

# South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > China and United States on a Collision Trajectory -2018

---

## China and United States on a Collision Trajectory -2018

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Sat, 11/24/2018 - 12:13

**Paper No. 6463**

**Dated 24-Nov-2018**

By Dr Subhash Kapila

China in end-2018 seems set firmly on a collision trajectory with the United States which has got accentuated with Chinese President Xi Jinping with his oversized strategic ambitions having met more than his match in US President Trump imbued with his 'America First' national aim brooking no Chinese challenge to dilute US global predominance.

In end-2018, the United States and China rhetoric that has emanated at various international meets in recent months significantly reveals that the gloves are finally off and China and the United States are now headed into a head-on comprehensive full spectrum collision course. The United States in response to China's predatory impulses in the entire spectrum of trade and economics to security of Indo Pacific has put China on notice that enough is enough and no more.

The US Administration's tough stances on China are backed by United States public opinion from the US Congress and prominent sections of US society. After nearly half a century the United States seems intent on changing course in US-China relations steering away from 1972 President Nixon's and his Secretary of State Kissinger's openings of United States to China.

The United States at highest levels from the US President Trump, Vice President Pence and Defence Secretary Mattis have unambiguously signalled that "Empire and aggression have no place in the Indo Pacific", obviously alluding to China's un-checkmated predatory moves in Indo Pacific region. To that end the United States seems intent on applying a combination of security pressures on China in the South China Sea and unleashing a trade war on China when China's economic growth is on a decline.

The United States cannot be blamed for the conflictual state of US-China relations as it was China that set the stage for this inevitable clash

of power trajectories with the Hainan incident of 2001. At that time also I questioned in a SAAG Paper whether China was starting a Cold War with the United States.

Successive US Presidents since then invested more strategic capital in 'China Hedging' and 'Risk Aversion' strategies vainly hoping that China would eventually emerge as a responsible stakeholder in the Indo Pacific region. This US approach only fuelled China's aggressive military brinkmanship in the last decade and a half with China indulging in political and military coercion on its peripheries secure in the belief that United States will not act firmly due what it perceived as a toothless United States power on the decline.

The above stands more significantly manifested and more prominently visible in China establishing control 'Full Spectrum Dominance' over the South China Sea maritime expanse challenging United States predominance and denting US image in Asian capitals. China made similar attempts in East China Sea against Japan but Japan was no pushover and stood firm in the Senkaku Islands invoking the provisions of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty.

The United States needs to be blamed for being a passive spectator as China rampaged across the South China Sea with forcible annexation of Islands from Vietnam and Philippines and construction of artificial islands to locate airstrips and naval jetties. China defied the UNCLOS provisions and also The Hague Tribunal Award declaring China's sovereignty claims over the South China Sea as "Illegal".

The United States needs to be blamed for adopting passive strategies on China spawned by power calculations of isolating Russia and enlisting China in US orbit. The United States approach failed miserably. China did not move into US orbit and Russia so side-lined was pushed into China's strategic embrace.

Resultantly, the Indo Pacific power calculus in 2018 presents the spectacle of the China-Russia strategic nexus attempting to challenge United States predominance in ways more than one. Admittedly, Russia may not be the driving force of China's geopolitical and military challenge to the United States in the Western Pacific but it is still noticeable that there is in being a China-Russia strategic nexus. It is China that is obsessed with pushing out the United States from the Indo Pacific and West Pacific more pointedly.

In end-2018 it is more than evident that the clashing power trajectories of China and the United States cannot be framed in terms of a revisionist China challenging the US-led order in Indo Pacific. China's aims go far beyond that with an aim plus of establishing a Chinese hegemony in East Asia as the initial point and re-writing the rules of engagement and conventions that emerged after the Second World War defining the world order.

China seems to be obsessed with writing a new world order with Chinese characteristics replacing the one authored by United States and the West post-August 1945. Therein lies the rub for China as it runs up against United States in no mood to relinquish its global predominance but in end-2018 unlike past US Presidents, the present incumbent in the White House, President Trump has not only dug US

heels firmly but also in a clever mix of US security pressures as combined with a ruthless Trade War in motion attempts to unravel the Chinese gains at US expense.

In 2018, China and the United States seem destined on a collision as their national ambitions trajectories seem to have reached an intersection where either China or the United States has to blink and step back.

The United States in the maintenance of its global predominance and with still possessing asymmetrical superiority over China cannot be expected to step back from its brewing confrontation against China.

China flush with the arrogance of a revisionist power having tasted victories in Western Pacific (South China Sea) by US defaults of China not checkmated by earlier US Presidents despite Asian capitals expectations that the United States would do so, can hardly be expected to blink under US pressures now.

The history of United States policy approaches towards China makes a sorry reading in the last decades with the United States engagement of China covering- easing China in global affairs as a responsible stakeholder, cooperation, engagement followed in recent years by “Congagement” a term signifying US policy of both ‘containment of China and in tandem continuing diplomatic engagement.

Congagement as the final step by the United States also did not deter China from its national aggrandisement in East Asia at US expense but picked up more momentum after Chinese President Xi ascended to power in Beijing. China under President Xi has markedly emerged as more aggressive and not shying away from exercising muscular diplomacy.

Last year US President Trump with his policy of ‘America First’ and concerned that perceptions were going that an unchecked China indicated US Power and influence was on decline applied ‘course corrections’ and President Trump’s first National Security Strategy Document listed China as a threat in being to US national security interests and US global influence.

Full analysis of this document can be read in my SAAG Paper of December 2017 and further reproduced in the Indian Defence Review titled “ United States National Security Document December 2017 Analysed in the Indian Context”. Both implicitly and explicitly China figures high in US threat perceptions as a comprehensive challenge to the United States.

The above was a significant departure from existing US policies on China which in earlier Documents were couched in polite and accommodative terms

Significant assertions made by United States on China have been echoed again at the recent APEC Summit by US Vice President Pence. Notably, that China was working to “Challenge American power, influence and interests to erode American security and prosperity.”

Since Chinese military literature because of language complexities is not easily accessible but the fact remains that unlike the United States which has now woken up to the China Threat, there was no doubt in Chinese military thinking that the United States was not only the prime threat to China but also that the United States was intent on preventing the rise of Chinese power.

The APEC Summit 2018 brought into full glare the cumulative hostilities that have been simmering in China-United States relations for over a decade now. This Summit in Papua New Guinea was not attended by either US President Trump or Russian President Putin. The Chinese President reached few days in advance of the Summit for its Southern Pacific push. However, US Vice President Pence who in recent months has been publicly airing a hard line US approach towards China minced no words and his assertions put China on notice in unambiguous terms.

On US differences with China, US Vice President Pence asserted that “They begin with trade practices, with tariffs and quotas, forced technology transfers, the theft of intellectual property. It goes beyond that to freedom of navigation in the seas, concerns about human rights.”

China’s OBOR drive also came in for stinging criticism with VP Pence castigating that the United States does not “drown our partners in a sea of debt” or “offer a constricting belt or one-way road”. A strong caution to nations economically weak nations being ensnared by China and then exploited for strategic trade-offs.

The striking point made was that the United States feels that it is in no hurry to call of its trade war against China or security pressures against China. The American Vice President stated that “We are in a strong position” and that “there’s no time table”. Both assertions indicate that United States is prepared for a long haul with no time lines for any course corrections.

Driving the US hard-line to its deepest point, he indicated that the “United States would not change course until China changes its ways”. This virtually amounts to a United States ultimatum to China in which China has to make the first moves for compromise.

In the highly acrimonious atmosphere that prevailed with surcharged statements by United States and China and where China was accused of diplomatic bullying of the Summit hosts including Chinese diplomats barging forcibly into the Foreign Minister’s office for changes in the Joint Communique until forced out by security guards, no Joint Communique emerged. This itself highlighted the colliding US and China trajectories with no scope for compromise.

The Chinese President’s vain attempts to justify Chinese trade practices found little resonance at the Summit. The only significant assertion by Chinese President Xi and which indicated China’s disinclination to yield and could be read as a counter-warning to the United States read “History has shown that confrontation, whether in the form of a Cold War, or hot war or trade war will produce no results”.

In my assessment the Chinese President is historically wrong because the disintegration of the Former Soviet Union was initiated by a mix of

such United States strategies.

China and the United States seemed to have reached the state of a 'zero sum game' in terms of Indo Pacific geopolitics and security. As the US Vice President was departing from the Summit on its conclusion he finally asserted once again that the United States was open to friendly relations with China provided "Only if Beijing is willing to make massive changes that the United States is demanding in its economic, military and political activities".

In such a surcharged geopolitical and militarily tense environment in the Indo Pacific even a small unintended spark from either China or the United States over a minor face-off could spark a wider conflagration engulfing the entire Indo Pacific region. In that eventuality, no space or perch would be available for countries of the region especially those of ASEAN to sit on the fence.

Finally, the significant conclusion that emerges contextually from the above in terms of power line-ups as China and the United States head towards collision trajectories is that the United States carries more strategic weight in terms of military capabilities and strategic ballast of US allies and strategic partnerships in the Indo Pacific. The United States is therefore in a far more stronger position should China and the United States end up in an armed conflict.

**Tags:**

US China Relations [1]

**Category:**

Papers [2]

**Countries:**

United States [3]

China [4]

**Topics:**

Strategic Affairs & Security <sup>[5]</sup>

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2386>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1973>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/united-states>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/china>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/strategic-affairs-and-security>