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THE CONTINUING CONTAINMENT

Evaluating the Trump Administration's China Containment Strategy on Eastern Regions and Beyond

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THERE EXISTS A SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER IN EAST ASIA. CHINA, THE RISING POWER, IS ATTEMPTING TO DISMANTLE AMERICAN HEGEMONY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC. TO COUNTER GROWING CHINESE CAPABILITIES, THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HAS ADOPTED A POLICY OF ACTIVE CONTAINMENT, ESCALATING U.S.-CHINA TENSIONS. THIS PAPER WILL EXPLORE CHINA'S RISE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GREAT POWER POLITICS, ESTABLISH THERE IS A POWER TRANSITION, AND LASTLY, ARGUE THAT THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S CONTAINMENT STRATEGY HAS BEEN FUNDAMENTALLY COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE TO AMERICAN INTERESTS IN THE REGION AND UNSUCCESSFUL AT MODERATING CHINESE BEHAVIOR. LESSONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S MISTEPS THAT CAN BE USED TO FORMULATE MORE EFFECTIVE CHINA POLICY UNDER THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION.

INTRODUCTION

In East Asia, a power transition is occurring in which China is actively trying to displace the U.S. as the primary regional hegemon. China's rising military and economic capabilities, and the U.S.' diminishing capacity to balance China's rise, have contributed to a shifting balance of power in the region. In response, the Trump administration has adopted a policy of active containment to constrain China's rise, escalating Sino-U.S. tensions. These tensions have led academics such as Graham Allison to warn about the "Thucydides trap," which assumes that the U.S. and China are "destined for war."¹ Such tensions have seen Washington, as realists such as John Mearsheimer have predicted,² move to curtail the number of Chinese students studying at American universities, launch a trade war, and bolster deterrence-building in the Indo-Pacific through cooperation with security partners. This paper will outline China's objectives in the region, establish a power transition, and argue that Trump's China strategy has been fundamentally counter-productive to U.S. objectives in the region and unsuccessful in moderating Chinese behavior. Instead, containment has exacerbated Chinese concern regarding strategic encirclement, compelling Beijing to double down on assertive behavior in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Lessons from containment can be drawn to formulate a more effective American strategy to confront China's continued rise.

MARITIME HEGEMONY

For states to consolidate maritime hegemony, it is necessary for them to first eliminate threats along their continental periphery. This was true for Great Britain and the United States, the only great powers to have existed in the past two hundred years. Great Britain was able to project its naval capabilities overseas because of maritime buffers that separated it from continental Europe, both against France³ and Germany.⁴

The United States could not consolidate regional hegemony until it possessed the land borders necessary to enable

naval buildup. When the U.S. first gained independence in 1783, it faced a perilous periphery, with threats on all sides. The British and Spanish Empires surrounded the country, and hostile tribes of Native Americans continued to control large swaths of territory⁵. The U.S. responded by instigating an aggressive campaign of expansionism under the guise of 'manifest destiny'. Throughout the 17th century, the U.S. gained continental-based security through a series of purchases from European and other North American powers.⁶ The U.S. then set out to achieve regional hegemony by pushing European powers out of the Western hemisphere through the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. At that time, the United States did not have the capabilities to fulfill the doctrine's objectives. By the end of the 19th century, however, the U.S. had pushed the great European powers out of its backyard, allowing the U.S. to consolidate regional hegemony and ultimately, great power status.⁷

China is now in a similar position to how the United States was at the end of the 19th century. Traditionally, China has had a contentious periphery: seven out of fifteen of the largest countries in the world, with a collective population of over 90 million, border China. Five of those countries have engaged China in a war since 1949, and Beijing maintains border disputes with nearly all of its neighbors. Over time however, China has gradually eliminated threats along its borders. Tensions stemming from the Sino-Soviet split have disappeared as Sino-Russian ties grow increasingly robust.

Furthermore, Russia's preoccupation with NATO forces in Western Europe, and domestic challenges in a slowing economy, declining population, and growing internal unrest, has rendered Moscow unable to balance China's rising military capabilities.⁸ Relative to China, Russia is a declining power. Likewise, India does not possess the military, economic, or technological capabilities to balance China or challenge Chinese security. GDP and technology gaps expand between Beijing and New Delhi every year, rendering India a declining power.⁹ Having consolidated a

"...containment has exacerbated Chinese concern regarding strategic encirclement, compelling Beijing to double down on assertive behavior in the Taiwan strait and the South China Sea."

“Similarly, China’s military rise has been facilitated by increasingly robust economic capabilities that have enabled China to contest the U.S. for hegemony in the maritime domain”

secure periphery, China has “followed in Uncle Sam’s footsteps,”¹⁰ and invested significantly in consolidating robust naval capabilities.

POWER TRANSITION IN EAST ASIA

As Paul Kennedy notes, the rise and fall of great powers is most often the result of “differentials in growth rates and technological change, leading to shifts in the global economic balance, which in turn gradually impinge upon the political and military balances.”¹¹ Under Kaiser Wilhelm and Bismarck, Germany’s rise was enabled by rapid expansion in industrial potential that allowed it to instigate a naval buildup outpacing shipbuilding rates seen in Great Britain and France.¹² Similarly, China’s military rise has been facilitated by increasingly robust economic capabilities that have enabled China to contest the U.S. for hegemony in the maritime domain.

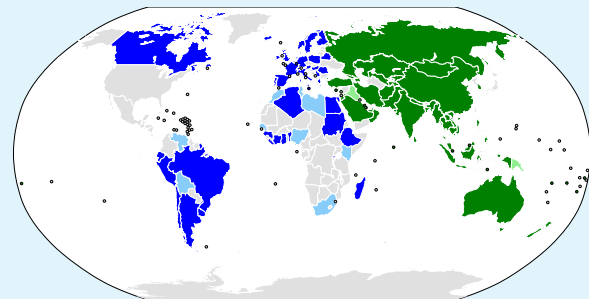
ECONOMIC TRENDS

Since Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in 1978, China’s economy has grown at astonishing rates. Between 1979 and 2018, China’s annual real GDP growth averaged 9.5% a year—essentially, China’s economy doubled in size every eight years.¹³ China’s GDP, measured according to domestic purchasing power, is already more significant than that of the U.S., and is also on the verge of overtaking the U.S.¹⁴ to become the world’s top consumer goods market.¹⁵ By 2049, China aims to be a fully developed nation.¹⁶ By 2050, China’s economy is projected to be the world’s largest, surpassing that of India and the U.S., projected to rank second and third respectively.¹⁷

As economic trends continue to favor China, Beijing has steadily become the primary architect for Asian-Pacific economic relations. Long dissatisfied with structural disadvantages it perceives in U.S.-dominated multilateral financial institutions, Beijing has actively sought to create its own. In 2015, for example, China launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which has since become a mechanism for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

financing and RMB internationalization.¹⁸ In the AIIB, China’s vote share is disproportionately large at 28.7%, compared to that of the second-largest AIIB nation, India, which has 8.3%.¹⁹ China also maintains de facto voting power over important issues, such as deciding the board of directors’ size and election of the president.²⁰ Despite stark U.S. warnings cautioning allies not to partake in the AIIB, U.S. security partners such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, and South Korea joined the initiative. The creation of the AIIB and the subsequent reactions of U.S. allies led to concerns in Washington about its ability to sustain leadership in international economic order²¹.

China has also steadily become the primary architect of trade relations in the Asia-Pacific. The CCP has long prioritized the creation of trade flows, setting up trade zones in Shanghai in 2013 and Tianjin, Guangdong, and Fujian in 2015. Beijing also signed FTAs with countries such as Switzerland, Australia, and South Korea in 2015.²² Xi linked free trade with the BRI in 2014, stating that “radiating Belt and Road” would “gradually build a network of



POTENTIAL SIGNATORIES, SIGNATORIES AND PARTIES TO THE ASIAN INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT BANK
GREEN: MEMBERS (REGIONAL)
LIGHT GREEN: PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS (REGIONAL)
BLUE: MEMBERS (NON-REGIONAL)
LIGHT BLUE: PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS (NON-REGIONAL)
(COURTESY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

free trade zones.”²³ Through enabling 6 trillion USD in new trade,²⁴ the BRI also provides opportunities for China’s export-oriented economy. The recent promulgation of China’s first multilateral trade deal, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), further bolsters China’s status as an economic leader.²⁵ RCEP will cover 48% of the world’s population, 30% of total world GDP, and 28% of global trade flows.²⁶ Shenmeng Hui and Li Tianguo, researchers at the state-affiliated Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), estimate that RCEP will add 0.22% to real GDP growth and 11.4% to China’s total exports.²⁷ Chinese elites have also extensively discussed the prospects of joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).²⁸ The U.S., notably, is absent from both these agreements. Chinese elites have asserted that China should capitalize on Washington’s recent skepticism of free trade to further its economic objectives. Wang Huiyao for example, president of the state-affiliated China Center for Globalization (CCG), has written that “the 2017 withdrawal of the U.S. from TPP” has provided “China the window to join the CPTPP.”²⁹ As the U.S. retrenches from the liberal economic order Washington created, China’s global leadership has become increasingly notable.

Thus, China has actively pursued the internalization of the RMB to decrease its reliance on the USD. In 2008, the Governor of the People’s Bank of China, Zhou Xiaochuan, criticized the status quo international monetary system and called for an international reserve currency “disconnected from economic conditions and sovereign interests of any single country.”³⁰ Chinese concerns were exacerbated by the 2008 U.S. financial crisis, which sparked anxiety about the volatility of the USD.³¹ Xiao Lisheng, deputy director of the International Finance Research Office at the CASS Institute of World Economics, has argued that RMB internationalization can minimize the impact of “external shocks or crises” and thus improve China’s “financial security level.”³² Through the creation of the Cross-Border Inter-Bank Payments System (CIPS), a funds transfer system created to process RMB transactions independently of the American-dominated SWIFT, China has pursued RMB internationalization. Between 2017 and

2018 for example, CIPS processed an additional 26 trillion RMB, enabling an 80% increase in the number of global RMB transactions.³³

Through initiatives such as Made in China 2025 (MIC 2025), China has also pursued growth via high-tech, advanced industries in information technology, artificial intelligence, aviation, and energy vehicle sectors. The plan’s primary goal is also to achieve self-sufficiency in tech, aiming, for example, for 70% self-sufficiency in core imports and basic materials for Chinese aerospace and telecommunications industries.³⁴ Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He recently stated that China will continue to bolster technological capabilities to accommodate growing demand from a wealthier population while also citing foreign containment in Chinese tech sectors as a reason to pursue increased self-sufficiency in tech.³⁵ Through compelling foreign firms to enter into joint ventures with Chinese ones in exchange for market access, the provision of government subsidies of over 426 billion USD, acquisition of foreign firms, and improved human capital, MIC 2025 has motivated substantial improvements in China’s high-tech sectors.³⁶

Experts note that China’s severe economic challenges, including negative total factor productivity (TFP),³⁷ overcapacity afflicting its state-owned enterprises (SOE’s), rising youth unemployment, and associated internal unrest among others, could stymie planned improvements in China’s military capabilities. Beijing, however, will likely do everything possible to keep its economic growth afloat, including artificially propping up its economy. Thus, it would be remiss to assume that China’s economic challenges will restrain its expansionist foreign policy vision; in fact, the opposite may occur. As Jack Levy’s “scapegoat hypothesis” suggests, states may instigate conflict abroad to distract from growing discontent at home.³⁸ Particularly vulnerable is Taiwan, which expects U.S. intervention during prospective cross-strait conflict under the provisions of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). Furthermore, China’s economic troubles must be assessed relative to those afflicting the U.S. economy. In 2020, the American economy is expected to contract by 8% and rebound by 5.2% in

“Thus, military trends provide the most accurate measure of power in security competition. Particularly important are China’s growing maritime capabilities.”

2021,³⁹ in contrast to China's economy, which is expected to grow by 2% in 2020 and 7.9% afterwards.⁴⁰ Relative to China, the U.S. is a declining power.

Economic power, however, is of secondary importance to military power. As John Mearsheimer notes, states maximize survival over the preservation of economic ties.⁴¹ Furthermore, Robert Ross notes that economic power is not “fungible in international security affairs”, pointing out that Chinese market control over Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia grew at the same time those countries were deepening defense ties with the U.S.⁴² Thus, military trends provide the most accurate measure of power in security competition.

MILITARY TRENDS

Military trends in East Asia, similar to economic trends, are favorable for China. China's primary goal in East Asia is to displace the U.S. as the primary hegemon in the region. Having eliminated threats along its continental periphery, China has investigated significantly in bolstering its naval capabilities to counter U.S. maritime hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. To this end, China has actively increased its fleet size while aggressively pursuing military modernization. Between 2010 and 2017, the number of PLA Navy (PLA-N) vessels increased from 210 to 320, making it larger than the U.S. navy.⁴³ It has also accelerated the production and commission of destroyers, frigates, corvettes, and submarines. Between 2015 and 2017, China launched almost 400,000 tons of new naval vessels, twice the output of American shipyards during the same period.⁴⁴ Robert Ross estimates that by 2033, China could possess a fleet consisting of 430 surface ships and a hundred submarines.⁴⁵ A 2016 U.S. Naval War College study estimated that the PLA-N could possess an active fleet of 530 warships and submarines by 2030.⁴⁶ Chinese naval spending indicates that an emphasis on bolstering maritime capabilities will persist. Between 2015 and 2021, Chinese defense spending is expected to increase 55% from 167.9 billion to 260.8 billion USD, with the PLA-N's share of the budget increasing 82% from 31.4 billion to 57.1 billion

USD.⁴⁷ Additionally by 2023, China is expected to launch a new aircraft carrier, its third following the commission of the Liaoning and Shandong.⁴⁸

At the same time, the PLA-N has undergone substantial modernization. In 2010, less than 50% of PLA-N ships could be classified as modern; by 2017, over 70% of PLA-N ships were modern.⁴⁹ The PLA-N has acquired capabilities in carrier operations and ballistic-missile submarine patrols,⁵⁰ and has benefited from increasingly sophisticated ship-launched and air-launched cruise missiles with precision targeting capabilities.⁵¹ China's submarines, for example, are now equipped with 290 nm-range YJ-18 anti-ship missiles.⁵² The PLA-N has also shown improved command, coordination, and operational capabilities, integral to what Barry Posen calls the “command of the commons.”⁵³ In April 2018, the PLA-N's new aircraft carrier Liaoning conducted its first carrier strike group operations in the Philippine Sea.⁵⁴ In August 2020, the PLA-N demonstrated the ability to conduct military drills in four regions across the eastern Pacific ocean simultaneously.⁵⁵ It has also shown an ability to assert global presence. In August 2018, U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson stated that the PLA-N is “ready and capable of operating wherever Beijing wants,” noting that the PLA-N had already conducted operations in the North Atlantic.⁵⁶

Simultaneously, China's intermediate and long-range ballistic missile capabilities have improved. Long-range DF-15s, of which the PLA could have 730,⁵⁷ can strike U.S. bases in Japan, the Korean peninsula, and targets in Taiwan and India. They have been shown to be highly precise, with a circular error probability (CEP) of less than fifty meters.⁵⁸ In August 2020, China successfully tested the DF-21D and DF-26B “carrier-killer” and Guam-killer” missiles in the South China Sea.⁵⁹ Wang Xiangsui, a former PLA colonel, has stated that the missiles could hit a moving target.⁶⁰ Andrew Erickson estimates that China may have more than two hundred DF-26 missiles in its arsenal.⁶¹ China's strides in missile R&D has also led to the creation of the DF-5B liquid-fueled intercontinental ballis-

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tic missile (ICBM), and the JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the latter of which can equip China’s Jin-class ballistic-missile submarines.⁶² Such improvements have made U.S. bases in areas of Southeast Asia vulnerable to Chinese ballistic missiles.

Meanwhile, U.S. navy capabilities are diminishing. In twelve years, the U.S. navy will consist of 237 ships, a decrease from the 282 currently in its fleet.⁶³ Moreover, the U.S.’ capacity to respond to China’s growing capabilities is constrained. In 2015, the U.S. developed a plan to increase the size of the active fleet to 308 ships by 2022.⁶⁴ In 2017, the Trump administration announced its desire for a 355-ship navy.⁶⁵ To reach 355 ships, however, the navy would have to increase its budget by 50% more than the average of the past six years.⁶⁶ A shift in spending would also inevitably entail decreased spending on the army and air force, a move that would spark fighting in the Pentagon.

Compounding these problems are challenges facing other service branches and prior U.S. commitments in Europe



CHINA'S ONGOING TERRITORIAL DISPUTES (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

and the Middle East. First, rising demand for additional funding from other service branches hinders the navy’s ability to receive the resources necessary for U.S. balancing of the PLA-N. In a 2020 report, for example, retired Gen. Mike Holmes (USAF) warned that “because the Air Force has not been allocated enough money to maintain the number of units required to meet current demands, ensure the readiness for countering peer adversaries, and transform force structure to meet the new threats, the service is at a breaking point.”⁶⁷ Second, the U.S. still has to contend with challenges posed by developments in the Middle East, in addition to a prolonged campaign of Russian expansionism. This stands in stark contrast to China, whose navy’s primary goal is to consolidate maritime hegemony in its region. The PLA-N already possesses geographical advantages over the U.S. in this regard, given the proximity of contested areas in the South and East China Sea to Chinese port facilities. In this sense, the U.S. is languishing under what Paul Kennedy describes as “imperial overstretch,” in which the global commitments of great powers become too costly to maintain.⁶⁸ Hal Brands and Evan Montgomery argue that the U.S. must inevitably “pare back its commitments to bring them into alignment with existing resources,” a move that would inevitably diminish Washington’s global credibility.⁶⁹ Analysts note that congressional budgetary irresponsibility, in addition to hesitancy within the navy to advance necessary reforms, are challenges that hinder plans to bolster naval capabilities.⁷⁰

American naval leaders have already warned of diminishing American maritime capabilities vis-à-vis China’s. In 2018 the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Adm. Phillip Davidson, testified that in all scenarios “short of a war with the United States,” China is “capable of controlling the South China Sea.” He also warned that “there is no guarantee that the United States would win a future conflict with China.”⁷¹ In February 2020, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence stated that by 2030, China’s force of “major surface combatants” including aircraft

carriers, destroyers, frigates, and corvettes will exceed those possessed by the U.S.⁷² In December 2020, retired Adm. Joe Sestak warned that the “Navy has now lost its assured command of the seas- for the first time in the post-World War II era – to China in the Western Pacific.”⁷³

TRUMP CONTAINMENT STRATEGY

In response to China’s rise and growing assertiveness, the Trump administration has espoused a policy of containment, as is consistent with the behavior of any declining power. Great power competition has since become a central theme of U.S. foreign policy, as exemplified by the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS).⁷⁴ Elbridge Colby and Wess Mitchell, two former Trump administration officials, wrote in Foreign Affairs that “beneath today’s ephemeral headlines, it is this shift, and the reordering of U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic behavior that it entails, that will stand out and likely drive U.S. foreign policy under president from either party for a long time to come.”⁷⁵

RHETORIC, HUMAN RIGHTS, SANCTIONS

The first element of Trump’s containment strategy is rooted in heightened criticism of China in official statements, briefings, and strategies. In October 2020, National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien named China “the threat of the century.”⁷⁶ In December 2020, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) John Ratcliffe asserted that China was “national security threat no.1” in an op-ed published in the Wall Street Journal.⁷⁷ The Trump administration has also emphasized China as a national security threat in several strategic documents, including the NSS and NDS, which labeled China a ‘revisionist power’. In November 2020, the policy planning staff at the State Department also released a 70-page paper titled “The Elements of the China Challenge”, which details a U.S. response to China’s “hegemonic ambitions” and desire to “revise the world order.”⁷⁸

On human rights issues, the U.S. has actively emphasized the plight of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. In October 2020, Robert O’Brien stated that “something close to genocide” was occurring in Xinjiang.⁷⁹ In December 2020, the U.S. officially banned imports of all Chinese cotton products made by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) due to concerns regarding forced labor.⁸⁰ Washington has also made symbolic moves to highlight its support for the Uyghurs. In October 2019, the White House appointed Uyghur-American Elnigar Iltebir to be the director for China affairs at the National Security Council (NSC).⁸¹ A similar story exists with Hong Kong. In November 2019, Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, authorizing the U.S. to sanction Hong Kong officials. The administration also signed an executive order ending Hong Kong’s preferential trade status with the U.S. following Beijing’s imposition of the National Security Law (NSL).⁸² Moreover, Washington has actively rallied allies to partake in such causes. In November 2020, for example, the five-eyes intelligence-sharing alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the U.S. released a joint statement urging China to revise their imposition of authoritarian measures in Hong Kong.⁸³ In October 2020, the State Department appointed Assistant Secretary of State Robert Destro to be Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, signaling a renewed commitment to raising awareness for the issue of religious repression in Tibet.⁸⁴

The U.S. has also put pressure on China through high-profile diplomatic challenges. In July 2020, the U.S. ordered China to shut down its consulate in Houston, labeling it a hub for Chinese espionage and influence operations. This prompted the Chinese to shut down the U.S. Consulate-General in Chengdu.⁸⁵ In June 2020, the State Department imposed new limits on the number of Chinese journalists allowed in the U.S., and designated specific Chinese media entities as “foreign missions,” asserting that the latter were “essentially owned by the

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PRC.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, in several key speeches, American officials have designated China as the U.S.’ primary national security threat. This began in October 2018, when Vice-President Mike Pence delivered confrontational remarks at the Hudson Institute.⁸⁷ In July 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a speech called “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” asserting that engagement with China had failed.⁸⁸ In September 2020, President Trump lambasted China for its mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic in front of the UN General Assembly.⁸⁹ The U.S. has also specifically targeted CCP officials for sanction and punishment. In July 2020, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Chinese Politburo member Chen Quanguo for his involvement in human rights abuses in Xinjiang.⁹⁰ In December 2020, the Trump administration also released new guidelines limiting all members of the CCP to single-entry visas.⁹¹



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AMONG OTHERS ANNOUNCED 23 CRIMINAL CHARGES AGAINST HUAWEI & ITS CFO WANZHOU MENG (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

ECONOMIC REALM

The second element of the Trump administration’s containment strategy has occurred in the economic realm, where the U.S. has actively sought a redress of trade concerns regarding a growing trade deficit, the dumping of Chinese products such as steel, and lack of intellectual property (IP) rights, through relying on tariffs and coercive economic measures. In 2018, the Trump administration imposed a 25% tariff on Chinese imports worth a collective 34 billion⁹² USD. Following the imposition of retaliatory tariffs by Beijing, the U.S. imposed 10% tariffs on Chinese imports worth an increased total of 200 billion USD.⁹³ Following negotiations over the Phase One trade deal, tariffs were reduced, although they have remained. The U.S. has reduced tariffs to 7.5% on Chinese imports worth 120 billion USD, and China has reduced tariffs on U.S. goods worth \$75 billion from 15% to 7.5%.⁹⁴ In August 2019, the U.S. also labeled China a currency manipulator, noting that China’s central bank has arbitrarily weakened the RMB on several occasions.⁹⁵ In December 2020, Trump is also expected to sign a bill that prevents Chinese companies from listing on American stock exchanges, unless they submit to U.S. auditing standards.⁹⁶

Furthermore, the Trump administration has sought to contain the success of Chinese technology giants such as Huawei, instructing Canadian authorities to arrest its CFO in 2018,⁹⁷ issuing new export controls in May 2020, and officially naming Huawei a national security threat in June 2020.⁹⁸ In November 2020, NSA Robert O’Brien named Huawei “the number one concern for democracy going forward.”⁹⁹ To this end, the U.S. has actively pressured allies to espouse similar policies against Huawei, including Great Britain and India.¹⁰⁰ It has also placed Huawei, along with telecom firms such as ZTE, on “entity lists” published by the Commerce Department, which essentially prohibits

American firms from conducting transactions with them.¹⁰¹ China's Ant Group, formerly known as Alipay, has also been blacklisted.¹⁰² The Trump administration has also placed thirty-five Chinese companies with alleged links to the PLA on defense blacklists, most recently adding chip making giant SMIC and gas producer CNOOC.¹⁰³ Such moves block their access to U.S. investors and restrict their supply of critical equipment from American suppliers. American concerns regarding semiconductor supply-chain security have also motivated the Department of Commerce to bar entry for Chinese firms, mandating companies to obtain a license before they can be allowed to provide goods and services to firms such as SMIC.¹⁰⁴ In November 2020, the U.S. drafted another list of eighty-nine Chinese firms with ties to the PLA.¹⁰⁵

MILITARY REALM

The third element of Trump's containment strategy is in the military realm, where the United States has actively built an emerging coalition in the Indo-Pacific to check China's increasing assertiveness in the East China and South China Seas. Together with members of the "Quad," namely India, Japan, and Australia, the U.S. has increased the number of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) it conducts in the South China Sea and has participated in a growing number of multilateral naval exercises. In November 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated that the U.S. would "demonstrate resolve through operational presence in the South China Sea."¹⁰⁶ Between 2018 and 2019 alone, U.S. navy vessels sailed in a twelve-mile range of Chinese-claimed territory over twelve times, a substantial increase in numbers seen during the Obama administration.¹⁰⁷ In November 2020, naval ships and aircraft from all Quad members participated in the Malabar 2020 Exercises, in the Bay of Bengal.¹⁰⁸ In the same month, the U.S. navy conducted a four-day mine warfare exercise with naval vessels from the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).¹⁰⁹ Defense ties between the U.S. and Indo-Pacific partners have also deepened. In November 2020, for example, NSA Robert O'Brien announced the delivery of precision-guided missiles among other weapons to the Philippine military, while affirming that an attack on a Philippine vessel in its territorial waters would trigger American defense obligations.¹¹⁰ American defense contractors have also cooperated with Japan to

produce joint weapons capabilities, most recently completing the development of the SM-3 ballistic missile interceptor, which was successfully tested in November 2020.¹¹¹

The U.S. has also actively expanded defense ties with Taiwan, which China considers a wayward province. Arms sales to Taiwan have occurred at a far greater frequency, and weapons sold to Taiwan have become increasingly sophisticated. In 2018, the Trump administration approved the sale of submarine-related subsystems to aid Taiwan's fledgling indigenous submarine program.¹¹² In July 2020, the U.S. approved the sale of Patriot missiles to replenish Taiwan's aging arsenal.¹¹³ In October 2020, the U.S. approved the sale of AGM-84H SLAM-ER missiles and HIMARS batteries, which when deployed in Taiwan, will be capable of striking targets on Chinese bases and airfields.¹¹⁴ The U.S. navy has also conducted operations aimed at bolstering deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. In June 2020 for example, the Aegis destroyer USS Russell crossed the Taiwan Strait.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the U.S. has adopted additional advisory and logistical support roles for Taiwan's military. In June 2020, the U.S. Army took the rare move of publicizing joint military training between American and Taiwanese special forces in annual "Balance Temper" training sessions.¹¹⁶ In November 2020, officials from Taiwan's Naval Command confirmed reports that members of the U.S. Marine Corps' (USMC) Marine Raider Regiment had conducted training alongside Taiwanese troops in Taiwan.¹¹⁷ In the same month, two-star Navy admiral Michael Studeman, who oversees U.S. military intelligence in the Asia-Pacific, paid an unannounced visit to Taiwan.¹¹⁸

Lastly, the U.S. has highlighted the Indo-Pacific as the priority theater for its armed forces now and moving into the future. In June 2020, three U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups conducted simultaneous operations in the Indo-Pacific in a robust show of force.¹¹⁹ In September 2020, the Ronald Reagan carrier strike group integrated over eleven-thousand personnel and one hundred aircraft between four service branches to conduct Operation Valiant Shield in the Philippine Sea.¹²⁰ The following month, the South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI) released a report stating that U.S. spy planes had conducted flights targeting China sixty times across the span of September.¹²¹ In October 2020, a Chinese military spokesperson stated that

"The U.S. has also actively expanded defense ties with Taiwan, which China considers a wayward province."

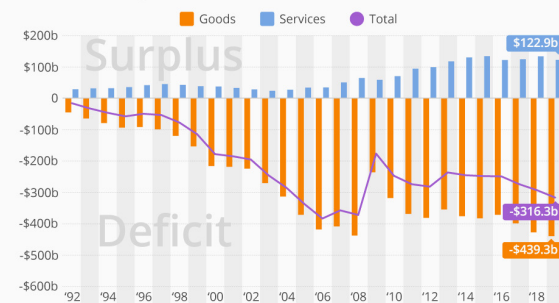
the USS John McCain had entered disputed waters near the Paracel Islands.¹²² In November 2020, the U.S. Secretary of the Navy called for the establishment of a U.S. 1st Fleet, to be based at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.¹²³ It has also sought increased engagement with allies to facilitate U.S. hegemony. In October 2020 for example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged Indonesia to find “new ways” of cooperation in the South China Sea.¹²⁴ Lastly, the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, recently authorized by the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), will see the U.S. allocate an additional 6 billion USD in military funding to bolster deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.¹²⁵

EFFECTIVENESS AND CHINESE RESPONSES

The Trump administration’s containment policy has not led to productive trade relations with China, stability in the Indo-Pacific, or more robust alliances. Washington’s trade war has hurt the American taxpayer and firms more than it has the Chinese economy. More FONOPSS and increased cooperation with the Quad have not compelled China to moderate its assertive behavior in the South China Sea. The imposition of sanctions on Chinese officials over human rights concerns, has similarly not compelled China to cease its campaigns of ethnic cleansing and repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, respectively. Instead, China’s exports have grown while the U.S. trade deficit has ballooned, Chinese military activity in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait has increased, and vulnerabilities in U.S. alliance structure have become more apparent. China’s economic and military capabilities, furthermore, continue to grow. In this sense, Trump’s containment policy

Trade Deficit Climbs to Decade High in First Half of 2019

U.S. trade balance in goods and services trade for the first six months of 1992-2019



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AMERICAN GLOBAL TRADE DEFICIT
(COURTESY OF STATISTA)

has failed to reverse trends favoring China in power relations with the U.S.

TRADE WAR VULNERABILITIES:

Despite the Trump administration’s touted successes, the U.S.-China War has imposed high costs on American taxpayers rather than Chinese firms. The nonpartisan Tax Foundation notes that the U.S.-China trade conflict has imposed 80 billion USD worth of new taxes on the American public due to U.S. tariffs on thousands of Chinese products.¹²⁶ Tariffs imposed by the administration are estimated to reduce long-term GDP by 0.23%, wage levels by 0.15%, and result in the loss of over 179,000 full-time jobs.¹²⁷ A September 2019 study by Moody’s Analytics was even more pessimistic, estimating that the trade war had already decreased U.S. real GDP by 0.3% and resulted in the loss of 300,000 American jobs.¹²⁸ Furthermore, a report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and Columbia University concluded that the trade war would result in the loss of 316 billion USD for the U.S. economy by the end of 2020.¹²⁹ Especially hurt are U.S. soybean, pork, and dairy farmers, who have seen revenue decline as China’s tariffs hurt exports.¹³⁰ Concerns prompted a spokesperson for the American Farm Bureau to warn that farmers have “lost the vast majority of what was once a \$24 billion market in China.”¹³¹

Furthermore, the trade war has not succeeded in achieving its primary goal of lessening the U.S. global trade deficit. In October 2020, the U.S. trade deficit ballooned to 67.1 billion USD, a fourteen-year high.¹³² The trade deficit with China has not decreased substantially either. Between 2017 and 2018, the U.S. trade deficit with China in goods actually grew from 375 billion to 418 billion USD, although it has since decreased to \$252 billion in 2020.¹³³ Additionally, the trade war has not succeeded in slowing China’s economic growth. China’s economy is projected to grow even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and growth in exports recently reached its highest rate since February 2018. The amount of Chinese exports in December 2020 was 21.1% greater than total exports in December 2019.¹³⁴ Firms such as Huawei have also continued to see growth in revenue, hitting a record 122 billion USD in profits during the 2019 fiscal year.¹³⁵

Moreover, targets in the Phase One trade deal have been shown to be simply unrealistic. In the first half of 2020, China had only purchased 23% of the goods they were supposed to purchase annually. China has pledged to

spend an additional 60 billion USD on American goods in 2018, but this would be practically impossible, given that American exports to China have declined significantly year-on-year.¹³⁶ Lastly, the trade war has bolstered perceptions among Chinese elites that Washington feels threatened by its rise, reinforcing Chinese confidence. Wei Jianguo, a former top Chinese trade official, has stated that “the essence of the trade war is to destroy” an increasingly capable China.¹³⁷ Fu Ying, former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, has stated that U.S. policy towards China is to “slow it down through suppression”, as it contends with a fight “the declining superpower cannot afford to lose.”¹³⁸ As the U.S. pushes economic containment, Chinese elites become increasingly aware of the shortcomings in U.S. capacity to respond effectively.

COMPOUNDING CHINESE FEARS OF ENCIRCLEMENT:

Trump’s China policy has also exacerbated Chinese fears regarding its external security infrastructure, motivating increased assertiveness from the PLA, as opposed to less. Fears regarding encirclement were particularly evident following Obama’s pivot to Asia in 2012, and have accelerated rapidly in the context of U.S. containment policy.

The pivot to Asia first emerged in 2011, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote an article in Foreign Policy titled “America’s Pacific Century”. Clinton affirmed that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia”, and that the “United States will be right at the center of the action.”¹³⁹ Through “forward-deployed diplomacy”, Clinton articulated U.S. desire to “build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific that is as durable and as consistent with American interests...as the web we have built across the Atlantic.”¹⁴⁰ In 2012, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said that the U.S. military would bring “enhanced capabilities to this vital region.”¹⁴¹ Key features of the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia” included the proposed deployment of 60% of U.S.’ submarines to the Asia-Pacific by 2020.¹⁴² During the pivot, the U.S. announced arms sales to Taiwan,¹⁴³ started annual exercises with the Vietnamese Navy, expanded naval exercises with Japan, signed new arms agreements with the Philippines, and bolstered U.S. military

capabilities on the Korean peninsula.¹⁴⁴ In 2012, Australia, Japan, and South Korea participated in U.S.-Philippine military exercises for the first time.¹⁴⁵ In November 2011, Clinton announced U.S. opposition to bilateral negotiations over China’s territorial claims, opting to support ASEAN’s calls for multilateral talks. In 2012, she asserted that Chinese claims violated the law of the sea.¹⁴⁶ This contrasted with the approach of previous administrations, which emphasized only U.S. interests in freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute settlement.¹⁴⁷

Chinese leaders understand that Beijing’s own aggressive maneuvering, rooted in rising confidence and regional ambitions, was the catalyst for these developments. Regardless, they have long viewed these attempts as a multilateral effort to encircle China with a network of U.S. allies.¹⁴⁸ In the 2000s, former President Hu Jintao said in private deliberations that “the United States has strengthened its military deployments in the Asia-Pacific region. They have extended outposts and placed pressure points on us from the east, south, and west. This marks a great change in our geopolitical environment.”¹⁴⁹ PLA Air Force colonel Dai Xu warned in 2010 that American interests in Japan, the South China Sea, India, and Afghanistan create a “C-shaped encirclement ring” that restricts China’s “strategic space.”¹⁵⁰ A Ministry of Defense White Paper, published in 2015, asserted that China must “safeguard its national unification, territorial integrity, and development interests” as “the world economic and strategic center of gravity is shifting ever more rapidly to the Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁵¹ The Trump administration has exacerbated these concerns through bolstering force posture in the region, and expanding security cooperation with China’s neighbors in the Indo-Pacific.

While these deterrence-building moves are perceived as defensive by Washington, they are likely perceived differently in Beijing, given challenges associated with Robert Jervis’ notion of the “security dilemma.”¹⁵² Jervis contends that it is difficult for states to differentiate between offensive and defensive capabilities. The deployment of ballistic missile defense by an actor may be defensive in orientation for example, but it still increases the threat perception

“Trump’s China policy has also exacerbated Chinese fears regarding its external security infrastructure, motivating increased assertiveness from the PLA...”

other states hold of the actor given that it diminishes their offensive capabilities. This happens despite neither side intending to escalate tensions.¹⁵³ Moreover, in an anarchic structure, the intentions of other states are always obfuscated, leading to potential misconceptions in any great power relationship.

In response to increased American activity in the region, China has ramped up military activity. In Ladakh during June 2020, the PLA engaged in skirmishes with Indian troops, ultimately claiming the lives of twenty. Gen. Zhao Zongqi, head of the PLA Western Theater Command, has suggested that the motivation behind China's attack was to ensure it did "not appear weak" during "exploitation by the U.S."¹⁵⁴ In the Taiwan Strait, on an almost-daily basis, PLA Air Force (PLAAF) Y-8 and Y-9 surveillance aircraft have incurred on Taiwan's declared Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). In October 2020, Taiwanese Defense Minister Yan De-fa announced that Taiwan's air force had scrambled fighters 2,972 times throughout the year, marking a 129% increase in scrambles from 2019. This had aroused worries among analysts that China is pursuing 'grayzone' warfare through gradually weakening Taiwan by exhausting its air force.¹⁵⁵ The PLA has also conducted an increased number of drills and exercises aimed at Taiwan.¹⁵⁶ On Taiwan's National Day in October 2020, the PLA conducted a large-scale exercise featuring drones, special forces, and airborne troops meant to simulate an invasion of Taiwan. Following the exercise, the PLA announced a four-day, live-fire exercise in the Taiwan Strait. In the South China Sea, Chinese assertiveness has been growing as well. In May 2019, China deployed its Coast Guard to harass Vietnamese and Malaysian vessels servicing a drilling platform off Vietnamese waters.¹⁵⁷⁻¹⁵⁸ In March 2020, China built two new research stations in Fiery Cross Reef and Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands, equipping them with defense silos and runways that can support PLA air force (PLAAF) fighter jets.¹⁵⁹ In April 2020, Vietnam lodged an official complaint after a Chinese maritime surveillance vessel sunk a Vietnamese shipping boat.¹⁶⁰ In July 2020, the PLA-N conducted exercises in the South China Sea centered around amphibious assault activities.¹⁶¹

Thus, it is clear that increased deterrence-building in the Indo-Pacific has not moderated China's military assertiveness. Instead, it has compounded long-held Chinese fears of encirclement, driving increasingly aggressive behavior as Beijing seeks to discourage renewed American commitment to the Indo-Pacific. The beginnings of an arms race and naval buildup between the two sides, as seen prior to

WWI between Britain and Germany, have substantially decreased the prospects for peace and stability in the region.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the Trump administration's containment policy against China has failed to slow China's economic growth or moderate assertive Chinese behavior. Instead, the Chinese have benefited from continued growth in export demand, seen record profits for flagship companies such as Huawei, and ramped up military activity in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The U.S.-China trade war has provided comprehensive proof that decoupling with China is unfeasible, and that full-fledged, Mearsheimer-style containment against Beijing does nothing but exacerbate Chinese insecurities regarding strategic encirclement, motivating arms races and thus, regional instability.

This is not to say, that decline is inevitable. Indeed, the U.S. - the only multicultural great power in the history of the world - possesses a host of advantages in its geography, and pre-existing economic, military, and technological capabilities that could be leveraged to sustain the continuation of Pax Americana. Under President-elect Biden, Washington is expected to eschew an isolationist mentality, bridge divisions at home, and place renewed emphasis on American alliances. It is also expected to upgrade U.S. defense capabilities, specifically in high-tech domains such as AI and 5G, make C4ISR networks more resilient, and test new joint operational concepts such as multi-domain operations as part of a broader shift in defense policy away from power in mass.¹⁶² Whether the Biden administration succeeds in these endeavors will determine whether this remains the American century.

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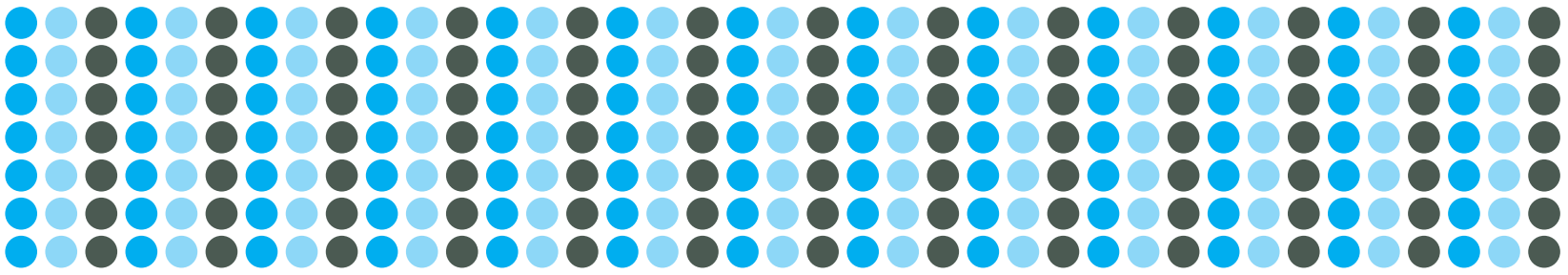
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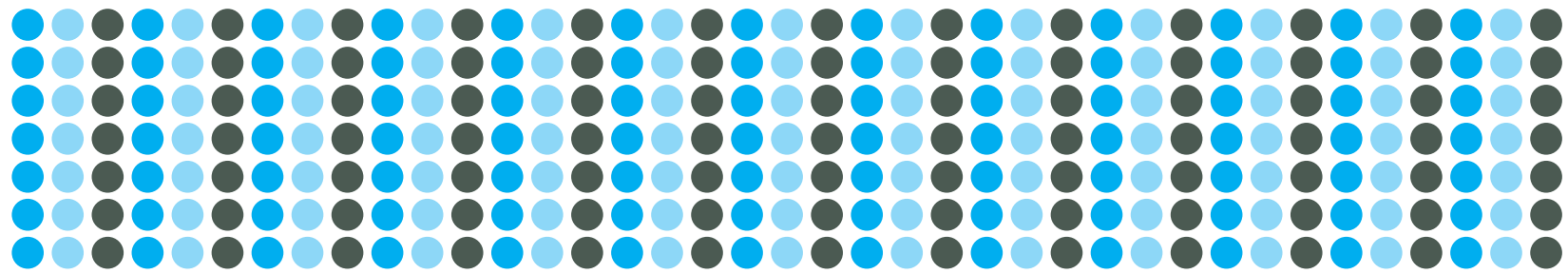
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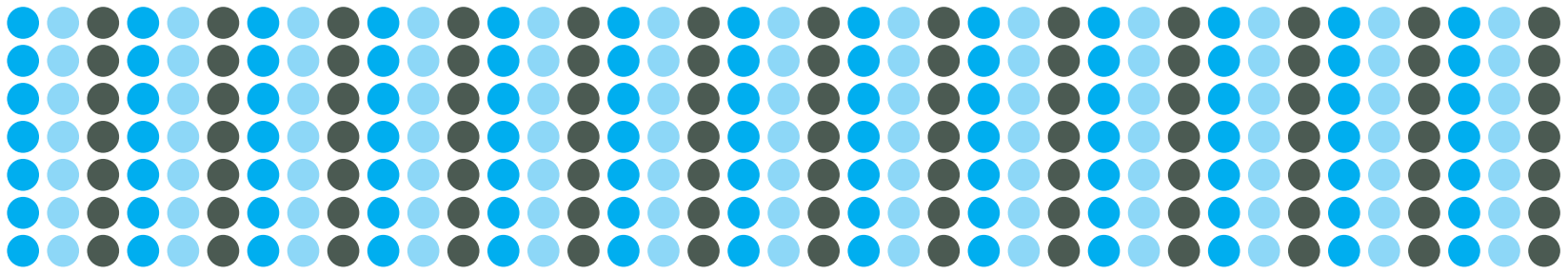
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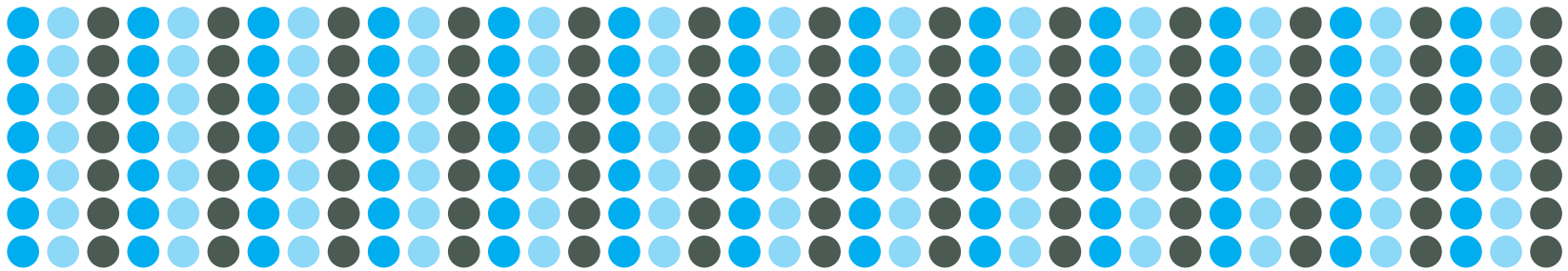
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