

SENIOR CONFERENCE 55 – THE EMERGING ENVIRONMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION: DRIVERS, DIRECTIONS, AND DECISIONS

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Senior Conference 55, entitled “The Emerging Environment in the Indo-Pacific Region: Drivers, Directions, and Decisions,” explored the evolving security environment in a critical and dynamic region. For three days, a diverse group of distinguished experts considered the shifting economic realities, political dynamics, and technological trends, as well as the forms of conflict and competition that will shape the region’s future. Although uncertainties abound, understanding the Indo-Pacific’s dynamics is critical for future political, economic, and security decisions both within and far beyond the region. While decisionmakers neglect other parts of the world at their own peril, the greatest challenges of this century will be faced in and by the Indo-Pacific region.

Rather than narrowly focusing the conference on the bilateral US-China relationship, the organizers of Senior Conference 55 deliberately assembled experts taking a broad approach to the entire Indo-Pacific region, focusing on the region as a whole to explore the wider relationships and consequences. Nonetheless, we anticipated a sizable portion of the proceedings would consider the implications of Chinese decisions and actions, as evidenced by China’s influence in the region and throughout the world.

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later be attributed to them in media. Consequently, we not only asked participants to honor this commitment at Senior Conference 55, but also take care in this publication to avoid assigning provenance. This report distills many views into one document, but we as editors attempted to leave our own views out of it as much as possible. Where our own assessments enter, we use the first person to make that clear. Otherwise, the text reflects the discussion and viewpoints expressed therein.

Several key themes emerged throughout the 2019 proceedings:

First, the United States government (USG) must develop a clear view and comprehensive understanding of an evolving Indo-Pacific. In 2018, the US Department of Defense (DoD) renamed its oldest and largest military command from Pacific Command (PACOM) to Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), signaling the importance of engaging a wider region to support regional stability throughout the Indian and Pacific Ocean basins. This decision comes amidst heightened tensions with China in a hyper-competitive, multi-domain environment and speaks to the value the USG places on engaging a wider constellation of regional actors. Another helpful reframing is for the United States to understand better the contemporary rise of China not as an emergence, but as a reemergence in accordance with its ancient and dynastic history.

Second, there is an ongoing battle for the narrative of the region. A second theme was whether

and how the United States is shaping a coherent and consistent counternarrative to China's ambitious international One Belt, One Road (OBOR) development initiative.

One Belt, One Road (OBOR) versus Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Initially developed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2013 as an ambitious, trillion-dollar global development initiative spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, OBOR refers to an extensive series of infrastructure investments, including both land and sea routes, as well as telecommunications access and other projects. One Belt, One Road's completion date is slated for 2049, in conjunction with the PRC's centenary. In 2016, the Chinese government invested considerably in an English language campaign rebranding the project as the Belt and Road Initiative because Beijing considered the "one" emphasis of OBOR to have problematic diplomatic consequences. Within China, the government still primarily uses the OBOR term (一带一路 *yidaiyilu*) in materials for a domestic audience. Another lesser-used term used is the "New Silk Road." In this report, we made an editorial decision to refer to OBOR rather than BRI.

Some now worry that China's large-scale investments come at the expense of international norms and institutions and that a growing web of international projects and loans are poised to exacerbate, rather than relieve, complex geopolitical problems. While certain China watchers express concern about the increasing financial and political dependence countries will have on China, others are sounding alarms that China seeks to refashion a twenty-first-century global balance of power in direct challenge to the established liberal international order. Some observers even see a remarkable amount of early success in these OBOR projects. A recent Council on Foreign Relations backgrounder described OBOR as a potential Trojan horse for developing and expanding regional, military, and government institutions. In recent years, countries in the region have sometimes welcomed the potential for increased Chinese investment and at other times pushed back against a seemingly aggressive Chinese campaign.

Third, geography is not dead. While there is validity to the argument that today's digital technologies facilitate everything from global dialogue to integrated markets and increasing cyber capabilities, it would be folly to neglect the continued relevance of physical and human geography. Location, culture, and identity still matter. This concept is particularly important in the most disaster-prone region in the world, already confronting the effects of climate change. Although the DoD is increasingly pursuing nonlethal effects, the United States is also developing new land-based technologies to bolster deterrence against China. The region's geography suggests that land forces would be secondary to naval and air units; however, land-based forces remain significant in any potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Finally,

in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, one must not underestimate marginalized or vulnerable communities who feel threatened in the face of rapid economic change and rising nationalism. These groups can include religious and ethnic minorities — such as the Tibetan, Rohingya, and Uyghur peoples — as well as those feeling economically, physically, or socially insecure in the face of demographic or geopolitical shifts and climate change.

Finally, international relationships remain essential. Throughout the Indo-Pacific, leaders are actively navigating relationships to secure national interests and make decisions in the face of economic, technological, diplomatic, military, and ecological uncertainties. The world is watching both the United States and China with considerable interest and concern, as each nation works to attract regional partners and to make sense of where and how to cooperate or compete. It would be shortsighted to force countries to choose between the United States and China; rather, it is essential for the United States to secure its interests through seeking mutually beneficial solutions with regional partners. As the United States grapples with the dynamics of a rapidly developing Indo-Pacific region, longstanding partners and allies are looking to American leadership to ensure a secure and prosperous future and to prevent unnecessary escalation of tensions. Thus, tending to international relationships and practicing the art of diplomacy remains imperative. While questions abound in the twenty-first century, there is widespread agreement that one of America's greatest assets is its enduring commitment to an inclusive and universal concept of freedom as advanced throughout the twentieth century.

We explore areas for future consideration in greater detail herein but, in brief, we offer five recommendations that emerged from the discussion:

1. The United States cannot go it alone. Strong international alliances and effective partnerships are essential. The United States cannot take these for granted. Over past decades, America has cultivated longstanding international relationships, which take time and effort to maintain. The United States must continue to "show up and turn up." There is no way to surge trust.
2. Walk the walk on being free and open. America must live up to its values and be the country the world expects it to be. The United States must align its actions with its words.
3. Continue to pursue both joint and multi-domain approaches. A key strength of America's military is its ability to conduct joint operations

better than any other military; developing effectiveness in multi-domain operations is now necessary.

4. The United States must engage in the global economy as a reliable investment and trading partner. The United States cannot rely on military power alone. To counter China's ambitious use of economic statecraft, the United States must continue to build greater capacity for financial investment and economic engagement.
5. Invest accordingly. If the United States is serious about developing and working toward a peaceful long-term vision for the Indo-Pacific, federal budgets and programs must reflect these priorities.

Even the leading Indo-Pacific thinkers and practitioners acknowledge the difficulty of predicting the region's future with great accuracy. However, the region is—and will continue to be—crucial for both the United States and the broader global community. Today, China is America's primary challenger, with many other countries also influencing an evolving regional foreign policy. As the United States navigates the coming decades beyond narrow political, business, and media cycles, it needs to increase its capacity for decision-making under risk and uncertainty.

Convenings such as these, which create the conditions for open, honest dialogue, are increasingly important. Spaces where decisionmakers challenge assumptions and resist disciplinary or departmental silos are constructive. Senior Conference 55 offered just this opportunity, but it was simply a start. Working effectively across political boundaries and partisan tensions, as well as across countries, cultures, sectors, and time zones, is mission-critical to getting both

domestic and foreign policies concerning the Indo-Pacific right. As the United States confronts challenges throughout the region, we cannot overstate the value of forging strong relationships and continuing candid conversations.

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