

Harsh Realities, Alliances, and Strategic Ambiguity: US Policy Choices in East Asia

Written by Harry Kazianis

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/23/harsh-realities-alliances-and-strategic-ambiguity-us-policy-choices-in-east-asia-2/>

HARRY KAZIANIS, SEP 23 2011

Recent developments in the South China Sea and China's emphasis on the modernization of its military raise important issues for the future of U.S. strategic manoeuvring in the region. What can be done to sustain future U.S. presence in Asia while tactfully maintaining a favourable position for its interests and the stability in the region?

A Competition Declared

Over the last few years much has been written theorizing possible competition and confrontation between the United States and China. A passionate debate has ensued seeking to answer this important question. On March 2, 2011, the debate ended with a definitive answer. It was on this date that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, while testifying to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, removed any speculation:

"We are in a competition for influence with China. Let's put aside the humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in. Let's just talk straight *realpolitik*. We are in competition with China." [1]

She would go on to detail Chinese attempts to outflank Exxon Mobile for Liquefied Natural Gas resources in Papua New Guinea: "Exxon Mobil is producing it. China is in there every day, in every way, trying to figure out how it's going to come in behind us, come in under us".

Such a pronouncement of declaring open competition is rare. Diplomatic interactions and security competitions throughout history have more typically been fraught with secrecy, shadowy statements and staged propaganda on both sides. However, any analyst following US-China relations has seen the writing on the wall for some time. Much has been written about the impending US move away from the "war on terror" to the growing security rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China. It is clear that, as tensions rise, a growing security competition will define the future of East Asia. The United States' reaction to this growing competition will likely be one of the defining events of the 21st century.

Events Forgotten To Some, Not To Others

While the US has gone off to war twice in the Middle East since 2001, China has developed a world-class economy that now ranks second in total Gross Domestic Product. Prior to 9/11, there was much talk about the US and China clashing as their interests began to diverge, and as the memory of Cold War camaraderie began to fade. As Frank Ching argues, China benefited from a lack of US focus on Asian affairs over the last ten years.

"With the demise of the Soviet Union, the George W. Bush administration came to office in January 2001 seeing China as the next enemy. The new US government's intention was to strengthen ties with US allies in Asia, especially Japan and South Korea, and to bolster Taiwan's political and military position." [2]

To be fair, tensions in East Asia have been present for some time, dating back to the Cold War or longer. Even before the Bush Administration came into office, tensions seemed to be simmering from a slow boil for some time. In 1996,

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the US and China locked horns over Taiwan – a crisis which saw the US deploy carrier battle groups to the region. In April 2001, the US-China relationship was once more shaken profoundly when an American EP-3 surveillance craft and a Chinese fighter jet collided. It seemed that future battle lines were beginning to be drawn as the crescendo of tensions continued unabated. Three months later, events in New York would put this collision course on hold.

As the events of 9/11 took over US foreign policy, with battle being waged against terrorism and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Chinese security experts were able to reassess the events of the last few years. Chinese officials never again wanted to be at a disadvantage with the US again, if a crisis were to break out in the future. Largely due to this strategic analysis, China has made massive strides in the building of its armed forces. Defense budgets annually increase at double digits every year. China, unable to purchase US or European equipment, developed strong ties to Russian defense contractors to gain the latest weaponry possible. China's military has now been transformed in less than twenty years. It now includes fourth generation fighter aircraft, Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) submarine technology, nuclear-powered submarines (with attack and ballistic missile capabilities), the world's only anti-ship ballistic missile system, and a newly refurbished Soviet-era aircraft carrier. Learning from the past, and taking advantage of a notable absence of any active US role in East Asia, China now appears prepared militarily if confrontation were to happen once more.

Doing More With Less

With China flexing its economic and military muscles, US strategic planners are faced with stark choices. The United States faces the dual challenges of crafting new foreign policy and security strategies that focus on the increasing great power tensions with China. This will be complicated as US military resources shrink, and as new political and economic realities set in. A sobering assessment from the prominent website *Foreign Policy* explained:

“(It is) the second phase of debt reduction that has the potential to be extraordinarily damaging to defense. If the bipartisan commission cannot reach agreement, it will trigger automatic across the board cuts of \$1.2 trillion beginning in 2013. It would appear likely the bipartisan commission will, in fact, deadlock, in which case a 50-50 domestic and defense split would require DOD to cut spending an additional \$600 billion. *It would mean a 14 percent cut overall to defense spending.* This DOD could not do without a major reconfiguration of forces and capabilities, and a major reduction in our actual fighting power.”[3]

In an era of shrinking resources, it is clear that US forces will be called upon to create new strategic plans, and to redeploy assets to face the possibility of future conflict with China. This presents a multitude of strategic challenges the US must begin to recognize and develop strategies in response to. A growing China with increasing abilities to contest US interests presents a looming set of challenges at a time when US economic realities constrain its capabilities to react. Joseph Nye, in a plea to the new bipartisan debt commission in the form of an op-ed to the *New York Times*, framed the debate accurately:

“Over the course of this century, Asia will return to its historic status, with more than half of the world's population and half of the world's economic output. America must be present there. Markets and economic power rest on political frameworks, and American military power provides that framework. Military security is to order as oxygen is to breathing: underappreciated until it becomes scarce. That is why the new bipartisan Congressional commission must provide the revenues that allow America to continue to play this vital role while avoiding the trap of overly ambitious nation-building.”[4]

Luckily, the US retains a large set of advantages at its disposal, even when one considers its current economic malaise and debt issues. The US clearly has the largest and most advanced armed forces in the world. However, with growing pressure to shrink its military budget, and a Chinese military that is expanding its defense budget rapidly, the US must begin to recognize that the relative gap between both powers, however large, is shrinking. When one also considers that the US must deploy its forces globally, while nations like China can focus large sections of their military power on geographically-restricted zones of possible armed conflict, the gap shrinks even more.'

US military planners must begin the process of formulating a new strategic vision going forward with less generous

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budgets than in the past. Luckily, other nations in East Asia see the rising challenge of a growing Chinese military and are looking to formulate partnerships.

Policy Recommendations

1. The US must look back to similar situations in its past Sino-American relations to guide current strategic thinking.
2. US strategic planners and their allies must use ambiguity, allowing actions to dictate intent to Chinese military and strategic planners.
3. The US needs to push much harder to develop strong military-to-military, commercial and economic ties with India.
4. The United States must continue to move combat systems closer to areas of potential conflict in East Asia. Balance must be struck to increase US and allied capabilities while avoiding a Chinese counter reaction.
5. The United States must maintain and strengthen its relationship with Japan.
6. With Chinese moves in East Timor and Fiji already being looked at by Australia, the US and Australia must take measured steps to increase their level of military-to-military cooperation on all levels.
7. US, India, Japan and Australia should consider sharing the burden of military hardware design and development.
8. Continue the development of the Air/Sea Battle concept to unify the combined power of the US Navy and Air Force to maximize combat effectiveness.
9. The US and its partners, along with China, must work to create multiple avenues to de-escalate tensions and build institutions that mitigate the push towards competition.

Harry Kazianis is a Deputy editor of *e-IR* and policy analyst at the *Foreword Report*. You can read the Full text of this Report [here](#).

[1] "Clinton says China seeks to outflank Exxon in Papua New Guinea." *Reuters*. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/02/us-china-usa-clinton-idUSTRE7215UV20110302> (accessed August 19, 2011).

[2] Frank Ching, "Why China Needed Bin Laden ." *The Diplomat*. <http://the-diplomat.com/2011/05/26/why-china-needed-bin-laden/> (accessed August 22, 2011).

[3] Kori Schake, "The three percent solution." *Foreign Policy*. http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/02/the_three_percent_solution (accessed August 19, 2011).

[4] Joseph Nye Jr., "The Right Way to Trim Military Spending ." *The New York Times* . http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/05/opinion/the-right-way-to-trim-military-spending.html?_r=3 (accessed August 20, 2011).

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Harry serves as Editor-In-Chief for The Diplomat as well as a CSIS: WSD Handa Fellow. He has served in the past as Deputy Editor for e-IR. He specializes in security studies with a keen interest in modern Chinese military strategy and foreign policy. Harry has written in publications including The Diplomat, East Asia Forum and the Foreword Report.