**APSI Special Report: Understanding the Strategic Threats From China to Asia-Pacific Region and Beyond**

On July 4, 2024, the APSI was privileged to host its recent Strategic Forum Discussion on the Geopolitics of Cooperation over Open Waters led by Dr. Anita Abbott. This in-depth discussion featured several distinguished geopolitical experts: Prof. Mumin Chen, Deputy of the Representative of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Center in New Delhi; Prof. Amit Gupta, Senior Advisor, Forum of Federation; Brigadier Kuldip Singh, the former Principal Director, National Security Council Secretariat & Joint Intelligence Committee, Prime Minister's Office, India; Dov Lipman, Member of the 19th Knesset and CEO of Yad L’ Olim; and Prof. Amer Al Sabaileh, Nonresident Fellow for the Middle East and North Africa at the Stimson Center.

The forum highlighted the serious challenges facing the world in several key hot spots: the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Israel’s ongoing war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and the persistent threats posed by North Korea and Iran as state sponsors of terror and nuclear proliferation. But perhaps the most significant challenge facing all countries of the Pacific Rim is the belligerent projection of military and economic power by the People’s Republic of China led by Xi Jinping and the CCP. China poses a unique threat to the world as it has transformed from a primarily insular, regional power to an aspiring world hegemon seeking dominance over areas as far away as Africa and South America.

Historically, China has focused on land borders and has had limited engagement with high seas. Post-Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, China’s dependence on global sea lanes for importing energy and raw materials and exporting goods increased significantly. The panel underscored several important maritime vulnerabilities with significant contributions from Brig. Singh.

**Maritime Vulnerabilities:**

1. **East China and South China Seas:** 
   1. The East China Sea (ECS) is enclosed by the Kuril Islands, Korean Peninsula, Japan, Taiwan, and the Ryukyu Islands, making China susceptible to blockades. China’s options here are more limited due to the robust American military presence in Japan and South Korea.
   2. The South China Sea (SCS) is similarly enclosed, and the positioning of Taiwan can effectively isolate China’s northeastern coast from the southern side. This concern is no doubt a factor in the promulgation of the “nine-dash-line” around the South China Sea which China claims to virtually universal rejection by the world community.
   3. The U.S. has the strategic capability to blockade China by positioning naval assets outside these island barriers, a concept aligned with the U.S.’s historical "defense perimeter" or “containment line” strategy defined in the 1950s. The Philippines’ recent valiant efforts to resist Chinese claims have nonetheless appeared largely symbolic and ineffective.
2. **Indian Ocean:**
   1. Much of China’s energy and trade passes through the Indian Ocean, with the Malacca Dilemma highlighting China’s vulnerability.
   2. India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands strategically overlook the Malacca Strait, further aggravating China’s concerns. The Belt and Road Initiative is one approach China is taking to mitigate this chokepoint and bypass Indian maritime control.

**China’s Strategic Development Plans:**

1. **Naval Power Enhancement.** China has prioritized strengthening the PLA Navy (PLAN) to protect its extended sea lines and economic interests.
2. **Diversifying Energy Routes.** China is developing overland pipelines and rail routes through Russia and Central Asia as part of the OBOR/BRI initiative.
3. **String of Pearls Strategy.** This involves commercial investments and infrastructure development in ports across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to mitigate strategic vulnerabilities. While primarily commercial, some ports could serve as logistical hubs for the PLAN.

**Indian Ocean Strategic Competition:**

* **India’s Growing Military Capabilities.** India’s military buildup, partnerships with Japan, and strengthening ties with the U.S. are concerns for Beijing, pushing it to take India more seriously in military strategy, technological advancements, and strategic alliances.

**Analysis:**

1. **Peacetime vs. Wartime Basing:**
   * Peacetime basing involves operational turnaround at foreign ports.
   * Wartime basing requires substantial capability to defend from attacks, something China currently lacks in the IOR.
2. **Home-Theater Advantage:**
   * India’s geographic proximity provides it with a significant advantage in the IOR, particularly in the Maldives and Sri Lanka.
3. **Potential Strategic Risks:**
   * Both India and China may be willing to take strategic risks in the IOR due to their respective vulnerabilities and ambitions.

**Conclusion:**

* The Indian Ocean remains a critical area of strategic competition, influenced by both regional dynamics and broader geopolitical concerns involving the U.S. and other powers.
* Growing partnerships with China’s adversaries could exacerbate tensions rather than mitigate them.
* Strategic developments and alliances will continue to shape the geopolitical landscape in this crucial region.