

The Trump Presidency, the Coronavirus, and the New America : Can the U.S. Military Still Preserve the Status Quo in East Asia?

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トランプ政権、新型コロナウイルスと新しいアメリカ合衆国
——アメリカ軍は東アジアの現状を維持することができるか——

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Abstract :

This paper examines the effects of the Trump presidency and COVID-19 on America's role in East Asia. As this paper demonstrates, President Trump's blunt demand that allies pay their "fair share" for U.S. military protection may lead to doubts internationally regarding the strength of U.S. commitments to security agreements, and the domestic backlash against his presidency has swelled to become a full-fledged social and racial justice transformative movement that may affect U.S. foreign policy. While the Trump presidency has thusly cracked open a domestic and foreign policy pandora's box, COVID-19 has blown the lid right off of this proverbial pandora's box, as this paper further demonstrates, by burdening the U.S. federal government with the largest budget deficit since World War II and by intensifying existing social divisions, which has exposed just how vulnerable America can be in a national emergency. These developments may lead to the perception that America lacks the political wherewithal and material capacity to realistically risk getting entangled in a military conflict in East Asia, and this impression may undermine the U.S. military's role in the region as an effective deterrent against attempts to alter the status quo by force.

要旨：本稿は、東アジアにおけるアメリカ合衆国の役割に対するトランプ政権と新型コロナウイルスの影響を分析した。トランプ大統領が同盟国に対して率直に「相応な」駐留経費の負担を要求したことで、国際社会は米国が安全保障体制にどの程度責任を持つのか疑念を抱くかもしれない。また、トランプ政権に対する国内の反発は、社会的正義と人種間の平等を求める変革運動へと拡大した。トランプ政権は外交と国内政策のパンドラの箱を開けたが、新型コロナウイルスはその状況をさらに混乱へと向かわせた。米連邦政府は第二次世界大戦以来、最大の財政赤字を抱え込んだうえ、既存の社会的分断がより一層拡大したことにより、国家の非常事態における米国の脆弱性を露わにした。このような進展は、米国は東アジアにおける軍事紛争に巻き込まれるリスクを背負うだけの政治的手段や物質的能力を持たないという見方につながる可能性があり、この認識こそが、武力で現状を変えようとする試みに対する効果的な軍事抑止力としての東アジアにおける米軍の役割を弱体化させるだろう。

Key words : International Relations, Security Studies, U.S. Politics

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I. Introduction

The San Francisco System, based on the Treaty of San Francisco signed by Japan and the allied powers at the San Francisco Conference in 1951, played a vital role in supporting economic development in East Asia following the end of the Second World War. This system has also been colloquially called the hub-and-spokes system on account of the U.S. serving as the hub, and attached to this hub are spokes in the form of bilateral security treaties with several regional powers, including Japan, the Philippines, Australia, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Thailand, and the Republic of China (Taiwan) until 1979, after which time the United States adopted a policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan. This hub-and-spokes system, coupled with various other strategic partnerships in the form of security agreements and defense relationships, helped America's allies in East Asia limit their defense expenditures and helped avert costly arms races, and thereby allowed countries in the region to focus on economic development. Although diplomatic relations have expanded considerably over the decades following the establishment of the San Francisco System, especially with the formation of multilateral arrangements like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the network of U.S. military alliances and security agreements continues to function as the cornerstone of East Asian regional security.

The September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and the subsequent Global War on Terror that led the United States to focus on the Middle East, contributed to a weakening of America's dominant position in East Asia. Most notably, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006, and the People's Republic of China (China) underwent rapid gains in military strength and capabilities. President Barack Obama sought to re-affirm the U.S. position in the region when he took office by announcing that his administration was pivoting America's foreign policy focus to the Asia Pacific. One of the most notable pieces of this pivot was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which included twelve countries that entered into a trade agreement that was designed to reduce their economic dependence on China. When Hillary Clinton ran for president in 2016 and enjoyed a comfortable lead in the polls throughout most of the campaign against her Republican opponent, Donald Trump, it seemed certain that Obama's former Secretary of State would prevail and oversee what would have largely been a continuation of his foreign policy agenda. Polls had narrowed by election day, however, and Trump pulled off one of the most stunning electoral victories in U.S. presidential history—and his administration's foreign policy agenda quickly proved to be a radical departure from his predecessor's approach.

Whereas presidential transitions from one party to another following an election previously resulted in relatively moderate shifts that still largely lay within a centrist ideological framework, the Trump administration immediately challenged the protocols, decorum, and established principles of governance that have guided past administrations, regardless of party affiliation, and in so doing cracked open a foreign and domestic policy Pandora's box that is ushering in a transformative period in American history. In the realm of foreign policy, President Trump has criticized America's vast system of alliances, bluntly demanding that allies pay their fair share for U.S. military protection, which may leave a lasting impact on the way allies and adversaries alike view the strength of the U.S. commitment to security agreements. Domestically, the backlash against the

Trump presidency has been intense and persistent, and it all came to a head in 2020 when protests surged across the country following the death of George Floyd. Unlike past incidents of protests and civil unrest, this wave of widespread social unrest appears to be a movement that will have a transformative impact on a wide range of American institutions and policies, which could include foreign policy.

While it is the Trump presidency that appears to have cracked open this domestic and diplomatic Pandora's box, the rampant spread of SARS-CoV-2 in the United States has blown the lid right off of this proverbial Pandora's box. This new coronavirus has compounded the two previously mentioned challenges by having a disastrous impact on the U.S. economy and triggering the largest federal government budget deficit since World War II. Furthermore, the national response to this pandemic has also revealed how America's highly politicized atmosphere makes it extraordinarily difficult for the government to formulate an effective coordinated response to a national emergency. All three of these factors taken together, as this paper will ultimately show, may lead America's chief adversaries to call into question whether or not the United States possesses the political wherewithal and material capacity to follow through on security agreements in East Asia. This perception of vulnerability, whether accurate or not, may thereby undermine the U.S. military's role in the region as a genuine military deterrent to any attempts to alter the status quo by force.

II. President Trump's Intense Focus on Allies Paying "Their Fair Share"

President Trump proceeded to enact his "America First" foreign policy vision right from the outset of his presidency. "From this moment on, it's going to be America First," he declared in his inaugural address, adding that "every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and their families."¹) Sometimes dubbed the Trump Doctrine, foreign policy under President Trump has been a repudiation of grand strategies based on the principles of liberal hegemony that have guided post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy.²) In his quest to put "America First," Trump's foreign policy has at times been erratic, with regard to both allies and adversaries alike. While Trump's impact on U.S. foreign policy touches on a wide array of topics, this section will focus on one in particular: the depth of President's Trump animosity toward allies on the issue of appropriate payment for U.S. military protection.

North Korea serves as perhaps the most high-profile example of Trump's dealings with U.S. adversaries. President Trump responded to North Korean threats against the United States in 2017 by publicly warning: "North Korea best not make more threats to the United States ... they will be met with fire, fury, and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before."³) Trump clearly eschewed diplomatic protocol by employing such menacing language, but soon afterward, however, he participated in a series of face-to-face meetings with North Korea's leader that were held on ostensibly friendly terms. In Singapore, in 2018, he met with the North Korean leader and held amicable talks, which led to some optimism that this summit might mark the beginning of negotiations to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. In 2019, in Vietnam, Trump met once again with North Korea's leader for another round of talks. Though President Trump abruptly ended the summit and immediately returned to the United States when it became clear that an agreement on the removal of sanctions could not be reached, he noted that "this wasn't a walk away

like you get up and walk out ... this was very friendly ... we shook hands ... when we walked away, it was a very friendly walk.”⁴⁾ Trump then met with North Korea’s leader yet again in 2019, this time in the Korean peninsula’s demilitarized zone. This meeting was brief, but clearly had a positive tone, and it also led to a historic moment when Trump became the first sitting U.S. president to set foot in North Korea.⁵⁾ Whether or not these overtures will ultimately lead to progress on denuclearizing the Korean peninsula remains to be seen, but what is noteworthy here is the way that Trump so eagerly pursued amicable diplomatic relations with an American adversary, one that had recently made open threats against the United States.

With regard to allies, Germany may represent the best example of President Trump at times seemingly refusing to pursue amicable diplomatic relations, and instead persisting with a more antagonistic approach. He has repeatedly criticized U.S. allies in general for not paying “their fair share,” with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) being the primary target of his criticisms, and Europe’s largest economic power in particular seemingly drawing most of his ire. In his first in-person meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Trump stated at the start of their news conference that he strongly supports NATO, but then bluntly added that “many nations owe vast sums of money from past years, and it is very unfair to the United States—these nations must pay what they owe.”⁶⁾ At the heart of this issue is the 2014 Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond, which committed each NATO member state to increase its own national defense budget to 2% of GDP within a decade. Germany has declared that it will not be able to meet this obligation, and will instead aim for 2031 to achieve this goal.⁷⁾ However, likely in an effort to appease President Trump, Germany has agreed to increase its share of contributions to NATO’s budget from 14.8% to 16%, while the U.S. has been able to reduce its share of NATO’s budget from 22% to 16%.⁸⁾ This shift, however, is widely viewed as symbolic since it pertains only to NATO’s relatively small annual administrative budget of \$2.5 billion.⁹⁾ Trump has therefore remained steadfast in his quest to get Germany to pay more for defense, and so he ultimately decided in 2020 to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Germany from 36,000 to 24,000. Trump made it clear that this decision was in response to Germany’s failure to pay more for defense, stating that the U.S. is “reducing the force because they’re not paying bills ... if they start paying bills, I would rethink.”¹⁰⁾

Clearly the issue of allies paying their fair share is so important to President Trump that he has been willing to strain ties with a key U.S. ally, while he has been so determined to pursue peaceful relations with North Korea that he was willing to overlook its blunt threats against the United States. This issue of allies paying their fair share according to Trump’s valuation is especially worrisome for Japan and South Korea, given the critical role U.S. bases play in each country’s national security strategy. Trump had already set the stage for questioning the costs of bases in East Asia during the 2016 presidential campaign, when he suggested that it might be beneficial for Japan and South Korea to build their own nuclear weapons.¹¹⁾ As president, according to former National Security Advisor John Bolton, Trump wanted to get Japan and South Korea to pay more for U.S. bases, and he was willing to threaten a U.S. withdrawal in order to pressure each country to pay more. As Bolton quotes the President : “that puts you in a very strong bargaining position.”¹²⁾ With regard to Japan specifically, President Trump was seeking to have the country increase its payment from \$2.5 billion to \$8 billion annually, though Bolton notes that “only Trump knew what payment

would satisfy him, so there was no point trying to guess what the ‘real’ number was.”¹³⁾

The reality is that burden-sharing agreements have been points of contention long before President Trump took office. This issue came up during his predecessor’s first term in office, for instance, when Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta pressed NATO allies in 2011 to increase their defense contributions, warning that failing to do so could result in a “hollowing out” of the NATO alliance.¹⁴⁾ However, the way that President Trump has further elevated this issue by persistently and bluntly criticizing U.S. for allies not paying “their fair share” for defense, and the way that questions about the value of U.S. military protection came to the forefront during the early stages of his presidency, will likely heighten the standing of burden-sharing agreements with Japan, South Korea, and NATO countries as political issues. In the case of European national defense spending, for example, a Pew Research Center poll shows that 45% of Americans in 2017 believed that Europeans should spend more on their national defense.¹⁵⁾ Although that percentage had dropped to 35% in 2019,¹⁶⁾ the massive federal government budget deficits in response to COVID-19, as will be discussed in Section III, could well end up leading public opinion to swing back toward the view that allies should spend more on their own national defense.

III. The Rise of Social Justice in Mainstream America

One of the most prominent racial justice issues in America is law enforcement, especially with regard to instances when police officers are accused of using excessive force against African American civilians. It is a long-standing issue that has provoked outrage on a number of occasions. Up until recently, the videotaped beating of Rodney King, an African American civilian, by a group of White police officers in 1991, and the subsequent week-long riots in Los Angeles, likely represented the most famous instance of public outrage regarding allegations of abuse of power by police officers dealing with members of the African American community. Beginning in 2014, instances of police officers using deadly force while attempting to arrest African Americans have increasingly gained widespread media attention, while at the same time a sustained protest movement has been growing in the United States in the form of Black Lives Matter (BLM). The spark that pushed BLM into the national spotlight was the 2014 fatal shooting of an African American man named Michael Brown by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Protests and even riots broke out in the city and lasted for approximately two weeks, followed by periodic protests in the months that followed.¹⁷⁾

Several additional fatal shootings of African Americans by police officers have continued to push the issue of policing and racial justice into the national conversation. Donald Trump’s candidacy in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, with his focus on law and order and his calls for stricter immigration regulations, seemed to exacerbate existing tensions. Trump’s victory over Clinton triggered wave after wave of protests, not only on the streets, but in the entertainment world, the press, and in the political arena. It was also at this time in 2016 that Colin Kaepernick, an American professional football player, began to sit during pre-game performances of the American national anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner, in response to racial justice issues and policing in the United States. Usually performed live before every major sporting event, professional athletes have customarily stood during performances of the Star-Spangled Banner, and so his refusal to stand for the national anthem sparked controversy. Eventually he shifted from sitting to kneeling

during the national anthem, and a number of his fellow players also began to kneel during the anthem, and some athletes in other sports began to kneel as well. The controversy surrounding the issue of kneeling during the anthem was a concern for professional sports leagues and some team owners, given that the backlash from some fans could hurt ticket sales and television viewership. Following the 2016 season, Kaepernick was not signed to a contract by any team, widely viewed to be due to the controversy his presence on the football field would generate. Despite his absence from professional sports as a player, other players followed his example and continued to kneel during the anthem, thus keeping the controversy alive, with his supporters arguing that it is inappropriate to stand for the anthem when there is racial injustice taking place, and with his detractors arguing that it is disrespectful to the American flag and to the troops who have fought for America's security.

Up until 2020, BLM was an emerging movement, and kneeling for the anthem in professional sports was controversial. This changed dramatically following an incident on May 25, 2020, when an African American man named George Floyd died while being arrested by Minneapolis police officers, and images were released that showed a White police officer restraining Floyd by kneeling on his neck.¹⁸⁾ The outrage was swift, and BLM's influence in America surged, quickly becoming one of the most potent political forces in the United States. Over the following weeks, millions throughout the United States took to the streets in protest, which at times turned violent, and a piece in *The New York Times* in July of 2020 even proclaimed that "Black Lives Matter may be the largest movement in U.S. history."¹⁹⁾ Iconic buildings posted messages, or were lit up, or went dark at various times in response to Floyd's death. Businesses posted messages in support of BLM on their websites, and Democratic senators held a moment of silence to honor Floyd. In the sports world, the controversy regarding individual players kneeling not only abated, but teams and leagues directly supported BLM and player protests. For instance, opening day of Major League Baseball's COVID-19-shortened season featured "BLM" stenciled on the pitcher's mound.²⁰⁾ Another incident shortly afterward that involved a police officer shooting an African American man even resulted in professional baseball, basketball, and hockey leagues cancelling games in protest.

The unrest following the death of George Floyd quickly moved from protests on the streets and symbolic acts in the sports and entertainment world, to real change. Growing calls to "defund the police" actually resulted in some cities significantly cutting police budgets. New York City, for example, cut \$1 billion from the New York Police Department's \$6 billion budget, and the city council has reportedly expressed a desire for even greater cuts to the department's budget.²¹⁾ Calls for change have gone well beyond the issue of race and allegations of abuse of power by police officers, quickly growing to cover a wide array of historical racial justice issues. Statues of historical figures connected to slavery in the United States have been torn down, as well as statues of founding figures in North American history, including Christopher Columbus.²²⁾ Buildings named after American leaders who espoused racist views have been re-named, with Princeton University, for instance, removing U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's name from its school of public policy.²³⁾ While much of this social unrest relates to domestic issues, U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. military may not be immune from the sweeping societal changes taking place in America. For example, calls to rename military bases named after Confederate leaders intensified following Floyd's death. Despite President Trump rejecting these calls and Republicans in the Senate holding a majority, the

Senate approved, with a vote of eighty-six to fourteen,²⁴⁾ a National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2021, which includes provisions to rename ten military bases named after Confederate military leaders.²⁵⁾ This may be just the beginning, for the ongoing domestic unrest in the United States could lead to calls to reduce funding for the military and calls to re-evaluate the role of the American military presence abroad. For instance, the military's role in westward expansion and the displacement of Native Americans, and the impact of its campaigns on foreign civilians during some of America's wars abroad in the past, will all likely face intensifying scrutiny as protests continue to raise racial justice issues from America's past.

These developments should not be seen as short-term, momentary developments that will abate with the end of the Trump presidency. Rather, Trump's ascendance to the presidency has ignited previously existing unresolved issues, and the intensity of the ensuing and escalating social unrest indicates that for large segments of the population, now that these issues have come out into the open, a return to the pre-Trump status quo is unacceptable. Reinforcing this point is the leftward shift in the Democratic Party following the 2018 mid-terms. The Green New Deal, a non-binding resolution proposed by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Democrat, New York) and Senator Ed Markey (Democrat, Massachusetts), is an ambitious proposal that would transform the U.S. government's budget and the U.S. economy in general. Some of its proposals include: "Meeting 100 percent of the power demand in the United States through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources" within ten years, along with numerous others goals ranging from guaranteeing jobs with a "family-sustaining wage" to "providing all people of the United States with ... high-quality health care."²⁶⁾ This was initially seen as the product of the fringe left in the Democratic Party, with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi derisively making reference to it as "the green dream or whatever they call it," and dismissively suggesting that "nobody knows what it is, but they're for it right?"²⁷⁾ Yet, by the time Democrats held debates for the Democratic presidential nomination, virtually all candidates supported the Green New Deal to some extent, at least in principle. The biggest criticism of the Green New Deal is that fiscal reality obviously makes such an ambitious set of goals far too costly to implement. However, the United States has spent approximately \$6.4 trillion on post-9/11 wars, from the end of 2001 to the 2020 fiscal year.²⁸⁾ This figure is based on the \$5.4 trillion in total appropriations for spending on war activities abroad and Department of Homeland Security expenses, and at least \$1 trillion for future expenses to care for veterans from post-9/11 wars. Green New Deal Democrats can thus draw on such information to make the argument that foreign wars and at least some part of the defense budget are misplaced expenses that could otherwise help fund parts of their new vision, and in so doing pull other politicians further left on the issue of defense spending.

IV. The Impact of SARS-CoV-2 on the U.S. Economy and Society

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in early 2020 wreaked havoc on the world, and the impact on the United States has been profound on an economic, political, and societal level. By the middle of September of 2020, the United States had over 6.6 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 195,000 confirmed deaths from the disease, both figures the highest in the world at the time. Even when adjusted for population size, the United States had the eleventh highest death rate in the world in per capita terms with 59.88 deaths per hundred thousand.²⁹⁾ As cases of COVID-19 surged in

March, the United States began to effectively shut down. The impact on the economy was disastrous, as the United States saw a dramatic drop in real gross domestic product (GDP), with real GDP decreasing by 5.0% in the first quarter of 2020, and then decreasing by an estimated 31.7% in the second quarter of 2020.³⁰⁾ Jobless claims skyrocketed as businesses laid off or furloughed employees, necessitating massive government spending. At the end of the 2018 fiscal year, the U.S. federal government budget deficit was just over \$779 billion,³¹⁾ but by the end of July of 2020 the deficit had surged to \$2.8 trillion.³²⁾ Moreover, the U.S. federal government budget deficit for fiscal 2020 is projected by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) to end up being approximately \$3.7 trillion, which at 17.9% of GDP, the CBO notes, would make it the largest U.S. government budget deficit since 1945.³³⁾ The CBO has further projected that the fiscal 2021 federal government budget deficit will be \$2.1 trillion, again significantly higher than average.³⁴⁾ This represents a substantial addition to America's sizeable debt burden, which at the end of July of 2020 reached approximately \$26.5 trillion.³⁵⁾

Compounding this problem is the political and social chaos in the United States throughout Trump's presidency, and the way that it intensified dramatically during this pandemic to the point that critical decisions have been almost immediately politicized. For instance, President Trump issued a proclamation on January 31, 2020, that banned the entry of travellers from China, with the exception of U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and select categories of people who are related to U.S. citizens or U.S. residents.³⁶⁾ While running for the Democratic presidential nomination, Joe Biden posted a tweet shortly after the ban that seemed to suggest that Trump's decision to impose a travel ban on China was the product of "xenophobia" and "hysteria,"³⁷⁾ though he later denied that this tweet was in reference to the China travel ban. The political turmoil during the pandemic has been extensive, with battles largely waged along ideological lines. Democratic politicians have essentially placed all of the blame for the spread of the virus on President Trump, while many Republican lawmakers have heavily criticized what they see as an overzealous use of emergency powers to enact mask mandates and lockdown orders in Democrat-controlled states. Even the basic issue of wearing a mask in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus has been largely politicized.³⁸⁾ President Trump and many Republican lawmakers have eschewed wearing a mask in public, whereas Democratic politicians have appeared in public wearing a mask far more frequently. Even in the general population there appears to be a notable difference along party lines, as demonstrated by a June 2020 Pew Research Center poll, which found that 76% of Democrats or those who lean Democrat wore a mask in stores "all or most of the time," whereas only 53% of Republicans or those who lean Republican answered the same.³⁹⁾

U.S. armed forces have not been immune from the effects of the coronavirus, with the situation of the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt serving as a prime example of the extent that COVID-19 has been able to impact the military. In a leaked letter that was published by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the captain of the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt, Brett Crozier, asked Navy officials for assistance in response to coronavirus infections "accelerating" on the ship.⁴⁰⁾ Crozier's letter, dated March 30, begins confidently: "if required the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT would embark all assigned Sailors, set sail, and be ready to fight and beat any adversary that dares challenge the US or our allies." However, his letter goes on to reveal that "the spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating." His letter then argues that "as war is not imminent, we recommend pursuing the peace

time end state,” and proposes removing most personnel to isolate them while keeping approximately 10% of the crew aboard to maintain the ship. Having over 4,000 personnel remain aboard as the infection was spreading, Crozier’s letter adds, “is an unnecessary risk and breaks faith with those Sailors entrusted to our care.” On April 2, shortly after the leaked letter was published, the captain was relieved of duty. According to the Acting Secretary of the Navy at the time, Thomas Modly, Crozier sent the letter by e-mail over an unsecured network and it was copied to multiple other people.⁴¹⁾

Crozier being relieved of command was immediately politicized, with Democrats criticizing the decision and calling for investigations. Controversy then swelled on April 5 when Modly addressed the ship’s crew in person and disparaged Crozier. “If he didn’t think, in my opinion, that this information wasn’t going to get out to the public, in this day and information age that we live in,” Modly told the crew, “then he was either A too naïve or too stupid to be a commanding officer of a ship like this ... the alternative is that he did this on purpose.”⁴²⁾ These comments drew fierce backlash, and on April 7 Modly resigned.⁴³⁾ Joe Biden, at the time on the verge of becoming the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, stated in an interview a few days after Crozier was relieved of command : “I think it’s close to criminal the way they’re dealing with this guy ... I think the guy should ... have a commendation rather than be fired.”⁴⁴⁾ Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, however, had noted on the previous day that “the Navy has a culture of swiftly and decisively removing captains if they lose confidence in them.”⁴⁵⁾ Then on April 24, it was reported that Adm. Mike Gilday was recommending that Crozier be reinstated as the Roosevelt’s captain.⁴⁶⁾ However, after a lengthy and thorough investigation, Gilday announced that Crozier would not be reinstated to command after all, stating : “had I known then what I know today, I would not have made that recommendation to reinstate Capt. Crozier ... if Capt. Crozier were still in command today, I would be relieving him.”⁴⁷⁾ All told, this incident not only reveals how widespread coronavirus infections in the United States can affect actual military operations, but also how vulnerable military decisions are to the partisan divide and political turmoil gripping the country at the moment.

V. Analysis : The Impact on the U.S. Presence in East Asia

The radical transformation taking place in the United States could prove especially significant for East Asia, where for over half a century, the Korean War and Vietnam War notwithstanding, the U.S. presence in the region has served as a stabilizing force. While multiple areas in East Asia raise security concerns, such as the Korean peninsula, there is perhaps no issue of greater regional importance than China’s growing economic and military power. In terms of military power, a 2020 U.S. Secretary of Defense report highlights how China has already surpassed the United States in several areas, most notably the following three.⁴⁸⁾ First, China has approximately 350 ships in its navy’s battle force, whereas the United States has approximately 293 ships comprising its battle force.⁴⁹⁾ Second, China now has over 1,250 ground-launched ballistic missiles (GLBMs) and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs), which have ranges can that reach 5,500 kilometers, whereas the United States currently has only a single conventional type of GLBM, with a range of up to 300 kilometers. Third, China fields one of the most sizeable forces of advanced long-range surface-to-air systems in the world, which makes up a notable part of its “robust and redundant integrated air

defense system architecture.”⁵⁰⁾ The report also notes that China has anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities that currently stand as “the most robust within the First Island Chain,” and it aims to bolster these capabilities farther into the Pacific Ocean.⁵¹⁾ As such, even though the United States currently demonstrates military superiority in other areas, and fields a more advanced and potent military force overall, the reality is that China continues to close in on U.S. military capabilities by rapidly developing its land, air, naval, and nuclear forces so that the country will have a “world-class” military by 2049.⁵²⁾

With concerns growing that China could potentially use its rapidly developing military force in relation to its territorial claims in the region, the United States has taken proactive measures, most notably in the South China Sea, where China has created new islands and constructed bases, and where China has competing territorial claims with several countries, including Vietnam and the Philippines.⁵³⁾ The United States has, for instance, increased the frequency of its Freedom of Navigation Operations, with nine such operations in 2019 in the South China Sea.⁵⁴⁾ Moreover, in response to a statement in the *Global Times* that China has a wide selection of “aircraft carrier killer” missiles, and that U.S. carriers traversing the area “is at the pleasure of the” People’s Liberation Army,⁵⁵⁾ Defense Secretary Esper stated that “American carriers have been in the South China Sea and the Indo Pacific since World War II, and we will continue to be there, and we’re not going to be stopped by anybody.”⁵⁶⁾

Similarly, there has been growing concern about the future of Taiwan, particularly following the passage of Hong Kong’s new security law, and in light of Chinese warplanes crossing the Taiwan Strait median line in August of 2020 when the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, visited Taiwan, and again in September of 2020 during U.S. Under Secretary of State Keith Krach’s visit to Taiwan.⁵⁷⁾ Though the United States has no formal security alliance with Taiwan, continued arms sales and military exercises in the region bolster the strength of America’s strategic ambivalence approach with regard to Taiwan. For instance, in September of 2020, just as China had warplanes cross the Taiwan Strait median line, the United States engaged in live-fire missile exercises that sank a decommissioned frigate as part of its Valiant Shield exercises, which feature only U.S. military forces and take place every other year. In a particularly forceful statement, Navy Capt. Steven DeMoss stated that “this exercise demonstrates our ability to bring overwhelming fire power from the sea whether that comes from under the surface, on the surface, or from the air,” and added that “we have this capability in every theatre of the globe and can employ these weapons at the place and time of our choosing.”⁵⁸⁾

The United States has also focused on countering China in other ways. It has been expanding its security framework beyond the traditional hub-and-spokes system to include multilateral arrangements, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, Australia, and India, which resumed in 2017.⁵⁹⁾ U.S. agencies are also increasingly shifting toward dealing with China specifically. For example, Defense Secretary Esper stated in 2020 that one of the Department of Defense’s goals is to focus on China, which has resulted in a number of changes, including: a newly created strategy management office that will integrate the Department’s efforts to deter China; the creation of a new policy office that is designed to counter China; and a shift in the National Defense University’s curriculum so that half of coursework focuses on China.⁶⁰⁾ By way of another example, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray stated in a 2020

speech that China's "malign foreign influence" and intellectual property theft represent serious threats to the United States, and added that nearly half of the FBI's 5,000 active counterintelligence cases relate to China, with the FBI "opening a new China-related case about every ten hours."⁶¹⁾

Even though the United States has officially remained steadfast in its commitment to regional security, and still fields the world's preeminent military force, recent events domestically may leave its allies in East Asia with a diminished security partner. The importance of the U.S. military to the East Asia region has not simply been due to its raw power, but due to the perception that its immense power under the command of a resolute political system could be called in to quash any attempt to forcibly undermine the status quo. It is of course difficult to ascertain precisely how much the U.S. military presence in East Asia actually factors into China's decisions on how to proceed with regard to territorial disputes. Maintaining the status quo irrespective of America's military capabilities may be China's preferred option, given the diplomatic and economic fallout that could arise from exercising military force to resolve such issues. On the other hand, if changing the status quo is China's preferred option and it has only avoided doing so due to the U.S. military's dominance in the region, then recent developments in the United States could increase China's willingness to assert its power in the region. In this latter case, the narrowing gap in military capabilities between the United States and China, coupled with the relatively sudden outbreak of widespread social unrest and turmoil from America's current socio-political conditions and struggles with COVID-19, raise the prospect that China could engage in a form of brinkmanship, believing that the United States would not risk getting drawn into a military conflict over matters with no direct ties to U.S. security interests, such as islands in the South China Sea. This perception, then, that the United States might not actually respond militarily to the aforementioned territorial disputes due to an unwillingness or inability to absorb the political and economic costs of armed conflict will obviously make it more difficult for the U.S. military to credibly serve as a deterrent in the region.

A full-scale armed conflict between China and the United States seems highly unlikely, but as what Graham Allison calls "Thucydides's Trap" makes clear, however, war is possible when a rising power threatens to displace an established power.⁶²⁾ This means that even though ongoing and future conflicts between the United States and China will likely center on cyber capabilities, trade relations, and influence in international organizations,⁶³⁾ the reality is that there is always the possibility for miscalculations or mistakes to trigger a military confrontation. For instance, how would China proceed if, despite U.S. shows of force in the region and tough talk by American leaders, it were to interpret the previously discussed challenges that the United States has recently been dealing with as a sign that America is actually neither willing nor able to absorb the costs of fighting in a major conflict in East Asia? Would it embolden China to assert its claims in the South China Sea by attempting to block U.S. carriers from engaging in Freedom of Navigation Operations, or embolden it to turn away U.S. military aircraft conducting patrol operations in China's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea? If the United States were to react militarily in such scenarios, it would mean that the U.S. domestic issues previously discussed precipitated an armed confrontation that could have otherwise been avoided. If the United States were to refuse to respond militarily in these scenarios, then the domestic challenges that America has been dealing with would put it in a situation to have its credibility undermined, and some aspect of the status quo would change in East Asia that might otherwise not have changed.

IV. Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the Trump presidency has seemingly cracked open a foreign and domestic policy pandora's box that is ushering in a transformative period in American history, while the rampant spread of SARS-CoV-2 in the United States has blown the lid of this proverbial pandora's box right off. President Trump's demands with regard to allies may serve American interests in a narrow way insofar as getting allies to contribute more to defense agreements may yield minor fiscal benefits, but in the long run it may lead allies and adversaries alike to question how committed the United States is to existing security agreements. After all, the fact that someone who so vehemently challenged the basic world order that the United States itself largely crafted could become president reinforces just how precarious international security agreements can be, and this injects at least some degree of uncertainty about the reliability of U.S. alliances.

The Trump presidency has also seemingly fostered a socio-political climate that has led to widespread protests and a wave of younger progressive candidates, which are collectively challenging America's centrist political system and effectively rejecting the status quo in U.S. society and politics. While the emergence of a truly new America domestically may well lead to a wide array of social justice benefits and may set the country on a path to resolving some of its entrenched social and racial justice issues, this kind of change represents a shift away from the country's traditionally centrist politics, and thereby creates uncertainty about the future of U.S. foreign policy and by extension the future of the liberal world order under American leadership. The spread of SARS-CoV-2 and the resulting number of COVID-19 diagnoses in the United States has compounded this uncertainty by not only adding a massive fiscal burden that will weigh on the federal government budget for at least the next few years, even if American economy makes a quick recovery, but by also highlighting how America's socio-political environment has become so divided that even when facing a severe crisis the country cannot pull together to generate the kind of unity needed to overcome it quickly and efficiently.

A White House report released in 2020 states: "Guided by a return to principled realism, the United States is responding to the CCP's direct challenge by acknowledging that we are in a strategic competition and protecting our interests appropriately."⁶⁴ A realist view stresses the importance of military power in achieving deterrence, and the U.S. military has indeed continued to demonstrate its strength by its words and actions. U.S. officials have firmly maintained that America will rebuff any use of military force to change the status quo. Continued U.S. military exercises in the region, along with broadening security commitments through multilateral arrangements, make it clear that the U.S. is serious about its regional commitment. However, it is also vitally important to project the political will and material capacity to absorb the costs of a military conflict. Even if the American military still has the actual capability to defeat an adversary and leaders are genuinely determined to fulfill treaty obligations, it does little good if an adversary is of the opinion that the United States is ultimately unwilling or unable to absorb the political and economic costs of armed conflict, since such an opinion can entice an adversary to engage in the kind of brinkmanship that raises the prospect of a miscalculation leading to armed conflict.

This is precisely how President Trump's comments on alliances, along with the social unrest relating to America's unresolved racial justice issues, and the way that COVID-19 has impacted the

U.S. economy and exacerbated the country's political divide, can potentially invite doubts about the efficacy of the United States military presence in East Asia as a deterrent to an adversary using force to change the status quo. This means that negotiating fair burden-sharing agreements without publicly disparaging allies, restoring some modicum of political stability by making progress on issues relating to racial justice, and curbing the spread of the coronavirus and its impact on the U.S. economy and society, are all vital aspects of America's ability to serve as a military deterrent abroad. These are of course significant challenges, but until the United States can at least partly resolve them, they will fuel doubts about the country's ability and willingness to absorb the political and material costs of fully responding to an adversary's attempt to use force to alter the status quo in East Asia—which could result in the new America and its allies being forced to fight a conflict that would have otherwise not started in the first place in a world guided by a pre-Trump, pre-coronavirus America.⁶⁵⁾

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