

EAST ASIAN
STRATEGIC
CONTEXT IN
2026: SOME
THOUGHTS

- CYNTHIA WATSON, PHD
- PROVOST EMERITA, NDU
- 12 MAY 2026
- CAPSTONE SPOUSES

- POTUS's strategy based on unpredictability
- Strategic context—the players
- Challenges for strategy in Asia
- Tools of statecraft
- Indo-Asia-Pacific within U.S. strategic priorities
- Questions for consideration?

DISCUSSION

U.S. POLICY AS OF EARLY 2026: UNCLEAR PRIORITIES?

- “We want to halt and reverse the ongoing damage that foreign actors inflict on the American economy while keeping the Indo-Pacific free and open, preserving freedom of navigation in all crucial sea lanes, and maintaining secure and reliable supply chains and access to critical materials”
- *National Security Strategy of the United States, 2025*, page 5 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

UNDER SECRETARY OF WAR ELBRIDGE COLBY IN SEOUL, JANUARY 2026

- “...Trump has been clear that we can and should strive for a stable, peaceful relationship with China that protects the interests of the United States and our allies. The United States under President Trump's wise leadership does not seek to dominate China, nor do we seek to strangle or humiliate it. ..What we seek—and what the President has consistently articulated—is a genuinely stable equilibrium that works for Americans as well as for our allies: a favorable balance of power in which no state can impose its hegemony... We are not seeking a hostile relationship with Beijing. We are seeking a stable one: a decent peace.”
- Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the Sejong Institute in South Korea
<https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4389207/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-sejong-instil>

STRATEGIC CONTEXT--THE PLAYERS

- Reassertive Japan under Takaichi affects all of region
- Xi demands 'respect' while recognizing internal limits
- Where does Taiwan fit into this? Unclearly at present
- The Korean peninsula still volatile
- Southeast Asia—increasingly hueing towards Beijing
- India under ultra-nationalist Modi on its only path
- Australia unquestionably U.S. strongest partner but nervously
- Russia an adjunct to China and DPRK
- Canada and United Kingdom receding into background

Asia



- *Japan under Takaichi Sanae purues traditional role as a center as US commitments appear in doubt*
- China, unhappy about Japan, but also seen as
 - Trade dominant *which is indisputable especially b/c of tariffs*
 - Increasing global role and regional bully with deep disputes
 - Selective about keeping any commitments: Hong Kong, UNCLOS
 - *But Xi has worries at home*
- Taiwan increasingly isolated, though Tokyo may play if conflict
- The DRPK remains a substantial, growing threat w/ opaque rule & nukes. Special relationship with POTUS is dead
- Democracy waivers in RoK, Thailand, Myanmar, elsewhere?
- Press freedoms, travel, human rights imperiled
- U.S. alliances under major stress due to \$\$, tariffs, respect
- Expanding Asia to include India futile or likely aspiration?

CHALLENGES FOR STRATEGY IN ASIA

- China using any and all instruments of national statecraft
 - Trade dominance: RCEP and BRI for starters
 - 'Filling the jar': vaccines, aid, infrastructure, diplomacy, tourism and more
 - Military modernization only one of many instruments deployed
- U.S. tools seem tariffs and Indo-Pacom—sufficient?
- Chinese-modeled organizations *en lieu of multilateralism*
- Tokyo talks arms sales and aid
- Asian nations pursuing links with far flung players
- Will AUKUS survive costs or AmFirst?
- Demands from allies: Japan and South Korea *are* stepping up but defending Taiwan? Historic animosities pervade region
- Modi's aims so muddled as to confuse which tools he brings
- INCOHERENCE on U.S. priorities, instruments, and actions

TOOLS OF STATECRAFT

- Will Trump make a deal with Xi? What kind?
- North Korea as a wild card
- Will India be important *within* Indo-Pacom or remain an adjunct to Pakistan issues? An end or a mean?
- Global center of economic gravity moving to Asia but what about Europe? Can we counter the Belt & Road aid? Is AmFirst encouraging Europe to reconsider China?
- Should we increase military spending, already overwhelming versus everyone else, or worry about our huge budget deficit?
- Revised bottom line: Western Hemisphere our *stated* top priority yet some demand response to any Chinese actions—what is our primary objective? Are we willing to abandon everything else for China?

INDO-PACIFIC WITHIN US NATIONAL PRIORITIES

- The Chinese model no longer as appealing so...?
- How will tariffs/trade affect our role in region?
- Are we really willing to abandon everything to oppose China?
- Does diplomacy matter in Asia?
- Are the alliances sustainable under new leadership or are we willing to forego them for our needs?
- Is Asia evolving into something new or are we returning to Asia with China as the biggest player?
- What happens if China stumbles?
- Is this Xi or is this China?

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Asia

