but also because it ensures continued use even when people are not directly dealing with the issuing nation.

This happens because of network effects. Network effects are a key concept in both economics and currency dominance; they refer to goods that become more useful as more people use them. Currency, specifically, is very susceptible to network effects, as it is easier to use when more people use it. Consider this through an individual example: if you want to buy something from

a store and they already have Money S, it will be harder for them to agree to take Money L. As a nation utilizes its dominant economy to spread its currency around the world, more and more people use it, making the currency increasingly dominant—even if you do not buy many exports from that nation. It is still easier to buy in the dollar because it is widely available and familiar.

Naturally, if economic dominance helps a currency become dominant, the loss of this economic power leads to a decline in the power of the currency. The British Pound Sterling is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Although some scholars argue the pound was not fully dethroned until the Bretton Woods system after WWII, the beginnings of the pound's decline were evident as early as WWI, accompanied by a loss of the British Empire's economic dominance. According to Wessels, before WWI, the pound enjoyed its role as the denominator of 60% of the world's trade. However, the inflation and accompanying economic pains Britain faced after WWI inhibited the currency's continued growth and decreased its popularity (Wessels, 1989). WWII exacerbated this decline as the war-fed U.S. economy slowly replaced the British Empire as the dominant economic power, and the dollar gradually replaced the pound as the world's dominant currency.

Economic dominance and currency dominance are deeply connected. A nation's ability to maintain a dominant global economy influences how widely its currency is used, creating a self-reinforcing cycle based on network effects. However, history demonstrates that as a nation's economic power wanes, so does the influence of its currency—a correlation evident in the example of the British Pound Sterling. Without economic dominance, it is hard for a country to reinforce network effects, and the resulting power vacuum will soon be filled by another currency backed by a more powerful economy. Were the U.S. to follow in the British Empire's footsteps, losing its economic dominance to another nation, the dollar would lose its support and become less widely used.

Decline in Confidence in the Dollar

Although the movement of goods is how a nation can supply its currency to the world, its image of power and stability also drives demand. A decline in global confidence in the U.S. as a dominant power, irrespective of whether there is an actual decline in power, is another condition that contributes to declining currencies. This is tied to another economic principle: consumer confidence. When a nation has a seemingly stable economy, others have confidence that its currency will hold its value, making it a “safer” option for use. They are confident that if they denominate a sale in dollars, that sale will retain its value the next day, rather than fluctuating due to changes in the dollar’s value. Similarly, most countries hold their reserve currencies in dollars and seek investments in dollars due to the currency’s relatively stable value.

A loss of confidence, whether justified or not, is a key condition under which a currency might lose its dominance. For example, although other factors were at play, one of the main reasons the Dutch Guilder lost its position of power was due to a loss of confidence in the Bank of Amsterdam and, by extension, the guilder. During the late 1700s, the Netherlands was one of the dominant world powers, as its economy, bolstered by numerous prosperous colonies, solidified its position and that of its currency, the Dutch Guilder. The Bank of Amsterdam emphasized stability, making the guilder a common currency used in trade and investments. However, several economic shocks and poor policy responses by the Bank of Amsterdam in the 1780s and 1790s led to a massive decrease in confidence in the bank’s ability to service its obligations (Quinn & Roberds, 2014). In other words, people believed that the Dutch Guilder would not maintain its value, making it no longer a safe option.

It is important to note that a loss of confidence in the dollar as a safe option could occur for many reasons. In the example of the Dutch Guilder, it happened due to poor internal economic policy. However, in the case of the U.S., a loss of confidence could very well occur because of other reasons—namely, fear of vulnerability to Economic Statecraft. In the past decade, the U.S. has

demonstrated its economic might by freezing currency reserves, banning countries from financial systems, and otherwise using the dollar as a tool for geopolitical goals. While maintaining the use of this tool is important, actions like these have scared countries that fear holding much of their reserves in dollars leaves them vulnerable to economic pain should the U.S. decide to leverage the dollar. This is also a form of lost confidence, as it means some do not see the dollar as a safe option. The dominance of a currency hinges not only on the movement of goods and economic stability but also on global confidence in its reliability and safety; any erosion of this confidence can significantly undermine its position.

A Note on Bolstering Institutions

While not directly related to increasing the use of the dollar, institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and other pro-Western financial systems and entities also play a role in facilitating the U.S.'s preeminent position in the world economy. Institutions like these bolster the U.S.'s financial power and, by extension, the dollar's power by creating a financial system widely used by many countries that is typically pro-Western. This is because institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank provide lending and economic support to smaller countries and often advocate for the U.S.-led financial system, with the U.S. holding major shares and voting power (Woods, 2003). There has been significant scholarship on the fact that countries with better political or economic ties to the U.S. or European countries tend to secure better IMF deals (Barro & Lee, 2005). The IMF's sister institution, the World Bank, operates similarly (Masters & Berman, 2023). Their influence helps reinforce the power of the U.S. in the global economy, creating network effects that make it harder for nations to shift away from the U.S.-led system and, thus, the dollar.

However, these institutions are not infallible. A CRF article written in 2023 examines the possibility that countries are shifting away from Western institutions for their financial and development needs. It specifically cites an example in 2015, when Pakistan turned to China and Gulf countries for loans before going to the IMF, and again during COVID-19, when China's

development institutions became a bigger source of global finance than the World Bank. The replacement of bolstering institutions is yet another way in which the U.S.'s global economic position—and, by extension, the dollar's position—can be eroded. While not directly part of the central argument of this paper, the importance of bolstering institutions bears mentioning.

Part 2: The Impact of BRICS

The previous section discusses the natural conditions under which de-dollarization might occur. Were the U.S. to lose economic dominance due to weakening internal economic strength, and were other countries to lose confidence in the dollar as a safe and stable currency, the dollar might lose its position as a global currency. These are significant changes that do not seem likely in the near future. However, this progression does not account for the addition of a player like BRICS. Although some scholarship highlights the lack of capabilities possessed by BRICS to inflict meaningful damage on the dollar's position, there is no doubt that BRICS seeks to replace the U.S.-dominated system. Their active pursuit of ending dollar dominance has a profound impact on how and when de-dollarization could occur. This section examines current global sentiments about the dollar and how BRICS seeks to capitalize on them.

Currently, there is a growing unease about the dollar. Many countries have expressed concerns that overreliance on a U.S. currency could mean that any adverse conditions within the U.S. would disproportionately affect their economies. For example, the Central Bank of India, one of the countries more reluctant to fully decouple from the U.S. and the dollar, published a paper in 2023 stating that there was an “inherent defect” in the dollar's dominant role—namely, any weakening in the U.S. domestic economy leads to losses outside their economy. A less unbiased source, the CCP, published articles in November 2023 claiming that the dollar system funnels wealth into the U.S. to the detriment of other countries. Concerns about overreliance on a single currency destabilizing domestic economies and the international system are becoming more prevalent.

The second fear many countries share is that relying on the dollar allows the U.S. to exert a dangerous level of control over their economies, exposing them to harsh sanctions and penalties should the U.S. choose to weaponize the dollar. This concern has grown due to an increase in dollar weaponization over the past few decades. The best example of this is the unprecedented sanctions on Russia after the invasion of Ukraine. The U.S. and EU were able to freeze half of Russia's central bank exchange reserves and cut them off from crucial financial systems like SWIFT. Even India, one of the less hostile countries in BRICS, argued that it should explore alternative reserve currencies to defuse the threat of economic sanctions. Many countries now fear that using a U.S.-controlled currency or financial system opens them up to potential U.S. retaliation if they oppose its goals.

BRICS is capitalizing on this unease by organizing anti-dollar countries into a coalition and attempting to provide viable alternatives to the dollar system. According to a Carnegie article, the creation of BRICS+ and the addition of more countries to BRICS include nations like Argentina, Egypt, and Ethiopia, which began their membership in January of this year. These countries have faced issues with the dollar in the past, including dollar shortages and high inflation. By adding more countries seeking to de-dollarize and coordinating their efforts, BRICS could effectively erode the network effects that secure the dollar's position and, by extension, the economic dominance of the U.S.

BRICS also stands ready to provide alternatives for concerned countries, with China being the most active player. For example, the PBOC has credit lines available for countries like Argentina, which, after economic stress, worked with the IMF (a bolstering institution!) to denominate a loan in Renminbi due to concerns over the dollar. Additionally, more countries are using the Chinese Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), an alternative to U.S.-based financial systems.

It is important to recognize that the decline in U.S. economic dominance and international confidence begins domestically. Beyond the usual competitive actions of nations on the global stage, BRICS has limited ability to directly harm the U.S. economy to the extent of undermining its dominance and global trust. These issues originate within the U.S., as high levels of debt and internal political instability fuel concerns about reliance on the dollar. However, BRICS can leverage growing unease surrounding the dollar and, more importantly, offer alternatives that unite concerned countries into a network capable of replacing the dollar-dominated system. This effort is evident in BRICS' expansion to include more member nations critical of the dollar and their development and strengthening of alternative systems. Actions like these can hasten or exacerbate the natural decline of the dollar's hegemony.

It is also important to understand that these efforts represent a fledgling but growing threat. BRICS contains 45% of the world's population, 28% of the world's economic output, and has over 30 countries expressing interest in joining. Even if only the nations currently within BRICS could de-dollarize, this would significantly impact the dollar's position. However, the dollar still constitutes 58% of global foreign exchange reserves, 54% of export invoicing, and 88% of foreign exchange transactions. By contrast, the Renminbi holds only 2% of foreign exchange reserves, 4% of invoicing, and 7% of foreign exchange transactions.

The majority of this paper's analysis is hypothetical, exploring the future conditions under which the dollar could lose dominance and what BRICS would need to achieve to de-dollarize. These hypotheticals are crucial to examine because of the nature of de-dollarization: once network effects are eroded, restoring dominance is difficult. Preventative measures are necessary to forestall efforts from hostile actors like BRICS.

In conclusion, the dominance of the U.S. dollar, deeply intertwined with economic strength, international confidence, and bolstering institutions, remains robust but not invulnerable. While the

natural conditions for de-dollarization may appear unlikely in the immediate future, the concerted efforts of BRICS to capitalize on global unease about overreliance on the dollar and to provide alternative systems merit a response. By expanding their coalition and strengthening alternatives, BRICS is working to erode the network effects that underpin the dollar's dominance. However, the scale of their success will depend on their ability to address internal disparities, coordinate effectively, and offer a truly competitive alternative. While the dollar's position remains strong, proactive policies are crucial to mitigating the risk of erosion in the face of BRICS challenges.

CONCLUSION

The dollar's dominance is underpinned by the U.S.'s continued geopolitical power, specifically its economic strength and the maintenance of international confidence. Historically, as shown by the British Pound and Dutch Guilder, a decline in a nation's global power often leads to the erosion of its currency's prominence. In the modern context, BRICS presents an added challenge with its potential to create alternative currency systems, whether through a unified currency or regional substitutes. Although the arguments set forth in the analysis section of this paper hold a measure of historical and logical evidence, there are counterarguments. In this conclusion section, I will respond to some of the main counterarguments to the idea that BRICS could hasten de-dollarization and provide brief policy recommendations to forestall any meaningful de-dollarization efforts.

Among the many papers and scholars raising the alarm about this issue, an equal number argue that de-dollarization is far in the future. One of the main arguments against the idea that BRICS poses a threat to the dollar is that the U.S.'s current network is too strong, and recent examinations of reserve currencies held around the world show no significant trend away from the dollar. My response to this is a "yes, but" argument. It is clear that the dollar is still maintaining a solid lead compared to other currencies. According to the Atlantic Council's *Dollar Dominance*

Monitor, the dollar maintains a 58% share of foreign exchange reserves and invoices 88% of foreign exchange transactions. The Euro (a generally pro-Western currency) accounts for 20% of foreign exchange reserves and 31% of foreign exchange transactions. In contrast, the Renminbi, which we could term a “hostile currency” based on the literature, holds a mere 2% share of global foreign exchange reserves and 7% of foreign exchange transactions.

These numbers seem to indicate that de-dollarization is far in the future, if it happens at all. However, several key facts are missing. First, the trend away from the dollar is progressing much faster than previous historical trends. For example, it took the British Pound Sterling about 100 years to decline to one-fifth of its peak value (Guy, 2022). By contrast, data from the IMF in 2021 showed that the share of U.S.-denominated assets held in reserve by central banks dropped from 71% to 59% over about 20 years, while the Renminbi rose to 9%, indicating a significant shift (Arslanalp & Simpson-Bell, 2021). Although these numbers are not directly comparable, a 12% loss of share over just 20 years is significant for a currency’s lifespan. More compelling is the logical rebuttal: a network eroded is difficult to restore. The dollar’s dominance relies on network effects—its value stems from widespread use. A few users shifting to another system may have little impact initially, but as more leave, alternatives gain momentum. Like a snowball turning into an avalanche, once this shift reaches an inflection point, the U.S. will face an uphill battle against the entrenched network effects of a rival currency.

Other scholars argue that BRICS is too decentralized and misaligned to significantly impact the dollar despite its intentions. My response is that while this may be true now, it is unlikely to remain so. As Liu and Papa demonstrate in their study, BRICS has shown increasing convergence on the issue of de-dollarization, which is often a focal point of their summits. Additionally, their study highlights rising levels of economic cooperation between member states in recent years. Although there is divergence on the methods to achieve de-dollarization, the desire to do so is evident. Moreover, emerging technologies such as blockchain and internet payment systems—pioneered by

actors like China—could alter the historical narrative of how a currency loses its dominance. Again, I return to the snowball argument: waiting until BRICS has a clear capability to challenge the dollar will make preserving its dominance significantly harder due to the compounding effects of network dynamics.

While specific policy recommendations are beyond the scope of this paper, I offer brief theoretical suggestions. It is impossible to ensure that de-dollarization never occurs, but steps can be taken to slow or delay it. These steps revolve around the idea that the U.S. and rival actors are competing for the economic allegiance of other countries. The U.S. needs to offer a more attractive “product” and conduct better “business” than BRICS. Even within BRICS, some countries remain hesitant about de-dollarization. To these nations, the U.S. must make the dollar so appealing that they cannot justify switching. This involves addressing why non-hostile countries might favor de-dollarization and resolving their concerns. By communicating clearly and enacting policies that inspire confidence beyond the U.S.’s four-year political cycles, the U.S. can rebuild trust. Similarly, sanctions should be handled delicately to maintain the U.S.’s ability to enforce economic statecraft without alienating potential allies. Most importantly, the U.S. must not underestimate the risk of de-dollarization, which could stem from reckless policy, as seen with the Dutch Guilder, or declining global influence, as with the British Pound.

In conclusion, the potential for de-dollarization represents a slow-burning but serious risk that requires careful consideration and action by the United States. While some may view this threat as distant or overstated, history demonstrates that dominant currencies rarely fall without broader consequences, often accompanied by shifts in global power and stability. BRICS and other emerging economies may currently lack the cohesion or immediate capacity to decisively challenge the dollar, but their ongoing efforts and advances in financial technology pose a credible future challenge. To counteract this, the U.S. must proactively reinforce the advantages of dollar usage by maintaining economic stability, avoiding the overuse of sanctions, and promoting the accessibility of dollar-

based transactions. By addressing the drivers of de-dollarization now rather than reacting later, the U.S. can preserve the dollar's global role, ensuring its economic security and the stability of the international order.

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It's Time to Wave Goodbye to Plastic Pollution: Exploring China's Journey. By Mary Beth Rayburn

Introduction

In 2022, China accounted for 32% of the global plastic production, making it the largest producer of plastic products in the world, by far. This is in comparison to the rest of Asia producing 19% and North America producing 17% (Statista, 2024). Not only do plastic products eventually break down into tiny plastic particles known as microplastics that transfer up the food chain and cause harm, but research has also supported the idea that they have permeated our water sources (Incheon National University, 2020). Although more research into the effects of ingesting microplastics is needed in humans, it is established that ingesting microplastics can affect certain biological processes such as fertility and metabolism in other terrestrial mammals such as mice (Liu, et al. 2022). Thus, further investigation into the world's largest plastic producer is necessary due to China's immense contribution to plastic pollution and the sudden policy shift on the matter. Understanding the full political history of China's plastic policy will progress the current literature by allowing scientists to better understand the full extent of the environmental impact that China has caused over time.

Thus, my research question will explore China's plastic policy timeline from the 1960s and 1970s, when plastics became widely used, until 2024. Between these periods, China has not only increased its percentage of the world's cumulative plastic production but, despite this, has also curiously made a massive change in its plastic policy rather quickly. This research question seeks to explore how China's lack of plastic policy has impacted not only the terrestrial environment but also marine ecosystems.

All in all, as plastic continues to be a part of daily life, it is important to understand the impacts of various processes involved in the creation and disposal of plastic products and the

effect that mass producers have and will have on our planet moving forward.

Literature Review

As plastic has been and continues to be a major part of everyday life, more and more research has been done into the harm that it causes not only to the human body but also to marine ecosystems, more generally. According to a study performed by Halden and North, although plastics have many health benefits, some plastic components such as DEHP and BPA which leech out of the plastic can also have destructive reproductive health effects such as early sexual maturation and decreased male fertility (Incheon National University, 2020; North, E. J., and R. U. Halden, 2013). This research on the harm that plastics cause to humans is relevant to the topic at hand because not only does it aid in explaining the significance of this research, but also the broader applicability.

Additionally, subsequent research that has been performed on the detrimental effects of plastics on the marine environment is also applicable to this research. Aside from the obvious relevancy to this project that China may be causing irreversible harm to the ocean, the other significance is that these effects will hopefully catalyze policy creation and the potential contraction of increasingly harmful effects they produce. In fact, according to Deville and Vazquez-Rowe et al., “abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) makes up the biggest share of marine-based plastic pollution” (A. Deville, et al., 2023). However, the microplastics that these unmanned fishing gear leave behind are not the only concern. Rather, this fishing gear and entangled prey can attract small fish, which in turn invite bigger predators (A. Deville, et al., 2023). In turn, these deceased larger predators bring in smaller fish that feed on them, and the cycle continues (A. Deville, et al., 2023).

While ALDFG harms fish and other marine life concretely, the microplastics that ALDFG emits microscopically affect marine life. According to a study performed in 2023 on the

effects of microplastics on mice, microplastics can cause neurodegeneration and catastrophic reproductive issues such as decreased testosterone levels and even sperm deformities (Liu, et al., 2022). Additionally, not only do microplastics affect terrestrial organisms, but they also affect marine life. According to Berlino, Mangano, and Sarà, microplastics also negatively impact benthic marine organisms (Berlino, Mangano, Vittor, and Sarà, 2021). After gathering data on a host of benthic marine organisms, they concluded that not only do microplastics harm individual organisms but impact entire ecosystems' worth of marine organisms. All in all, both of these studies contribute to this research topic by exploring the negative impacts of microplastics and the detrimental effect that a lack of policy can have on not only terrestrial organisms and humans but also marine organisms and ecosystems.

In fact, it has been shown that plastic policy is effective in reducing pollution. In a study performed by Engstrom in 2024, it was shown that policies that entail lower numbers of loopholes are more effective in reducing plastic consumption, and thus, pollution. For example, in the study, Engstrom studied various states and their corresponding plastic bag bans. In an Oregon town she learned, the paper bag consumption increased by 500% after the plastic bag ban went into effect showing that residents shifted their consumption from plastic to paper. This study supports the underlying idea of this research, which is that increasing plastic policy would effectively reduce plastic pollution in China.

Shifting to China's specific policy impacts on plastic pollution, although they have been as recent as 2008 according to Feng and Fürst, with plastic policy drastically increasing between 2016 and 2021(Fürst, Kathinka, and Feng, 2022). Additionally, Fürst and Feng argue that while these policies have had a substantial impact on plastic consumption, they have not had a strong enough impact on plastic production, which is also incredibly harmful to the environment (Fürst,

Kathinka, and Feng, 2022). Notably, a study performed in 2008 stated that while China's plastic policy does seem to target consumption, "disposable plastic used in disposable plastic packages used by e-commerce, express delivery, and food delivery are not subjected to the 'plastic limit order' released in 2008, which can be considered a grey area of law and regulation" (Liu, et al. 2022). However, after attempting to find more positive literature concerning Chinese plastic policy, a study performed by a Chinese student and a Chinese university seemed to be a part of the scarce positive literature. The study essentially concluded that the more that countries relied on the Chinese market, they "inferred that the higher the reliance of a country on the Chinese market (prior to the ban), the more dramatic will be the decrease in its plastic waste exports" (Wen, et al., 2021). While this not only seems to conflict with much of the literature in this academic space, this researcher has 141 publications attributed to them. All in all, although this study may be a form of propaganda to inflate the perception of Chinese plastic policy, the other two mentioned seem to help support the notion that Chinese plastic policy may not be as effective as it may seem. Specifically, although the language of the policy itself may seem stringent, in actuality, it may not be that successful.

Analysis

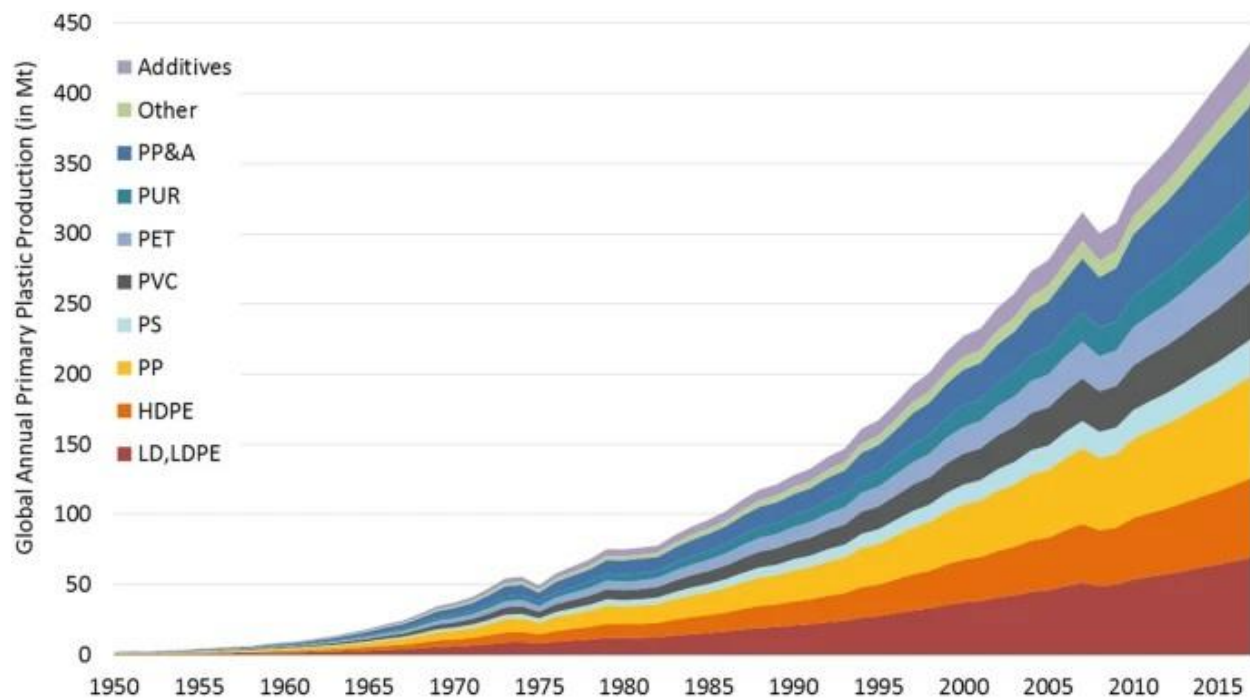
Through this analysis, I seek to establish a timeline of events from the 1960s and 1970s, when plastic first became widely used, to current-day policies China has enacted to retort the rest of the world's efforts to make China the global recycling bin. Going back in time to the 1960s and 1970s reveals a new perspective and some sort of middle ground not accounted for in previous literature. Specifically, this analysis reveals and supports the conclusion that while China is partially to blame for the mass amounts of ocean plastic pollution, the other part of this blame falls on the rest of the world which exported plastic waste to China for disposal. This

partial blame that China does incur is due to the fact that their policies seem to be all-or-nothing in nature and that as opposed to looking to cooperation to solve the economic issues surrounding recycling, China relatively immediately resorted to stringent policies regarding the purity levels of plastic imports and ceasing plastic imports all together. All in all, through the timeline of events, referencing examples of policies such as those limiting purity levels, and combining this with the current scientific literature on the effects of microplastics, I seek to support the conclusion that China is just as much to blame for plastic pollution as is the rest of the world.

The Plastic Boom

The year is 1968, and a French company has just spearheaded the plastic packaging industry by utilizing PVC bottles to package their mineral water (Marty, 2021). However, there were several cultural reasons that occurred prior to this event which underlie this plastic boom. According to an article by Nicolas Marty, while bottling production had improved post-WWI, packaging severely limited production capabilities (2021). Previously, glass was used for packaging of food products such as milk. However, with these packaging issues limiting production capabilities due to the high price of glass, some cheaper alternatives needed to be found. In addition to the issue of the price of glass, there was another issue with glass: these “returnable bottles usually change hands about twenty times” (Marty, 2021). However, fast forward slightly and it is during this same time of need that plastics are being used in other sectors during WWII. After the war, plastics continued to be used in various industries as they remained cheaper to produce than materials such as glass or steel. Additionally, there were shortages of these goods, so sometimes plastic was the only option. It is precisely through this that plastic became as large as it is today. Below is a figure that demonstrates the exponential increase in plastic production since the 1950s that has led us to the place that we are today. This

figure is featured in an article by Geyer which details the history of plastic production and its exponential increase, especially after WWII (Geyer, 2020).



However, all of this plastic that is produced has to go somewhere. In fact, most plastics, even today, are incinerated rather than recycled or reused (Geyer, 2020). However, recycled plastics need to “be sorted, and China had the cheap labor that made it economical to do by hand” (Hilton, 2020). This is how China became so involved with the importation of plastic. Chinese use of plastic would also only increase from here as they began to economically develop as well (Hilton, 2020). This is the story of how China became one of the world’s biggest players in terms of plastic—a title that China still holds today.

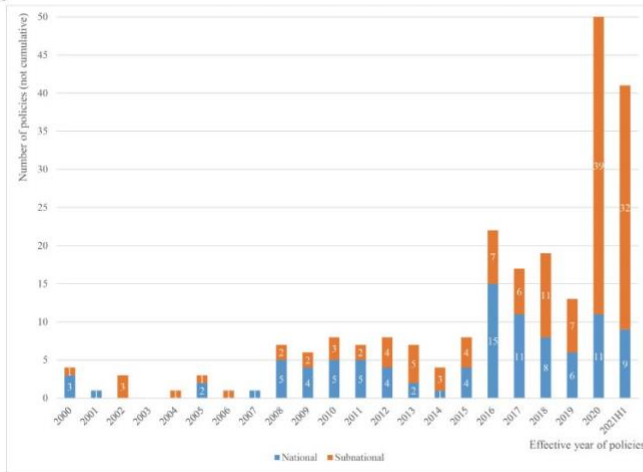
Out With The Old, In With The New: Chinese Plastic Policy Then and Now

As previously mentioned, a serious disposal problem followed the plastic boom that occurred around the 1980s. However, China offered a cheap and easy solution to this disposal problem: cheap labor, low contamination standards, and low rates for shipping in cargo vessels

(Hilton, 2020). Cheap labor is an integral part of the disposal process because before incineration or recycling, plastic needs to be sorted into different types for appropriate disposal. Additionally, any liquid residue or food residue must be removed for proper disposal. The issue with this, however, is that this labor is extremely tedious and time-intensive. Thus, the cheap labor solution that China proposes to this situation resulted in China importing tons of plastic and essentially becoming the world’s recycling bin. Additionally, this may be a contributing factor to China’s immense plastic pollution footprint.

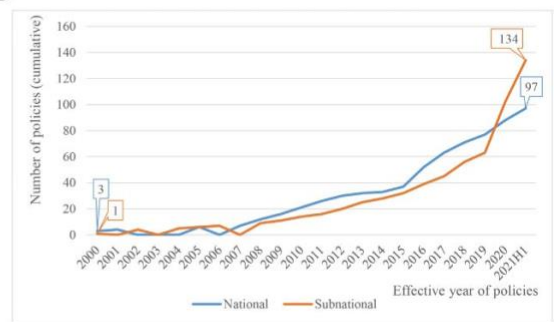
With Chinese plastic policy taking off in the 2010s, these policies passed during this time were “an effort to halt a deluge of soiled and contaminated materials that was overwhelming Chinese processing facilities and leaving the country with yet another environmental problem — and this one not of its own making” (Wang, 2019). According to the graphs below from a study regarding Chinese plastic policy by Fürst and Feng, Chinese plastic policy began to increase rapidly around 2016, with the number of policies passed reaching a pinnacle in 2020.

A



Number of national and subnational policies issued annually (not cumulative)

B



Number of national and subnational policies issued annually (cumulative)

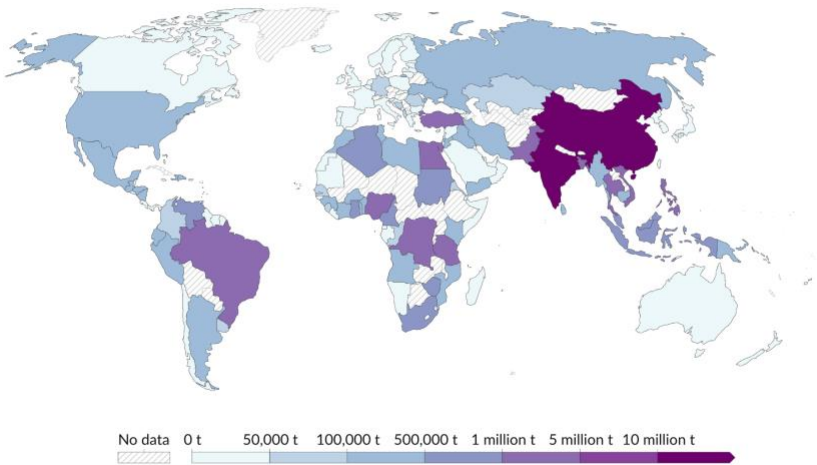
Effects of New Chinese Policy

One of the many effects of this rapid increase in Chinese plastic policy that can be categorized as all-or-nothing was that plastic imports relatively immediately decreased by 99% (Wang, 2019). Moreover, since so much plastic was previously imported to China for disposal, this matter was on the table for reconsideration. According to an article by Jennifer Wang, this means that globally, more plastic is ending up in landfills (Wang, 2019). Additionally, now that disposal is so expansive, this creates a new challenge for getting rid of plastics safely (Wang, 2019). The article by Wang points out that before China's ban on plastic imports, "95 percent of the plastics collected for recycling in the European Union and 70 percent in the U.S. were sold and shipped to Chinese processors" (Wang, 2019). Now, this waste has nowhere to go. Additionally, according to this same article by Wang, China has imposed a 99.5% purity standard through these policies, which is nearly impossible to meet (Wang, 2019). This fact supports the conclusion that China's approach to plastic policy can be categorized as all-or-nothing. The result of this is that now China cannot import plastic waste due to these policies, but even if the policies were reversed, this purity standard alone would make it nearly impossible for China to accept plastic waste.

The effects of these policies are global, but this issue hits particularly close to home for me. According to the article by Wang, recycling in rural areas was hit the hardest. For me, this definitely rang true. As long as I can remember, recycling has always been something that my family has emphasized. Growing up, whether it was through hunting, fishing, recycling, or just being a good steward, my parents always taught me to respect the environment. However, around 2018, recycling began to look completely different for us. Every other Saturday since I was in middle school, my dad and I would always drive to Walmart and recycle the plastic and

Mismanaged plastic waste, 2019

Mismanaged plastic waste is waste that is not recycled, incinerated, or kept in sealed landfills. It includes materials burned in open pits, dumped into seas or open waters, or disposed of in unsanitary landfills and dumpsites.



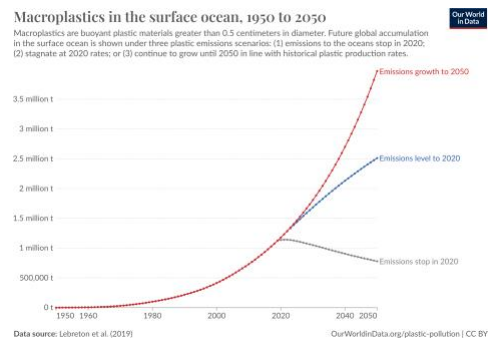
Data source: Meijer et al. (2021)

OurWorldinData.org/plastic-pollution | CC BY

aluminum we had accumulated over the past weeks. Then, they announced that they would be closing because “it just isn’t profitable anymore.” Now, there is no option for my family to recycle.

However, the concerns

related to plastic waste continue to accumulate. Not only is the number of microplastics on the ocean’s surface increasing exponentially but plastic is still being seriously mismanaged, according to the graph above. Additionally, the blue graph on the following page suggests that most waste is still being emitted into the ocean from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and even Brazil.



Data source: Lebreton et al. (2019)

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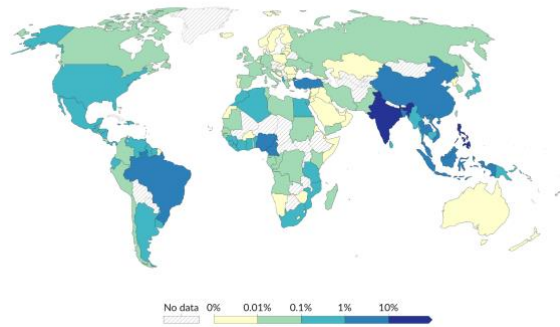
Reflections

As the previous figures suggest, the road forward is an important one that we need to accelerate down pretty quickly due to the harms emitted from not just macroplastics, but microplastics too. However, the implications of this research were quite surprising to me. While I went into the research thinking I would find reasons to blame China for the increasing pollution problem, I came out finding much more. While I did find reasons to critique China for the way

that they suddenly ceased importing plastic as opposed to seeking a cooperative solution, this

Share of global plastic waste emitted to the ocean, 2019
Annual estimate of plastic emissions. A country's total does not include waste that is exported overseas, which may be at higher risk of entering the ocean.

Our World
in Data



Data source: Meijer et al. (2021)

OurWorldinData.org/plastic-pollution | CC BY

research also opened my eyes to the issue that

China faced when they passed this legislation:

continue being the world's recycling bin and

fronting the cost of that process or put that

problem back on the producing countries.

Ultimately, while I certainly do not condone

China's all-or-nothing response to plastic

pollution and the costs of recycling, this research definitely allowed me to see their perspective

and better understand the intended effects of the legislation. All in all, through examining the

history of plastic, its massive increase in production, looking at China's all-or-nothing approach

to plastic, and combining this with current literature on the effects and production of

macroplastics, this supports the conclusion that China and the rest of the world, in fact, share

blame for plastic pollution.

Conclusion and Implications

As previously discussed, although this was not the anticipated outcome of this paper, the

research I have done supports the idea that while China is partially to blame for the world's

plastic pollution due to a lack of policy, the other part of the responsibility is on the rest of the

world. This is because the world used China as a recycling bin due to the low labor costs

associated with sorting.

The implication of this research is a bit broad, and one that was not expected: sometimes

there is more to political pictures than meets the eye. Moreover, perhaps part of the blame should

be shifted to the rest of the world for the lack of intervention in the plastic pollution situation.

Additionally, in this same vein, I think that this exposes a shortcoming of globalism that is not talked about enough: unequal burden sharing. Ultimately, the reality is that some countries are going to be richer than others. This results in wealthier countries using poorer countries to take care of issues that they do not want to address such as plastic waste disposal. This inequitable burden shifting is problematic because although all countries contribute to an issue, one country may be solely blamed for a problem that all countries contribute to. This leads me to the assertion that moving forward, wealthier nations should take on more when it comes to solving the responsibility of the plastic pollution problem.

However, the issue of plastic pollution may not have a clear solution. In 2017, President Trump notably withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement which imposed increased responsibility on more wealthy countries like the U.S. When asked about withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, President Trump's Administration stated that the decision was made to benefit American workers economically (U.S. Department of State, 2017).

It seems that more research simply uncovers more issues such as the fact that unequal burden-sharing can be attributed to the reality that no nations will ever be equal in economic success. However, this inequality will never be corrected without the emphasis on long-term solutions. The underlying issue stems from the fact that all nations are ultimately self-interested and that no one wants to give up convenience or profit.

Some shortcomings of this research include that because I do not know Chinese, I cannot examine the exact language of their policies on plastic pollution to determine their efficacy or lack thereof. Moreover, this paper does not provide a psychological explanation for the lack of accountability taken by world leaders on this issue, nor does it explain why shortsighted policies that favor immediate profit tend to be more popular than long-term solutions to an issue that is

slowly killing our oceans. This can be something though, which future literature explores and applies to the issue of plastic pollution that plagues our world today.

In conclusion, while China is partially to blame for the plastic pollution issue, the rest of the world is equally as responsible for placing that burden on China in the first place, and not assuming responsibility and eating the costs of their own plastic pollution. However, it is uncertain how this issue will ever be solved. Perhaps future research will explore the behavioral science behind unwillingness to assume this responsibility and eat this cost, and what solutions will help us curb this issue and ultimately wave goodbye to plastic pollution.

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American & Chinese Military Considerations in East Asia. By Mark Jonah Snyder

The United States of America (US) and People's Republic of China (PRC) have an increasingly complex relationship which has change drastically in throughout the beginning of the 21st century, with China integrating into the world economy, and creating closer ties with the United States. But consistently, China has proven that it doesn't want to play by the rules of the world order that the US has established. These tensions have led to a deteriorating relationship between the United States and China that has increased the potential of military conflict between these nations. There are many places in Southeast Asia could flame up into a full-scale war between China and its neighbors, and most of these have a high probability of involving the United States in said conflict as well. Recently the question has been not if, but when will it happen, with the popular opinion being that it is only a matter of time and some predicting war as soon as 2025.

Both nations' militaries are preparing for this potential future, which has been demonstrated through increasingly tense political rhetoric and riskier military actions. Rather than exploring the why of an American-Chinese War, this paper will ask: how would each country fight this war and how would that affect its outcome? The literal focus of this is the capacity of each nation's armed forces, as well as the geopolitical and internal factors. While there are plain numerical advantages and disadvantages, the non-military factors often prove decisive. A direct conflict between these two powers would be the most devastating war since World War II, with the potential to spill over to surrounding countries and wreak havoc on the global economy. An unprecedented struggle of this magnitude could reshape the World Order as we know it, with the current status quo of an American-led world prevailing or disintegrating in flames. While both countries would more than likely prefer an alternative to war, the current path that they are both heading down will bring them

precariously close to the brink. By understanding both nations, hopefully, what might occur in the any potential scenario can become clearer.

Literature Review

There is a lot of literature on the why of a conflict in between the United States and China. But this paper will focus on the logistical and philosophical question of how this war will be conducted.

Several important pieces of literature on this topic are government created. The United States, and to a lesser extent China, publish reports that lay out their countries' respective defense strategy. These serve as guidelines for the militaries of each nation. While there is the bias associated with documents that have a government organization, all of these reports offer a perspective into what that countries' military prioritizes. The United States' National Defense Strategy, a quadrennial document created by the Department of Defense (DOD), outlines the US military's strategic goals. Something worth noting is that the most iterations of this document, published in 2018 and 2022, and have acknowledge China as a focus for the DOD. The language that focuses on China realizes their potential to be an adversary and calls on the US to prepare adequately for the threat, which has lead to a huge shift in military doctrine (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2022). Another report created for Congress focuses on the recent developments of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in terms of technology, as well as manning and growth of their force. This report compiles important information on the PLA, looking at their strategy as they establish a more global presence, but also looking at the numerical considerations, such as number of soldiers, ships, and aircraft. Now this information is all declassified, so it may not include the full picture of the Americans predict that the Chinese have. But there is also the likely reality that the DOD doesn't know a lot of what the PLA has in their arsenal (US Department of Defense 2023). The Chinese equivalent of the National Defense Strategy is vague, but it does provide some clarity on the basics of the Chinese military doctrine. A lot of the language is idealistic, but it does

acknowledge the seriousness of global security challenges and their willingness to act. Though the document also consistently insists that their goal is peace. With this comes an overall strengthening of their military, which fits in with the vision of their leader, Xi Jinping (China State Council Information Office 2019).

Research shows that while the United States had been growing in its capabilities, so has China, and they are quickly reaching parity with each other. Just in the past 30 years, the increase in Chinese military capabilities has been incredible. A look at the numbers between the two countries show that China has overtaken the United States in terms of ships, missiles, and soldiers. That doesn't even factor in the local concentration of power that China has accumulated throughout the South China Sea, as well as along their coast (Heginbotham 2015). It's important as well to consider the perception of China and the United States around the world. On average most countries view the United States more favorably than they do China, but one could argue that this is due to the world order being American led. China has very clearly demonstrated that they want to have this same level of prestige that historically been the United States' (Silver 2023). One crucial factor in being dominant in any conflict in the region is the ability to create and maintain air superiority. Both nations air forces are modernizing at a rapid pace, but struggle from similar problems such as fighting in a joint environment, the production and sustainment of aircraft, and refueling. Currently, the United States Air Force (USAF), holds an edge over the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in many of these logistical struggles. An inability to adequately support the logistics of a full-scale war could prove to be fatal, and currently the PLAAF is untested in these categories, compared with the USAF, which has had a 20-year War on Terror to help them improve and prepare their forces. While the application of air power against a terrorist organization is different from its use against a nation-state, the USAF has valuable experience that can be applied, something the Chinese don't currently have (McPhilamy 2020).

The two areas that China has a primary focus on asserting its dominance militarily, as well as politically, is in the South China Sea and Taiwan. In the South China Sea, the PRC has

consistently, been expanding its presence, creating bases on artificial reefs to back up their claims to the water. Even after a decision from the International Court of Justice, China would not back down from their claims. The countries with claims in this area have grown increasingly annoyed by these actions, with tensions rising. The United States is reopening bases in the region to be better prepared for the beginning of a conflict here. The South China Sea has a ton of potential to be the spark that starts a US-China conflict, especially when considering the Defense agreement that the US has with the Philippines, one of the key players in the region (Moulton 2022). When it comes to Taiwan there is a lot of speculation, but what has remained consistent in China's messaging is its desire for reunification, something which has been true since the end of the Chinese Civil War. There are a lot of scenarios, with varying likely hoods. While a relaxation of tensions or peaceful reunification could be possible, it seems unlikely without either side giving up something. For the Chinese they would need to surrender their claims to the island of Taiwan, or for the Taiwanese, they would need to surrender their independence and autonomy. At the present neither side seem willing to budge, which makes it much more likely that a Chinese invasion of the island would happen. A large part of what would make this scenario work though is American political instability, as it would take longer for the US to come and support the Taiwanese in an invasion scenario (Stucki 2023).

Two areas worth discussing in this region are India and Korea. Both nations have long and complicated relationships with China and the United States, and while they are not the most likely place for a conflict to break out, its worth discuss the implication of this conflict in regard to these two nations as well. In India, tensions over its border with China continue to simmer. This three-way disagreement between India, Pakistan, and China, over the Kashmir region has been very contentious, sometimes boiling over into conflict, but so far not a large-scale conflict. The United States isn't directly involved but they do provide financial support to the Indian military, something that originated during the War on Terror but has continued (Curtis 2023). Meanwhile Korea is another potential conflict zone, a frozen conflict on the border of China, close to the capital of

Beijing. While there is the China friendly buffer of North Korea, South Korea, is US-aligned, hosting about 30,000 American troops, and a highly capable American-trained military. This alliance with the United States is a key factor in its ability to project power in the region. Any renewal of a war on the Korean peninsula would put even more American troops close to Mainland China, something that China seeks to prevent, keeping North Korea very tightly under its control (Pak 2020).

Research Analysis

This section of this paper will look at the potential scenarios for a war to break out between the United States and China, as well as how a war would be conducted. While there is a chance that war could break out anywhere, the focus will be on the South China Sea and Taiwan. India and Korea will be discussed as well, but not in depth. Both of those places have the potential to boil over into larger conflicts, but the involvement of the US in India and China in Korea is less clear than in the South China Sea and Taiwan. Additionally, the armed forces of the respective countries and their capabilities will be a continuing theme, as understanding the numerical considerations with the strategic ones helps to form a better picture of how a potential war will be conducted. Lastly, the focus will primarily be on a conventional (non-nuclear) conflict, as the involvement of nuclear weapons dramatically changes the calculus of a war, with little strategy present besides destruction.

The PRC has claimed the entirety of the South China Sea as its territorial waters, disregarding other nations' established sovereignty in these waters, while also ignoring international condemnation. In the past two decades, China has militarized the region, establishing bases on disputed islands, like the Spratly Islands, and coral reefs, which have been transformed into artificial islands. These bases allow China to project its power throughout the region, solidifying its claims by the show of force (Moulton 2022). The flexibility that these bases provide to Chinese naval and air assets has turned the South China Sea into a minefield of potential

conflicts. It makes it harder to get an accurate picture of what military forces are where, and what their specific capabilities are. However, the primary danger is from a nation that is willing to fight back. The Philippines has consistently asserted its rights to its sovereign waters throughout the South China Sea, even stationing troops in a WWII wreck, the Sierra Madre, to protect its borders. While this may seem like a strange tactic, the Sierra Madre has been the center of numerous disagreements between the Chinese and Philippine Coast Guards, with ships being rammed and sailors being injured, though none fatally. This little wreck could easily spark the beginning of a Chinese-Philippine War and would drag the United States into a regional conflict.

The United States has a string of its own bases that are on the edge of the Chinese claims in the South China Sea, known as the First Island Chain. This string of bases starts in the Philippines and stretches all the way up through Japan to Korea. The United States is reopening and rebuilding bases in the Philippines, as well as throughout the regions since these bases will be the first line of defense in any conflict. All of these bases have large concentrations of troops and material but are vulnerable to missiles from the Chinese mainland that could render these bases inoperable in the crucial beginning stages of a war (Heginbotham 2015). Now unlike the Chinese, the United States is not primarily reliant on land-based defenses and assets, with its ability to project power, via naval assets. While on paper the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has a greater number of ships than the United States Navy (USN), a large number of those ships are primarily for sealift and supply. The USN has eleven carriers, and China has only two. The flexibility that a carrier group provides is a direct challenge to the Chinese ability to supply and defend its island bases. And in the scenario of a war in and around the South China Sea, a lot of it will be determined by the sea and air war. Now if China can successfully deny the USN access to the region, they have a much better chance at protecting their claims and winning the conflict.

The beginning of an open conflict is going to be determined by control of the sky. This dimension of war is crucial to success in the modern era. The establishment of air superiority allows a nation's military to act without interference, allowing for the safe movement of troops,

ships, and supplies. War is often a logistical struggle as much as it is a military one, and the ability to safely and efficiently project power in the region will be a key factor in winning. The PLAAF and the USAF have become closer in capabilities, with the PLAAF having more planes of a more advanced nature. This is a direct threat to the USAF's ability to secure airspace while protecting its bases and assets. But in a South China Sea scenario, the United States does have a slight edge (Heginbotham 2015). A lot of this has to do with the lack of effective power projection through its application of air power in the region which can be countered by the flexible posture of USAF. China has little expertise in operations in a joint environment which would be crucial for a multi-faceted conflict in the region. The PLAAF also lacks an air refueling fleet, which is a crucial element in sustaining long-term air operations within a theater. Additionally, the PLAAF is reliant on foreign parts for a lot of its aircraft production, which could jeopardize the production and sustainment of its airframes (McPhilamy 2020). However, it is worth noting that there are technologies that the United States similarly relies on for its military and could prove just as problematic in a war. But these all suggest that even with how far the United States is from the conflict, they may be better suited to sustain air operations, and even achieve air superiority in the region.

What's interesting about a lot of the Chinese claims and bases in the South China Sea is its insistence that they are not meant for military functions. The PRC has stated that these bases have been built for civilian purposes, such as marine life research and to improve the navigability of the region. But many of these outposts, in the occupied Spratly Islands, have been equipped with many land-based weapon systems that could deny the area to hostile forces. With missile systems that could hit bases, ships, or aircraft, it creates a very tense environment that could easily be set off. The PLA also continues to build up military infrastructure, like docks, runways, hangars, radar, and hardened shelters, all of which violate international law. All of these outposts are more than capable of supporting and aiding military operations but currently, they host no combat aircraft,

which shows hesitancy on the part of the PRC to directly project that kind of power in the region (Department of Defense 2023).

When looking a little further north, the topic of Taiwan comes into play. Taiwan, or officially the Republic of China (ROC), is a remnant of the Chinese Civil War. It is seen by the PRC as a breakaway province, which is rightfully owned by the mainland, even though the PRC has never had a presence on the island. Originally run by the authoritarian Kuomintang (KMT), the ROC liberalized, and is now a thriving constitutional republic, with a powerful capitalist economy. While many in Taiwan view themselves as Chinese, there has been a growing trend of separatism, as well as support for independence. For the Communist Chinese Party (CCP), Taiwan represents a Chinese nation that is free and liberalized, which stands opposed to its authoritarian and communist style of government. For most of its history, the PRC has claimed that they will reclaim the island, by force, if necessary, but China now can successfully carry out a cross-strait operation, the ramifications of which remain unclear.

The United States has no explicit policy or strategy toward Taiwan. Ever since the switching of diplomatic relations in 1979, the United States has maintained strategic ambiguity towards the island. We still supply their military but there are no official ties with Taiwan. This makes it challenging to discern what an American response to a Chinese invasion would look like. President Biden has stated that there would be direct support for the Taiwanese but what that would look like is still in question. What is clear is that the United States military would prefer to keep China guessing about any response and deter any change to the status quo (Joint Chief of Staffs 2022). As mentioned early though, a key vulnerability of the United States military is the production of semiconductor chips, essential to our computer systems in everything from desktops to fighter jets and aircraft carriers. The chokepoint in this supply chain is Taiwan, framing a conflict here as a resource conflict, one that is much more valuable and crucial than oil.

China remains insistent in its claims to Taiwan, holding to the One China Principle that was established by the 1992 Consensus. This arrangement worked for the KMT and the CCP as it

maintained the status quo in a conflict that seemed to be without resolution while allowing for a framework of relations to be created. But the KMT was voted out of office, and the newer, more pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has angered the CCP. These domestic issues have directly correlated with more frequent military drills by the PLAN and PLAAF, which they claim are in response to these separatists. The PRC claims that these Taiwanese separatists pose the greatest threat to peace and stability in the region, which China claims to remain committed to. But the PRC is also in favor of Peaceful reunification, which many are wary of after what has happened in Hong Kong since the British returned it to the mainland. China also believes USN actions in the Taiwan Strait, as well as the sales of weapons, to be a provocative action that damages their relationship, even though it is viewed as a stable relationship by the Chinese (China State Council Information Office 2019).

Taiwan, even without US support would not be an easy obstacle for the Chinese to invade. It is a rather mountainous island, with few beaches suitable for an amphibious assault. While China may have the sealift capacity to move troops across the strait, continually supplying and protecting them would be a challenge over the distance that these vessels would need to travel. It would take at least several days for the PLA to mass enough troops on the island for a larger-scale invasion after the initial assault, which would leave the beachhead under constant attack by the Republic of China Army and Air Force (ROCA & ROCAF). While these forces are smaller, they have the advantage of defending their territory and would hold a numerical advantage early in the conflict due to the locality of the conflict. Concerns about the PLA's ability to project power would be put to the test in this invasion scenario. The longer that it takes China to establish control of the seas and skies will also be key in determining the outcome of a conflict (Silver 2023). If the conflicts drag on the conflict has the potential to turn into a stalemate, similar to the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Taiwan has always been at risk of invasion, but that risk has become more realistic due to several internal factors within the key players. In China, there has been unprecedented levels of unrest due to tensions from the pandemic, as well as the economy that is struggling, putting

pressure on the middle class. A decline in China's economic might would only exacerbate these tensions. Meanwhile, if domestic tensions in the United States reach a boiling point due to their presidential election, it could lead to a fractured and distracted United States, one less focused on the issue of Taiwan. These domestic factors could lead to a Chinese gamble; and invade Taiwan while the United States isn't prepared, due to leadership challenges and a weakened government. This would make it harder for a cohesive American response unless USN ships or American bases were attacked in the opening salvo of the war. A direct attack on Americans has the potential to galvanize and unite the American people, but with the fractured nature of American politics currently, it may be harder to have a cohesive response (Stucki 2024). The longer a war goes on the harder it would be for China to sustain, as friendly nations would be more likely to become involved, whether directly with troops or indirectly, with aid and weapons. Plus, the potential for China's economy to be cut off from the world at large and put under sanctions is a huge risk in this scenario, but it could have devastating consequences like those put on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. A sustained military operation like this is unprecedented in the history of the PLA, and many of their forces have seen little to no combat. While on paper, China may have one of the largest militaries, the reality of war may have drastic implications for the PLA on a smaller scale, and the PRC & CCP on a larger scale.

Another area of concern is the Chinese-Indian border, which has been the site of large military buildups as well as recent escalations in violence. The dispute over the 2,100-mile-long border in the heart of the Himalayas is important to note, as India is a nonaligned nuclear power. It is not exactly aligned with either the United States or China, but it does resent what it sees as a Chinese occupation of Indian territory. Both countries have been building up more infrastructure along the border as well as moving more troops into the region, and many locations along the border could become the trigger for an all-out war. India and China both have the largest and second-largest populations respectively, and a war between them would be devastating (Curtis 2023). It is unclear how much support the United States would provide to India if war was to break out.

The United States has ramped up its financial support to the Indian military, but the US has no obligation to help India in case of a war with China, though said the war would be advantageous to American strategy in the Indo-Pacific, as they seek to counter China wherever and whenever needed.

The last flashpoint worth noting is the Koreas. This frozen conflict has remained relatively stable since the ceasefire agreement in 1953. The authoritarian and communist regime in North Korea tends to saber rattle, consistently threatening its democratic sibling. The North Korean regime has closely aligned itself with Beijing, and South Korea has aligned itself with Washington. This leaves the Koreas caught between what could be a much larger struggle, but also puts both of them in a unique position. If hostilities restarted on the Korean peninsula, it would mean an American-Chinese War, but one more likely to be fought by proxy, at least on the Chinese side. Any Korean conflict would involve American troops, just due to the sheer number of them stationed there, but the Chinese may be hesitant to commit troops if it won't serve their interests. Having North Korea as a buffer is valuable, but with the advancement of modern military technologies, it doesn't matter quite as much. But that hasn't prevented China from trying to disrupt South Korea and its relationship with the US (Pak 2020). South Korea holds a lot of strategic value for the United States and is a proven and reliable ally, which could prove essential in any conflict.

Conclusions

The PRC and the US have only recently become focused on a conflict between powers, which has dramatically shifted the trajectory of their military doctrine and their grand strategy in the region. Both have highly modernized and incredibly lethal fighting forces, which are preparing specifically for a future conflict. The United States has shifted its training away from focus on small unit action against terrorist organizations towards a large war with a near-peer adversary. This is a relatively recent development, but the US's focus on its joint force cohesiveness and the

ability to react quickly has helped it, but there is still the question of will it be enough in time. There are still shortcomings in certain new technologies, like the F-35, coupled with an aging American naval fleet. New ships and planes may not be able to be produced quickly enough to support a full-scale conflict, even with drastic measures that would be put in place domestically to help the war. At the same time China also shared similar supply chain issues, but less is known about them. Additionally, China has the advantage of fighting in and near its territory which gives it a lot more security and puts American troops more at risk.

On a much broader scale, it is apparent that any real conflict between the United States and the PRC would be devastating, a shooting war that has the potential to involve billions of lives, and dozens of countries. A war of this magnitude would completely reshape the world order, something that the United States and China may or may not be after. This war may not be inevitable, but it is worth considering that a military buildup may be changing that. The more that the PLA and the US military focus on each other, the less they'll be able to avoid each other. With both sides ready to pull the trigger it might not take a lot for a full-blown conflict to erupt, and it's not clear where or when that may happen. Domestic factors have the huge potential to influence the willingness of each country to go to war. For the United States, potential political disunity and turmoil could easily be exploited by the Chinese, allow them to invade Taiwan with impunity. Alternatively, a sluggish Chinese economy could lead to a nation more willing to take riskier moves, in hopes of distracting its citizens from internal problems.

One of the main shortcomings in this paper is its lack of information on the importance of each nation's allies. While there is no NATO in the region, there are a lot of individual treaties, as well as nations with long and complicated histories. This diplomatic side of the equation would be important, considering that many would be unable to escape a broader conflict. The United States has a lot of vulnerability with its overseas bases, since most of them are hosted by another country. The host countries can also decide that they don't want to house an American base for fear of being involved, which would in turn make the region less accessible to American forces. This type of

area denial may seem implausible but it's something worth considering when assessing the capabilities of American forces in the region. For China, it's unclear how its allies, Russia and North Korea could factor into a larger conflict, whether that would be through material means or with actual troops. Currently due to the war in Ukraine, Russia can't spare much, but North Korea has the potential to devastate and distract, which could help China. Additionally, the sway that PRC has over nations involved with the Belt and Road Initiative is unknown, but China has used this initiative as a way to build infrastructure that it could utilize. Plus, the financial pressure that China could apply would make it hard for these countries to go against China, whether with their military or even just through the application of sanctions.

Another struggle when assessing a country and its military doctrine is always the issue of operational security. When it comes to grand strategy specifically it's an interesting balance. You want to make clear to your opponents what you're willing to do, and showcase what you have, but you can't reveal everything, otherwise they'll be prepared for what you have. The reality of researching a topic like this is that there are going to be a lot of gaps in knowledge. It is possible to piece these things together and figure out the general tactics and considerations. But without full access, and a high enough security clearance, it isn't possible to fully understand the true capabilities of these powers. The last thing that this paper doesn't discuss is the implication of the usage of nuclear weapons. That is something unprecedented in modern conflicts, so there is not much to go off of. Both countries reserve the right to defend themselves if attacked, but what retaliation may look like is unclear. For example, the sinking of an American carrier argued as a basis for a nuclear strike, but that isn't known, once again a problem when it comes to study a topic so obscured by ambiguity and lack of precedent.

A war with China is a very possible reality; it could be a year away or maybe 10 years away. Hopefully, it never happens. It is not clear what may happen, but what is obvious is that both the United States and China have the ability to fight a largescale conflict, wherever that ends up. There are plenty of reasons why this conflict may happen, but the how is what will matter in the

end. The true test of each country and its armed forces will be on the seas, in the air, and on the islands of the South China Sea. There are lot more questions than answers when it comes to the actual application of military forces. The logistical challenge of sustaining a true modern war is an issue worth researching further. A lot of military hardware is so complicated it raises questions of sustainment and the ability for the supply chains to support a wartime economy. It is important to understand what this war would look like because it may convince each nation to try everything and anything before coming to a conflict. No one really wins in this scenario, but these nations will prepare nevertheless, ready to fight when its time.

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Naval Encirclement: Maintaining Strategic Dominance in Melanesia. By Ivan D. Teter

Should the US seek to maintain its strategic upper hand in the Pacific, the question of how best to sway the Solomon Islands enters the forefront. How can the US convince the Solomon Islands that our partnership is more valuable than partnership with the Chinese?

It is no secret that the United States has made significant efforts to establish alliances across the Pacific meant to contain any Chinese desires for expansion. Our relationship with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand creates a chain of friendly and allied countries preventing Chinese expansion into the Pacific. Despite this strong alliance bloc, our allies are still at great risk of being cut off during wartime should enough Pacific Island nations fall under Chinese influence.

Of particular note are the Solomon Islands, whose waters stand directly between the United States and our allies in Australia. It is vital that this corridor remains open to US Navy vessels. China is keenly aware of this, already leveraging their economic might to influence the politics of Solomon Islanders and other islands in the Pacific in hopes of building their own shield against US reinforcements. Bribes and investments in the region have gradually brought the Solomon Islands closer to the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Cavanaugh, 2019a; Doherty, 2023). As a result, the position of the Solomon Islands has shifted significantly since 2019, abandoning their recognition of Taiwan in favor of the PRC, to whom they have granted increasing influence (Cavanaugh, 2019b). To maintain its Pacific shield, the US must sway the Solomon Islands away from China's temptation and reinforce cooperation between our democracies.

Geopolitical Context

To understand which options are available to the US in managing relations with the Solomon Islands, it is important to understand the situation between the four core players in the region: the US, China, Australia, and the Solomon Islands themselves. The Solomon Islands are a young country, only granted independence from the government of the United Kingdom in 1978, though they still remain under the British crown (Solomon Islands Act, 1978). As an English-speaking democratic constitutional monarchy in the British Commonwealth, the colonial legacy is readily apparent, and they maintain ties to other colonies such as Papua New Guinea, Australia, and New Zealand.

When considering the future of US-Solomon relations, the US Indo-Pacific strategy serves as the dominant guiding framework for the region. The White House National Security Council (2022) outlines five goals in the Indo-Pacific: encouraging freedom and sovereignty, reinforcing regional leadership organizations, building high-tech economic networks, establishing security partnerships, and guarding against emerging century threats like global warming and pandemics. Of particular note for the Solomon Islands specifically is the Council's support for "good governance," including improvements in fiscal transparency preventing corrupt influence campaigns such as the one undertaken by the PRC (Cavanough, 2019a; Doherty, 2023). While noble, these goals are ambitious and restrictive for US strategy, enabling China to offer more to the Solomon Islands with fewer strings attached.

Expanding on the limitations faced by the US in the region, Sora (2022) notes that, despite the National Security Council's (2022) claim that they aim to be an "indispensable partner to Pacific Island nations," thus far they only established six embassies in the region. He argues that the US strategy aims to avoid direct competition with China to follow the wishes of

the Pacific Island nations' governments, competing for influence without introducing exclusivity as Pacific Island nations leverage their sovereignty against foreign domination. If the US can partner effectively with Australian connections and investments, Sora (2022) indicates that we should be able to retain influence, especially as popular support in states like the Solomon Islands continues to lean pro-US even when governments turn the other way.

Of particular note for the Solomon Islands is their security agreement with China. Signed in early 2022, this agreement granted China two very threatening concessions: troop stationing rights near vital shipping and communication lanes and Chinese involvement in law enforcement in the Solomon Islands, according to Hammond (2023). Hammond puts additional importance on the Chinese sway in the Solomon Islands, indicating that the Bougainville secession movement in Papua New Guinea would open the region to even greater Chinese influence. While our Pacific strategy under Biden has seen a substantial increase in regional investments negotiated during the US-Pacific Island Country Summit, he claims that we have not yet seen notable returns from this venture.

As China's Belt and Road Initiative includes the region, this investment vector plays a role in the region's political dynamic as well. Zhang's (2023) analysis of China-Pacific trade and the BRI finds that though trade continues to grow in volume, "it is unlikely that the Pacific Islands will become a major trading partner of China" (p. 84) and that "economic interest is not China's major motive behind its Pacific diplomacy" (p. 84). At the same time, Zhang indicates that perception among Pacific Islanders is a weak point for Chinese companies and the country as a whole, with tensions rising for numerous reasons, including environmental degradation and labor management. Of particular note is the role of internal competition between Chinese companies in providing bids more favorable than any Australian or New Zealand companies can

match, and the concern that China will leverage their existing and future initiatives to erode support for Taiwan in the region. Fraenkel and Smith (2022) indicate that in the Solomon Islands specifically, Chinese companies are particularly weak, facing difficulties establishing dominance in sectors like logging and mining. Where they do maintain influence, Fraenkel and Smith indicate that they openly admit to serving as strategic arms of the CCP, as in the case of the China Sam Enterprise Group notable for their attempt to lease Tulagi island.

Fraenkel and Smith (2022) argue that the true threat of the Solomon-China security deal is a shift in how the Solomon Islands respond to domestic pressures rather than the potential of a Chinese naval base. They suggest that Manasseh Sogavare, then the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, relied on authoritarian methods for maintaining his power and influence in the country. This, in combination with slums populated by impoverished and agitated youths in the capital, has resulted in frequent riots during political transition periods (Fraenkel and Smith, 2022). Chinese security forces are not restricted by the same ethical constraints as Australian and New Zealand's offerings, and the failure of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) to reform the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIP) or their operating environment risks China reinforcing their authoritarian administration by force.

Tom Long's *A Small State's Guide to Influence in World Politics*, as applied by Wibawa et al. (2024), considers three avenues of power for the Solomon Islands. The first in their analysis is particular-intrinsic power, which consists of resources inherent to the state such as valuable materials or, more importantly in the case of the Solomon Islands, strategic territory. This, in combination with derivative power, or the ability to achieve one's interests by maintaining "a special relationship with great powers" (Wibawa et al., 2024, p. 44), has given the Solomon Islands ample reason to commit fully to their relationship with China in an attempt to

balance US and Australian hegemony in the region. Wibawa et al. claim that collective power, the Solomon Islands' previous primary method of interest pursuit, risks limiting the freedom of the Solomon Islands more than alignment with China. In fact, they go as far as to say that, as China's only strategic partner in the region, the Solomon Islands have gained substantial power over Chinese policy. This sets alarming precedent and threatens a shift in strategy among other islands in the region towards balancing against the US, masked by rhetoric of neutrality.

Finally, Australia, historically charged with maintaining Western influence and international law in the region, has been an inconsistent partner more broadly as well. Wallis (2020) critiques Australia's failures with strategic objectives in the Pacific, such as promoting democracy, as domestic political priorities have encouraged them to abandon long-term strategic objectives, at the same time reiterating the Pacific Islanders' resistance to hegemony. Wibawa et al. (2024) also identify Australian failures in the security sphere, primarily their inability to protect Chinese Solomon Islanders during riots in 2021 through RAMSI.

Policy Proposal

With geopolitical foundations laid, next comes the question of how to address the situation. There are three apparent avenues of attack: institutional, economic, and public opinion. The National Security Council (2022) has a vision for the avenue of institution; it limits the US's ability to out-bribe China by requiring adherence to "good governance," but as far as public opinion strategies, no guidance is provided.

China's approval in the Solomon Islands is top-down, failing to reach street level. This grants the US an opportunity to leverage public sentiment against China in the pursuit of its policy goals. The Solomon Islands, while it may be facing authoritarian pressure from China's

support for Sogavare, remains a democracy, so building a wide base of public support for the US as an advocate for the people may allow for the island to be returned to our sphere of influence.

This authoritarian expansion directly impacts the US's ability to engage in outreach in the Solomon Islands as well. Wickham (2022), writing for the Guardian, found that the Sogavare government was reducing the freedom of the press, especially in the case of the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC), and especially when relating to China and their presence in the Pacific. Australia cutting the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's funding for Pacific television broadcasting and their entire shortwave radio presence further weakens Western support for a free and open press, which may amplify pro-Western views.

An alternative to the press is social media, a growing method for reaching out to mass audiences directly for numerous influencers around the world. The Solomon Islands are a growing user of social media, predominantly Facebook according to Kemp (2024), the website having 32.1% of the eligible (over age 13) population as users of the site as of January 2024 and seeing a staggering growth of 29.9% over the prior year. This is even more impressive when considering the country's 45% internet penetration rate, with Facebook representing a significant influence over the parts of the country that have an internet connection. This is the most accessible vector for influencing mass opinion by far, especially considering the growing body of understanding of digital influence campaigns.

Edward Bernays's (1928) seminal work on public opinion highlights a widely cited framework of leveraging thought leaders in the sway of public opinion. By determining who is looked up to in a culture or subculture and reaching out to have them uphold the desired opinion, significant progress in shaping broader public opinion can be achieved. As these figures may not be politicians, the US may even be able to avoid a bidding war for support. Friendly influencers

may already exist, only requiring funding to extend their reach to exacerbate the Solomon Islander-Chinese divide.

Consider the case levied against Tenet Media by the US Department of Justice, in which influencers such as Tim Pool were funded by the Russian state to spread Russian government messaging without the knowledge of viewers (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 2024; Passantino & Lyngaas, 2024). These videos received millions of views; these popular figures of the right were promoted and supported in exchange for their influence over vital interest groups. These influencers shared their messages with other influencers, such as Ben Shapiro, further increasing the virality of Russian messaging in targeted communities.

When applied to social media, tools for leveraging influencer power over public opinion grow much more complex. Arce-García, Said-Hung, and Mottareale (2022) found that the Spanish response to COVID-19 was influenced by a so-called “troll farm,” an organized group of social media users acting to spread disinformation, in the Philippines. They relied on a “Thunderclap” strategy, which uses a combination of “alpha” accounts who post disinformation and “beta” accounts who link the “alphas” with influencers in small communities through interaction (Arce-García, Said-Hung, & Mottareale, 2022). This exposed influencers to the alphas’ messaging while promoting alphas into influencers in these communities in their own right. Considering the noted success of these tactics in spreading messages and, importantly, calls to action, it would only take minor collaboration with Solomon influencers to achieve the desired effect should targeting be effective.

This strategy was apparently inspired by defunct crowdspeaking platform Thunderclap, which relied on a similar strategy to push a cause to virality. Unlike the example in Spain, the alphas existed not on the target social media site, but instead on Thunderclap itself, creating a

campaign which betas would join to prepare a wave of support from hundreds of unrelated accounts (*Goodbye, Thunderclap: How Social Media Storms Closed the Popular Crowdspeaking Platform*, 2022). Thunderclap campaigns are not new to the US government either; the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have both leveraged the service to spread awareness of programs and events (Lemon, 2014). While the platform itself no longer exists, the method remains functional.

Social media influence is no paper tiger. A cornerstone example of this is the Arab Spring, in an analysis of which Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) found social media's impact on political protest to be "the impact that wind has on fire" (p. 120). They provided the caveat that this only applied in cases where both social media penetration and motivation for unrest were sufficient, but this is already the case in the Solomon Islands (Fraenkel and Smith, 2022; Kemp, 2024; Sora, 2022). This especially applies to sensationalized and emotional content, which, according to Banyongen (2024), are able to spread widely through targeted communities. Further, Banyongen (2024) found that successful stories may divert attention away from other issues by shaping the narrative, providing the US with the ability to bury rumors of negative American influence with more sensational cases of Chinese influence on the islands.

A digital influence campaign would not start from scratch either, as a large portion of the Solomon Islands' populace remains pro-US, despite governmental shifts towards China (Sora, 2022). Under the correct economic conditions, namely economic downturn, heightened political and social dissatisfaction with Chinese influence in the Solomon Islands could be galvanized into an anti-Chinese movement, which would force a reversal of Solomonic alignment (Bianchi, Hall, & Lee, 2018).

This strategy would require minimal innovation on behalf of American social media strategists. Russia, master of disinformation since the Cold War, has established a playbook which US operations can draw from as needed to achieve policy goals (Avramov, 2018). With only minimal modifications for sensationalism, numerous theories of Chinese conspiracy could be boosted to more widespread prominence, proliferating stories of direct Chinese intervention in and exploitation of the Solomon Islands to friendly and undecided audiences alike.

There are a number of specific issues which can be targeted as well. In 2021, Solomon Islanders from Malaita province traveled to the capital to protest Chinese influence over politicians, foreign ownership of prime land, and government preference towards logging interests which China has notable influence over (*Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare Survives Vote of No Confidence*, 2021). Considering the protesters' violence towards Honiara's Chinatown, these issues run deep and are ethnic in nature. By feeding into the existing narrative, the US could leverage existing movements in their favor.

While these measures may be considered dirty when discussed openly, especially thanks to their association with authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China, Iran, and others, Americans may not disavow such covert measures. Public backlash against operations such as Iran-Contra comes to mind; however, Myrick (2020) finds that covert actions are popular to the American public when they are successful, despite broad evidence of a preference for transparency. While Myrick's (2020) study finds that even boots on the ground may be popular in a similar case to that of the Solomon Islands, a covert public opinion campaign would be a far less risky alternative for garnering the support and outrage of the public in the Solomon Islands. After all, there are legitimate examples of conspiracy to draw from, including politicians (Cavanaugh,

2019a, 2019b; Doherty, 2023) and local news media (Piringi, 2023) alike, which could be used to leverage trust away from local governing bodies and towards direct American involvement.

In summary, the US has access to a robust tool for influencing public opinion in the form of a Facebook Thunderclap-style campaign. This tool is strengthened significantly by the existing pro-US sentiments and legitimate conspiracy between China and the Solomon Islands' institutions, offering influencers, ground support, and pre-packaged opinion campaigns for the cause. A time of economic weakness would be the perfect time to push this agenda, leveraging public distrust for Chinese presence on the island to encourage public unrest and/or backlash against the Sogavare (or now Manele, who is similarly China-aligned) regime at the ballot box. This would need to be executed within a short enough time frame that further authoritarian measures cannot prevent the maneuver. If successful, Americans would support the operation despite its deceitful nature.

Conclusion

By highlighting the drawbacks of Chinese influence in the Solomon Islands—particularly its authoritarian tendencies and exploitative economic practices—the US can position itself as a genuine ally to the Solomon Islander people. By focusing on stories of Chinese abuses, from corruption to violations of labor and pollution laws, and even highlighting cultural differences, and by partnering with local influencers and thought leaders, the US could build a compelling counter-narrative to China's grip on local media, fostering public support for an alliance rooted in shared democratic values. This approach will only become more powerful as internet access expands, while the costs of missing this opportunity will increase as China deepens its influence in the region, especially if China attempts to dominate social media conversation as well as print media.

For this strategy to succeed, substantial research on the ground is essential. Attempting to build grassroots support without in-depth, intersectional, and local understanding risks failure, especially among more media-literate social media users. In fact, poorly targeted efforts could even backfire and attract scrutiny, as was seen in the case of a Texas Nationalist Movement member who used the Russia-specific term “warm water port” to justify Texan secession, drawing unintended attention from X (formerly Twitter) users and even a former congressman (Higham, 2024). Avoiding such missteps is critical for American operations. If successful, however, this strategy could yield considerable benefits, securing the Pacific once again.

In this age of information warfare, US strategic dominance in Melanesia hinges not only on financial investments and military presence but also on the ability to shape narratives effectively. While traditional diplomatic channels remain valuable, indirect persuasion campaigns through social media are an underutilized tool, one which our enemies . By leveraging local thought leaders and influencers, the US can advance its national security interests and reinforce democratic principles globally—strengthening both our alliances and our influence.

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