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Scope

“Global Perspectives on Japan” focuses on developing a global perspective on the study of Japan and Asia. The journal promotes innovative, interdisciplinary, inter-regional and transnational approaches to Japanese Studies.

The journal aims to be a venue for scholarship in E.M.E.A. region with a special focus on Turkey and neighboring regions. It especially encourages scholars from the Middle East, Balkans, Central Asia and the Mediterranean but also welcomes scholars from other parts of the world.

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インド太平洋地域の地政学——大国間競争の現状と展望*

Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Current Status and Prospects of Competition between Major Powers**

Yoichi Kato

The recent geopolitical and geo-economic changes in the Indo-Pacific region are varied and fast moving. While more time is needed to ascertain the outcomes, it can be said that many of these changes have taken on an unprecedented character and carry the potential to fundamentally overturn the existing order in the region.

The new players making an appearance as part of this power game are not only large countries, but also small and mid-sized countries. In this interim report, the changes will be examined from the perspectives of the four major regional powers: China, United States, India and Japan.

- (1) China: Overreach and revision of the Belt and Road Initiative
- (2) United States: Hardening of its stance toward China
- (3) India: Deepening sense of caution toward China
- (4) Japan: Changes in strategy toward China brought about by the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy (vision).

In addition, the effects of such changes on the maintenance and reconstruction of regional order will be discussed.

* This is an abbreviated translation of the following article: 加藤洋一. (2021年)、インド太平洋地域の地政学——大国間競争の現状と展望」、「インド太平洋地域の海洋安全保障と『法の支配』の実体化にむけて：国際公共財の維持強化に向けた日本外交の新たな取り組み」(令和元年度 インド太平洋研究会) The original can be accessed at: https://www.jiia.or.jp/pdf/research/R01_Indopacific/01-kato.pdf

** Summarized and translated by Sevgi Zeyneloğlu.

1. Major Geopolitical Developments in the Indo-Pacific Region

1.1 China: Overreach and Revision of the Belt and Road Initiative

1.1a Current State in South Asia

Infrastructure projects based on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are being planned and implemented across a wide geographical range, from Southeast Asia to the South Pacific, Central Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe. South Asia and the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean are among the regions that draw the most attention.

The most widely known case is that of the Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The construction that began in 2010 was completed with financing from China. However, the interest rates of up to 6% were high for aid, and the repayment was set to begin early. Sri Lanka was unable to repay the loan, and in July 2017, agreed to transfer 70% of the stakes belonging to the propriety company of the port to the Chinese side for 99 years. In December, the port was essentially turned over to China. Some locals voiced their opinion that "it was like becoming a Chinese colony".

Reporting on it extensively in 2018, *The New York Times* popularized the issue. The newspaper reported that as a result of the transfer, "China controls territory just a few hundred miles offshore its rival India, and has established a strategic foothold along a waterway of vital importance, both in terms of trade and military affairs." The report continued "This case is the most striking example of China's ambitious use of loans and aid to gain leverage around the world . . . These debt deals strengthen the harsh criticism towards President Xi Jinping's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) in which China's global investment and lending programs are trapping vulnerable countries around the world in debt." These feelings of suspicion and caution regarding the BRI are shared by other Asian countries, as well.

In July 2018, Malaysia halted work on the construction of the East Coast Railway, a project that had been ongoing as part of the BRI. In August, Prime Minister Mahathir visited China and held a joint press conference with Premier Li Keqiang in which he drew attention to the following statement:

We agree that free trade is the way to go. However, as a matter of course, free trade must also be fair. It must always be kept in mind that steps of

development differ across countries. To put it simply, fair trade means that poor countries can stand a chance against wealthy countries. Therefore, the circumstances to bear a new colonialism are not desired. Fair trade is a must. In this regard, together with Li Keqiang we support free trade, because we think that it is the way forward for the entire world.

This statement directly identified the defects of 'free trade'. However, the expression 'new colonialism' was used immediately after Malaysia's decision to suspend a BRI project, and was taken as a criticism of the initiative.

In October 2018 it was reported that Pakistan, known for its friendly relations with China, was going to re-examine its BRI related project China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) due to "debt trap" concerns.

The project aims to increase investments for the construction of industry infrastructure such as power plants, harbours, highways and railways. The total investment is said to reach \$62 billion, and China has pledged to provide the bulk of the funds. CPEC is one of the six economic corridors that make up the Silk Road Economic Belt which constitutes the 'belt' portion of BRI. It is also the most advanced in terms of development. Given that "China regards CPEC as the flagship project of the BRI initiative", such stagnation might suggest that the initiative is running into trouble.

In South Asia, China's greatest worry is India. In May 2017, India boycotted the "The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation" in Beijing, the first international event regarding the initiative. "What India opposes is not the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, but China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)." It is said that "since before, India has held the viewpoint that China's motives moving forward with CPEC are about advancing their national security, and they are claiming it is a project about economics as an excuse to let it pass" and "China increasing its presence and influence in the Indian Ocean is not something India can ignore as they consider it to be 'India's Ocean'".

In February 2018, Gateway House, a think tank based in Mumbai, India pointed out the following problems in a report they published regarding the current state of China's investments in South Asia:

1. China has become the largest foreign investor in the Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

2. This penetration by China has reached especially high levels in Myanmar and Pakistan, countries that surround India from the East and the West.
3. China's method is evident. First, they enter the country as a weapon supplier, and then build relationships with the country's elite. After that, they provide modern infrastructure with deferred payments. Once they enter a country, they then influence its domestic affairs. At times, they even manoeuvre for a regime change in favour of China.
4. While China's investments are concentrated on hard infrastructure, they also consider the geo-economic dimension. China is clearly trying to create new rules to control the business and finances in the region.

Furthermore, according to the case studies of major countries in South Asia, the situation in each country is described as follows "In the Maldives, the investments erode democracy. In Pakistan, there are unreasonable mortgages. In Sri Lanka, it's a debt trap. In Myanmar, there is resistance to Chinese dominance." The state of affairs in the small and mid-sized countries of the region and their impact on the power game will be examined in detail in the final report.

1.1b. Strategic Revisions

Since such criticisms and sense of caution spread across the region, China made a move to defend itself by what can be described as strategic revisions. Attending the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Papua New Guinea on November 17, 2018, President Xi Jinping stated the following:

The Belt and Road Initiative is the establishment of partnerships that will open the door for cooperation. Its fundamental principles will be discussed together, established together, and shared together. China, with the world, aims to share opportunities together, to develop in a proper manner without any geopolitical objectives, without targeting or excluding anyone.

The viewpoint that China, by providing aid, trapped countries in debt and

made them do China's bidding in pursuit of geopolitical gains was firmly rejected. It is supported with China's worldview and global strategy that economic globalization is increasing the interdependence of each country and forming a community with "shared interests and destiny". The question is whether the countries of the world or the region are willing to join a community of shared interests, much less of shared destiny, with China. No self-analysis was given by China regarding this point.

In order to avoid criticism from other countries towards the BRI, China has made the eccentric move to change the English name of the initiative. In 2016, it was changed to "Belt and Road Initiative" from "One Belt, One Road" with the reasoning that the previous name could cause the "misunderstanding" that there are only one road and one belt. In fact, the plan is to connect Asia, Europe and Africa via five routes. It was also meant to prevent regional partners from competing with each other. Furthermore, the addition of the word "initiative" was explained as a way to emphasize the openness of strategies and to avoid the criticism that it was "China-centric institution building".

Despite the fact that at least one of the reasons for changing the English name was to explain that it did not represent reality, the Chinese name remains as "One Belt, One Road". This shows that the Chinese government and the Communist Party are only concerned with the image that other countries have of China.

However, as following developments have shown, the effect of this name change on the international community has not necessarily been as the Chinese government aimed for. During the 2018 APEC summit, US Vice-President Pence, who took the stage after Chinese President Xi Jinping, expressed strong criticism towards BRI without naming China.

As we speak, as we're all aware, some are offering infrastructure loans to governments across the Indo-Pacific and the wider world. Yet the terms of those loans are often opaque at best. Projects they support are often unsustainable and of poor quality. And too often, they come with strings attached and lead to staggering debt . . . And so today, let me say to all the nations across this wider region, and the world: Do not accept foreign debt that could compromise your sovereignty . . . We don't drown our partners

in a sea of debt. We don't coerce or compromise your independence . . . We do not offer a constricting belt or a one-way road.

Vice President Pence used the English name “One Belt, One Road” on purpose and criticised by pointing out that the “belt” restrains the countries that accept financial support from China, and that the “road” is a one-way road that benefits only China. These strategic revisions are not limited to BRI. Another prominent example is ‘Made in China 2025’. The comprehensive industrial policy has been introduced in 2015, and its meaning is explained by the State Council as follows:

The manufacturing industry is the foundation of the national economy, the basis of the country, the sacred treasure of national promotion, and the foundation for a strong country. Creating a globally competitive manufacturing industry is the unavoidable path for China to increase its overall strength, guarantee its national security and establish itself as a global powerhouse . . . By 2049, the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the country, through the next three 10-year plans, China must develop into a manufacturing powerhouse that will lead the development of the world's manufacturing industry and lay the groundwork for the realization of the ‘China Dream’, the great revival of the Chinese nation.

However, the response of the US to this policy was strict opposition. U.S. President Trump, at the press conference on November 7, 2018 after the midterm elections, criticised ‘Made in China 2025’ as “insulting” and stated the following: “China got rid of their ‘China ‘25’ because I found it very insulting. I said that to them. I said, ‘China ‘25’ is very insulting, because ‘China ‘25’ means, in 2025, they’re going to take over, economically, the world. I said, ‘That’s not happening.’”

Reuters has reported that China’s state-run Xinhua news agency mentioned “Made in China 25” more than 140 times from the beginning of 2018 to the end of May but stopped after June 5. According to Reuters, “Beijing is increasingly wary of the backlash in the United States caused by the announcement of this ambitious plan”.

There are several other examples of such revisions, but the common ground between all is that they all remain ‘strategic’ in nature, and do not

change China's 'strategies' or 'ambitions'. As the US and other countries in the region have seen through this point, the tensions with China have not fundamentally been eased.

2. United States: Hardening of its Stance toward China

United States' stance towards China has changed extensively in the last few years, both in the security dimension and in the economic dimension.

First, there is the security dimension. In 2015, during the meeting to confirm his nomination, the current chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford has told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Russia was the biggest threat, followed by China, North Korea and the Islamic State (ISIL) in order. However, in 2017 during the confirmation meeting for his re-nomination, he said that while North Korea was the biggest immediate threat, "in the coming years China will probably be the biggest threat to the United States," revealing a new view that saw China as the biggest threat in the medium to long term. The perception of Russia as the single greatest threat has changed dramatically over the past two years.

This trend can be seen in two U.S. strategy documents released in 2018-19. The National Security Strategy (NSS), released at the end of 2017, identifies China as a "revisionist state", along with Russia. In addition to military matters, the report revealed a sense of caution on the economic front as well, citing their strategic intent to "replace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the sphere of influence of state-led economic models, reconstruct the order of the region in favour of their own country". The National Defence Strategy (NDS), a subplan of the NSS released in January 2018 as a summarized edition, defines China as a "strategic rival" and makes the judgement that it is "militarizing artificial islands in the South China Sea while using its economy for plundering purposes and threatening its neighbouring countries". In addition to geopolitical means, the new report points out that geo-economic methods and tools are also being used.

At a symposium held in Washington, D.C., in May 2018 for the 40th anniversary of the normalization of US-China relations, a discussion was heard about how the "shock absorber" in US-China relations has been lost. In

the past, when security tensions caused a crisis in bilateral relations, the two countries were able to shelve the problem as their economic relations were complementary. However, it was brought into attention that the framework of the bilateral relationship had changed. As a result of the structural evolution Chinese economy has undergone, the two economies no longer have complementary roles, and in some industries, they are in direct conflict. Hence, the analysis was that security tensions and differences in the positions of governments are becoming more frequent and more apparent.

The view that the current tension between the US and China is not a temporary matter, but one caused by historical and structural issues is becoming widespread in the United States. In response to the major shift in the perceptions, the US government's approach toward China has also changed. To begin with, the assessment is that 'engagement', which has been the basis of the approach towards China since the normalisation of diplomatic relations in the 1970s, has failed. The 2017 NSS notes the following:

For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China's rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others . . . These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades —policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.

As a result, the US is shifting its approach to China from 'engagement' to 'balance' and 'decoupling', taking a hostile stance.

'Balance' means that the US will counter China's aggressive and hostile policies and measures and the consequent increased tensions with commensurate policies and measures. A typical example is the so-called 'trade war' that the Trump administration is pursuing, mainly through economic sanctions.

'Decoupling' means a more radicalized approach. Although it is not an official policy of the US government, it has been advocated by Peter Navarro, Assistant to the President, Director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy.

Strengthening the authority of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) to prevent Chinese capital from acquiring US companies and the decision to bar China's Huawei Technologies from the next generation 5G high-speed mobile communications network are both examples of decoupling.

While these are fundamentally economy and trade policies, they also extend to the security dimension. The cancellation of China's invitation to the multilateral military exercise RIMPAC: Rim of the Pacific Exercise 2018, hosted by US and scheduled for June 2018, is an example. It was a retaliatory measure against China for its refusal to stop militarizing its artificial islands in the South China Sea.

China is strongly opposed to such decoupling. On March 8, 2019, at a press conference held during the National People's Congress, Foreign Minister Wang Yi directly denied it, stating that "while there are those who declare that the two countries' economies are decoupling, that is simply wishful and naïve thinking". Furthermore, he stated that the interests of the two countries are "indivisible" and that "decoupling from China is decoupling from opportunities, from the future and in a further sense, from the rest of the world". He also said that "the two countries should not and will not fall into conflict".

A week later, Premier Li Keqiang reiterated Wang's denial, saying that "it is not realistic to decouple the US and Chinese economies". The repeated denial from the Chinese side can be seen as a sign of a sense of crisis to somehow stop such a trend.

This radicalisation of the stance towards China from 'engagement' to 'balance' and then to 'decoupling' is a phenomenon observed since the Trump administration took office. However, not all policy areas can be escalated to the point of decoupling. As China has pointed out, there are limits to the growing economic interdependence. In reality, in some areas there is 'balance' and in others 'decoupling'.

3. India: Deepening Sense of Caution Toward China

On January 24, 2019, India opened a new naval air base in the Bay of Bengal. It is a Kohassa base in the northern Andaman and Nicobar Islands located in

the northwest of the Malacca Straits. In accordance with this, the Indian Navy signed a contract to procure 12 Dornier 228 medium-sized patrol aircrafts in 2017, and decided to establish three new sQUADrons in 2019.

Kohassa Air Base is an expanded and renovated version of a naval air base that was originally established in 2001, with a current runway of 1000 meters. It can only be used by medium-sized twin-engine propeller-driven patrol aircraft and helicopters, but there are plans to extend the range to 3000 meters in the future. In that case, it can be used by the P8I, a state-of-the-art long-range anti-submarine patrol aircraft developed in the United States based on the Boeing 737 passenger plane.

This series of developments suggests that India is seeking to improve its anti-submarine patrol capabilities in the eastern waters of the Bay of Bengal. Although the Indian government's official announcement avoids using names, it is evidently a countermeasure to the increasing presence of not only the surface ships but also submarines belonging to the Chinese Navy in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. It is thought that the Indian Navy commissioning its first domestically produced ballistic missile nuclear submarine, Arihant, in 2016, may be another sign that the navy is seeking to improve its anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

This deepening sense of caution toward China is also reflected in their request to Japan for a stronger defence cooperation. There have been calls among the Indian naval officials for Japan to help capture Chinese submarines advancing from the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean. The sense of impending crisis on the Indian side concerns the possibility of China establishing control over the East Bay of Bengal across the Strait of Malacca as in the South China Sea.

India's diplomatic strategy during the Cold War was non-alignment in the first half and Indo-Soviet alliance in the second. After the Cold War, it was described as "omnidirectional collaborative diplomacy".

Currently, it is "emphasizing strategic independence" and "developing an all-round diplomacy with major countries rather than alliances with specific countries". In its foundation lies the idea of "strategic autonomy". However, recent developments in the strategic circumstances have led to the necessity of going beyond this "strategic autonomy" and developing a new diplomatic strategy. As China expands its influence in the South China Sea

and the Indian Ocean by increasing its naval presence and building artificial islands and ports, “India has begun to take countermeasures such as joint training with the US Navy and supplying US ships”.

Will it be an extension and reinforcement of the “emphasis on the US” that is said to have emerged in part after the end of the Cold War, or will it lead to greater expectations for Japan, or to a so-called four-country (‘QUAD’) attitude with the addition of Australia to Japan and the US? The future is still unclear.

4. Japan: Changes in Strategy Toward China Brought About by the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” Strategy (Vision)

In the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” strategy brought forth by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, Japan expanded the scope of the general framework of its foreign policy strategy from the “Asia-Pacific” to the “Indo-Pacific”.

According to the government’s explanation, the fundamental idea is to “promote stability and prosperity for the entire region” by connecting the “two continents” of fast-growing Asia and high-potential Africa with the free and open “two oceans”, the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.

The three pillars of the initiative are:

1. Spreading and establishing the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade
2. Pursuing economic prosperity
3. Ensuring peace and stability

The Japanese government explained the aims of FOIP at various opportunities, saying that it is “not targeted at any particular country” and that “the intention is not the envelopment of China”. It is based on diplomatic calculations and considerations, trying not to provoke backlash from China and allowing countries of the region to be in harmony without being concerned about China.

In 2018, an additional step was taken to change what had been initially announced as a “strategy” to “vision”. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* reported the reason as the following:

A senior official of the Ministry of Foreign affairs stated that 'There are countries in the ASEAN that don't like to make a choice between Belt and Road Initiative and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. We thought it would not be wise to give them the glaring image of a strategy. We are more concerned with the substantial outcome of increasing the number of countries that agree with us, rather than the nominal struggle of word choice.'

FOIP is not hostile toward China or the BRI, but it was surely created with that in mind. Some government officials have stated that it is to off-set China's growing influence.

In order not to be at a disadvantage in competition with BRI, FOIP "deliberately removed" the elements of 'value diplomacy' such as the spread of democracy and respect for human rights. This is a 180-degree turnaround from the first Abe Cabinet's strategy, the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity", which was based on value diplomacy.

The original gambit of the FOIP was to highlight the problems of BRI, such as debt trapping by explaining the high-quality infrastructure development, which is Japan's forte. Regardless of the official account, it was clear that the real aim was to oppose China.

This has been changing gradually. In June 2017, Prime Minister Abe expressed a positive evolution of the BRI for the first time in a speech, saying that it is "a concept with the potential to link the East, the West and the diverse regions in between", while attaching four conditions to the project: openness, transparency, economic efficiency and the financial soundness of the host country. When Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga was asked to explain at a press conference the following day, he stressed "it is important that efforts under this initiative be promoted as high-quality ones that meet international standards," and said "it is important for Japan and China to contribute together to international issues and regional prosperity, and we intend to cooperate where we can with this perspective."

During his visit to China in October 2018, Prime Minister Abe went a step further and announced that he would embark on joint infrastructure development projects in other countries with China, provided they are in line with such 'international standards'.

The People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of

China, reported that President Xi Jinping said the following at the Japan-China summit meeting with Prime Minister Abe:

“The joint construction of BRI has provided an experimental new platform for China and Japan to strengthen their mutually beneficial cooperation. China welcomes Japan’s more active participation in China’s development process in the new area and the realization of higher-level mutual benefit and win-win cooperation between two countries.”

It was reported that Japan would participate in the joint infrastructure development project in a third country that came to an agreement with China. *The People’s Daily* went on to report that Prime Minister Abe agreed, saying “BRI is an initiative with great potential, and Japan wants to strengthen its cooperation with China in a wide range of areas, including the joint development of markets in third countries”. Incidentally, none of these statements were included in the official record of the meeting released by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Japanese government’s idea is that by participating in the joint project, they will impose international standards on the Chinese side including the four conditions mentioned above, and resolve problems such as debt trapping. It is an approach of ‘leading reforms from within’ that seeks to get close to China in order to change its behaviour.

On the other hand, the US has taken an ‘outside pressure’ approach, offering alternatives to regional countries through FOIP in order to eliminate the BRI which it perceives as a threat. This is an approach that can only be taken by the US, which has abandoned ‘engagement’ with China as a failure, and is changing its approach to a hostile one of ‘balance’ and even ‘decoupling’. There are fundamental differences in perceptions between Japan and the rest of the world.

Japan’s approach retaining an element of ‘engagement’ is, to some extent, in line with China’s current policy towards Japan that aims to improve relations. However, China’s ‘strategic revisions’ as described above have not been raised to the level of strategic revisions such as a return to the “tao guang yang hui” policy described as “keeping a low profile and biding one’s time”. There is no such prospect either.

Furthermore, some countries in the region have criticized Japan’s

'engagement' approach as a softening and compromise of its stance toward China. In particular, Japan's efforts to expose the problems of BRI, which it has been promoting since 2016 through FOIP, have permeated to some extent among the countries of the region, and there is even a trend of reconsidering participation to projects. Given that, intense criticism is being voiced by some of the policy experts in the region, asking why Japan is betraying the project. Although Japanese officials refute it as a 'misunderstanding', this case once again highlights the difficulty of devising a policy toward China that gathers uniform support in the region.

The disturbance of relation between countries in the region caused by this policy toward China is also reflected in Europe. During President Xi Jinping's visit to Europe in March 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron said that "the days when Europe was naïve about China are over" and took a tough stance on China's continued economic expansion benefiting asymmetrical interests. In response, Italy, another EU and G7 member state, signed a memorandum of understanding, pledging to cooperate in the BRI. The port of Trieste facing the Adriatic Sea has become China's gateway from the Mediterranean to Europe. A total of 2.5 billion Euros in economic support will be provided for its development.

The Impact of the Changes in the Behaviour of Major Powers on Regional Order

China's geo-economic approach, using its own economic power and the dependence of its partners, is bringing in some good results throughout the world. Political measures and methods that add geo-economics to geopolitics have come to play a major role in creating regional order in the Indo-Pacific region. Not only do they shape the tone of competition among major powers, but they also have a significant impact on the regional engagement of smaller countries.

The new contradictions among the countries of the region that have emerged as a result of China's geopolitical and geo-economic approach, represented by the BRI, highlight the differences in the regional order that each country is aiming for. Japan is still in a position to support and maintain the unipolar order in which the U.S. takes the lead. This U.S.-dominated order

is being challenged by the rising power of China. On the other hand, China has long been aiming to build a multipolar order, and with the expansion of its own national power and influence, the possibility of realizing this goal is gradually increasing. India, which is defined by the U.S. as a “major defence partner of the United States”, similarly views a multipolar order to be desirable for its interests.

The Trump administration, with its ‘America First’ policy, has shown no signs of giving up on its position as a regional leader. In the 2017 NSS, the following was stated about the geopolitical and geo-economic challenges developed by China:

“States throughout the region are calling for sustained U.S. leadership in a collective response that upholds a regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence.”

On the other hand, William Burns, who served as Deputy Secretary of State in the Democratic Obama Administration, wrote the following in his recently published memoir:

“Asia continues to loom as our first priority, with China’s rise the most consequential geopolitical trend of our time. President Trump’s unpredictability and detachment have opened the playing field for China, offering an unexpectedly early path to dominance in Asia . . . The unease among other players across Asia about Chinese hegemony creates a natural opportunity for Washington to knit together relationships with traditional allies like Japan and emerging partners like India.”

While acknowledging that the possibility of China’s domination of Asia is beginning to appear sooner than expected, the U.S. will not concede its leadership position in the Indo-Pacific, typical of the mindset of the U.S. diplomatic elite, both the Republicans and the Democrats. The intensity of the struggle for regional order will inevitably increase in the future.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region has been shaken by China’s growing influence and uncertainty over the commitments of the U.S.. The small and medium-sized countries in the regions are getting involved in the tug-of-war between FOIP, promoted by Japan and the U.S., and China’s BRI. This is a complex situation

that cannot be explained by a simple bipolar composition. However, in the big picture what confronts each country is the historical and fundamental question of whether the unilateral dominance of the United States, that has continued since the end of Cold War can be sustained, and if it collapses, who will create the “post-primacy alternative” and what form it will take. An analysis of the geopolitical and geo-economic changes taking place in the Indo-Pacific could be one of the most powerful tools to determine the answer.

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