

# The Asia-Pacific Scramble and a 'Larger Australia'

Written by Strobe Driver

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STROBE DRIVER, MAR 30 2015

### Australia and Its Pathway

Approximately one year has passed since Dr. Micheal Fullilove addressed the *National Press Club* with a speech entitled 'A Larger Australia,' in which he dealt with numerous issues that Australia will face in the coming decades. The speech was essentially about the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) per se, and encompassed issues such as economic growth. This was summed up by the statement—"China's economy should be the world's biggest within the next decade..."—the Asia-Pacific (A-P) region and the sovereign-state relationships therein; the increasing geo-strategic impacts China and the United States of America (US) will have on the region; and the possible outcomes of both powers as they strive to meet their challenges in this realm. With regard to Australia, Fullilove stipulated one way in which Australia would be able come to terms with the impending pressures cum dangers that may arise over the next two decades. Fullilove argued Australia should have an 'extensive diplomatic network and a capable military.' Fullilove further stipulated another pathway that would allow Australia to evolve and retain its power-base in the A-P region is to retain our historical allegiances with the US. Thus, "our alliance with Washington is overwhelmingly in our national interest" and therefore, any downgrading of the alliance is 'wrong-headed.' It is a moot point whether this statement is ingrained in the history of the A-P region as per US involvement with Australia after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor; and the subsequent bombing of Darwin, followed by the whirlwind advances of the Imperial Japanese Forces (IJF) into the Pacific in World War Two (WWII). It is suffice to state that Australia's security during this time was undoubtedly important to stemming the advances of IJF, however this was not the top priority of the US—aiding Australia was *seventh* on the US' list of priorities.[1]

Therefore the rise of China is not unique in the region per se, as numerous nations have vied for primacy in the region, and on many fronts. The 'Asian Tigers,' Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, exemplify the fight for industry- cum economic-based primacy, Hong Kong as a protectorate of Britain (and now governed by China) as a sea-transport hub, and the government of India's attempts to make Mumbai a powerful financial centre are only several examples of post-WWII A-P competitiveness. However what is taking place, and will continue to build momentum, will be vastly different than what has gone before. Correlations that can be drawn and two that offer an understanding of why emergent nation-states expand when the 'time is right,' is Britain prior to and continuing through its Industrial Revolution (*circa*-1750 to 1918)[2], and the US taking advantage of the toll on European, Asian and Baltic states immediately after the end of WWII.

Due to the profound and continuing rise of China there will come with this many newfound issues for Australia in the coming decades which will need to be astutely addressed. Many of them will have been formed from an economic base-of-dependence and with it a continued an economic reliance on China, as this has already been in place and built over the last several decades. Hence, Australia will encounter significant problems both economic and strategically if China's rise is mismanaged and recent statistics would suggest the Australian economy remains dependent on and is being incrementally built upon China—and a peaceful A-P region. Moreover, for this state-of-affairs to continue Australia will have to be ever-vigilant and acutely aware of China's manoeuvrings whilst taking into account its vulnerabilities as a geographic position—not unlike that of the Pacific phase of WWII—and also continually monitor its historic allies as well as seek new, dependable polity in order to retain its current position. What is certain is the A-P region will have to be viewed through a new prism and in doing so Australia must be critically aware of a potential collision between the US and China and be prepared to act with due diligence and

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efficiency or there will exist the possibility of being 'caught in the crossfire' of A-P tensions. It is with this in mind and through this prism that forthcoming tensions in the scramble for control of the A-P that can now be addressed.

## **The Rise of Japan and the United States: A Brief Perspective**

At the commencement of the Pacific phase of WWII with the (December, 1941) bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Imperial Japanese Air Force (IJAF), Japan had already achieved significant regional-power status with incursions into Russia, Korea, and China. Moreover, it had won the Japan-Russo War (1904 – 1905) and it utilized the successes of Nazi Germany to venture much further than its original regional power-base. With the advent and initial successes of WWII, the IJF would reach as far southeast as the Solomon Islands. There were however, significant problems in the rapidness of the strategic advances and major issues quickly came to the fore. Notably, Japan had failed to secure allies in the Pacific theatre that would willingly support their hegemonic ambitions, and combined with it being an island nation with a near-total dependence on petrol-oil-lubricant (POL) imports, the Emperor's forces would be incapable of keeping supply lines open—or what in modern day military parlance is called, sea-lines-of-communication (SLOC)—and these, along with many other issues, would hinder any long-term control over the region. The end result would be Japan being resoundingly defeated; suffer immediate sole strategic displacement in 1945; be forced into forming a direct geo-strategic partnership with the US and its allies; and be brought under near-complete US dominance in the second. The capitulation of Japan would bring the US to power and allow it to exercise SLOC into the Pacific—a control it still maintains to this day. A germane yet worthwhile point to make is in order for the US to sustain its controls over the region in a post-WWII world and to keep the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) in check, the US would advance on its gains and essentially annex Okinawa—which effectively became a suzerain-state of the US—and in doing so, would allow it to exercise an inordinate amount of control over the A-P regions waterways.

The fury of the Pacific phase of the 'total war' [3] of WWII aside, it is pertinent to again stipulate Japan had never extended control further than its littoral region and more to the point, there was never any expression within Japan's political polity to exercise control beyond this region. Alternatively the US, having achieved victory advanced upon the geo-strategic freedoms that WWII had inadvertently caused, and the A-P region was only one area the US would exercise its military muscle. To be certain it was not only the US that would extend its power-base as Australia would attempt to co-dominate the A-P region, France would venture into Southeast Asia and Africa, the USSR in the Eastern-bloc countries and Britain in Malaya, the South Atlantic and the Indian Oceans to name only several other geo-strategic undertakings by powerful nation-states, and their dedicated navies. Observing the aforementioned geo-strategic and geo-political manoeuvrings and the, albeit brief, concomitant histories neatly segues into the reason geo-strategy is different in the twenty-first century; why the change will be far more drastic than those that played out for Australia in WWII; and more importantly why it will be so difficult to accept another Asian foray into the what has been a 'Western lake.'

## **The 'Baggage of History' for the West**

It can be argued from broader geo-political and geo-strategic standpoints there is a deeper malcontent at play for the West: the rise of China has caught the ever-perceptive and all-conquering West—or what has been called the 'Vasco da Gama era'[4] or the 'Atlantic-centric world order'[5]—off guard. Notwithstanding, the deeper historical malaise there has been as a long-term accompaniment and hence, a belief, that China will somehow be incapable of continuing its successful upward trajectory. This factor, along with the aforementioned resides in historical inculcations the West has managed to build up over time. In a broad-base way it is able to be summed up under a dyad: 'orientalism,' and the consequent Euro-centric stereotyping of 'otherness.' These interlinked and imbued understanding the West has developed is through an ongoing narrative, one that has harnessed the West to the notions that non-Westerners are essentially unable to continually 'progress,' and therefore they are essentially deficient in their reasoning and rationales which have been perpetually reinforced through, the prism of West—and at the core of these belief is the Enlightenment (1685 – 1815). As the West 'scientifically and rationally' advanced it developed an overarching attitude of supremacy which according to Said led to a 'one way exchange when *they* [the Oriental/non-Westerner] spoke, and behaved, *he* [the European] observed and wrote down,'[6] and this would create, inform and then fuel inherent biases toward non-European peoples. In the processes of the persistent tenet

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of the exploration-occupation-interpretation which became a paradigm that was continually fuelled by expansion and would benefit Europeans even greater benefits as it would offer the European a 'naturally grander rating,' which is often loosely referred to as 'social Darwinism.' Concomitant to this, the dominant thread of the '[o]mnipresent perception that drives notions of progress and defines notions of Enlightenment [became] embedded in Western and colonialist discourses and systems of knowing today'[7] remained firmly in place. To be sure, there are many more aspects that inform and underpin why the West is unable to accept the ongoing and ascending progress of China however, to decouple the West from its centuries-long influences would be to ignore the obvious; and encourage a retreat from admitting to the way in which the West has moulded the geo-strategic and geo-political tenets of the world.

### **The Mechanisms of China's Rise**

The rise of China however, should not have come as much of a surprise to the West and in particular to the US as it has, given that the West has dominated the information and technology realms for several centuries. Aside from the inbuilt prejudices alluded to in the above, why is this the case? China began its incremental movement toward greater world involvement in earnest in 1974 with the *Shanghai Communiqué*, which diffused Taiwan as a source of tension between China and the US,[8] and 'secured a major role for China on the stage of world politics.'[9] The foundation of entering into world politics was summarily advanced upon by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 with the Four Modernizations—industry, agriculture, science and technology and national defence.[10] There would be a litany of international relations objectives to follow as Deng's policies moved on and China would continue to develop into a cosmopolitan nation-state.

The advances China began to make (and have made) are too numerous to mention, although several developments should be revealed as they fit what the West deems 'improvement.' Some exceptional examples are, China has increased diplomatic engagement and trade with many nation-states (especially with Developing World countries); entered into regional trade and defence agreements; remained engaged with their neighbour cum pariah-state the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea); developed a space program; has strong domestic military programs and purchases international military materiel; has increased independent decision-making in the United Nations Security Council; and has voiced opinion on the World stage regularly—one example being as recently as 2012 accused Australia of having a 'Cold War mentality.' For better or worse, all are signs of the coming-of-age of a nation-state and moreover, China is simply following path that the West created in terms of preponderance. Nevertheless, it has caught the West off-guard and the reaction from the US has in recent times been to revisit its geo-strategic policies.

### **Bewilderment and Uncertainty: US Domestic Issues and the Quest for Asia-Pacific Allies**

To be specific, it is the ongoing and continuing rise of China has completely bewildered the only remaining superpower. Japan, Australia and the Western-European world in general have also been stunned however it is the US that has begun to react to China's extramural activities. The single premise of the scramble can be summed up as the US, 'isn't ready to relinquish its dominant strategic role' in the region and thus, has been attempting to bulwark 'rebalance' the situation. The attempts began prior to the oration by Fullilove and it has continued in an incrementally more focussed way, especially in recent times. President Obama's visit to Australia in 2011, was the first sign of a renewed US effort in the A-P region Myanmar and India, with an additional visit to Australia in 2014. United States Secretary of State Kerry has also reflected the US' renewed interest in the A-P region, with a tour of Australia, India, Indonesia—in which he also saw government representatives of the Philippines and Brunei—and moreover, the extent of US alarm was also shown by Kerry visiting the Solomon Islands. All were essentially undertaken in order to shore-up relations that had long been inconsequential and slowly eroding, and the reason for the visits were to shore-up and protect America's military primacy in the region. The exception to the remit of refocussing (possible) military allies was the visit to China by Obama at the beginning of his A-P tour, which essentially was only a courtesy visit to the world's most populace nation, as its purpose was to offset any indignation the PRC government would have shown had it not been made—in short, it was a public relations exercise only.

The international roaming of the US aside there is and remains within the US issues that will come into play over time that must have an influence on America's role in the A-P. Broadly speaking outcomes in the international arena are

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often dependent on domestic issues of one sort or another. What happens in a country's domestic environment is able to profoundly affect its international profile and the US preponderance is not immune to these elements. A recent example of this phenomenon for Australia is the Australia-Indonesia spy scandal, which resulted in Indonesia cancelling its role in a military exercise and Indonesian's demanding a rethink of their government about allies, and this will influence Australia's role in the region for many years to come. The US' desire to retain primacy in the A-P region is the aspiration of Congress however, it is also not immune to domestic political machinations and moreover there are several seismic shifts that are either already underway in the US' domestic environment, or are about to take place.

The tensions that are beginning to awaken comment in the US domestic arena consist of, but are not limited to America is "hungry for nation-building at home" which will require a renewed effort on the domestic front; and there will be a the need to reign in their fiscal debt to China which was incurred as it used foreign finances to avert a financial meltdown—due in large part to the Freddy Mac and Fanny Mae excesses and the 'laissez-faire'[11] of the US banking industry in general.[12] Perhaps more telling than the fiscal disruptions the US has been 'bloodied by its adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan' which has brought about a feeling in the US populace that its efforts have been unappreciated; and in vain. Another telling element and which will grow exponentially over the coming decade. Migration patterns to America in the years 1991-2000 offer a snapshot of how population patterns have changed—an enormous increase in Asian and South Americans entering the US which does offer an insight into the way future voter-patterns may pan out—such as a lesser interest in the A-P per se—as these migration patterns evolve.

## **Cause and Effect: A Brief Perspective**

Overall what has been alluded to is the massive change in the geo-political and geo-strategic elements that are coming within the framework of a regional milieu largely centred on the as Australia-US-China mix, whilst placing Japan as an historical example of a regional power and the immense vulnerabilities of an island nation-state. To wit it is impossible to forecast exactly what will take place, nevertheless it is possible to state that from the above evidence-base several issues have come to the fore. For instance, if China placed fiscal pressures on the US would it hesitate at committing wholeheartedly to the A-P region and risk maintaining its primacy at the cost of enormous domestic fiscal pressures including the possible collapse of the US' banking system? Whilst this scenario remains to be seen, there is certainty in the fact that the will retain a presence in the region. Nevertheless if any or a combination of these issues came to fruition undoubtedly it or they would temper the forthrightness of any commitment. As part of this equation, the growing 'Asian vote' could diffuse America's need for yet another Asian war, and in tandem with this whether the inclusion of the Latino- and Hispanic-voting blocs, also in ever-greater numbers, will encourage a greater Central- and South-American focus to be undertaken also may come into play. Regardless of the likelihood of these happening military resources will be tailored to pacify the most belligerent voting blocs—as is the case in all voter-responsive liberal-democracies.

Notwithstanding, the outcome for Australia is the ongoing and urgent requirement that domestic happenings in the US be monitored and acknowledged in order that Australia places too much emphasis on it moving beyond the realities of being a regional 'middle-power,' which is essentially our military capacity according with our economic and population weight and be overstretched. Bearing in mind the West has a strong history of containment of opposition forces—the Cold War being the most obvious example—as China exerts greater pressures on the region, Australia will have a tendency to fall back on the US as it once 'was,' rather than the what it is 'becoming.' How the above issue pan out is immaterial to what Fullilove suggests needs to be the final outcome which is a 'larger Australia.' An Australia that is able to grow and meet the demands of the twenty-first century and with regard to the A-P region to meet these demands 'head-on.' Assuming that China maintains steady growth and continues to develop an 'ocean-going/blue-water navy'[13] which meets its regional needs of preponderance Australia will definitely need to be 'larger,' and it is here that this issue can now be dealt with.

## **Where Will a 'Larger Australia' Come From?**

The above has dealt with possibilities, probabilities and to some extent history and forecasting. There are however practicalities that will also come to the fore in the process of Australia-China relations in the future, and they too need

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to be addressed. In the process of Australia becoming 'larger,' in the military sense there is a question that needs to be asked, where are these prospective soldiers, sailors and air personnel going to come from? Australia has a rapidly ageing population as current statistics with regard to the 'baby boomers' attests and this issue regularly dominates political comment especially with regard to the 'fiscal drain' they will place on the Australian domestic medical and work environment, and the vote-power they will exercise. It is a germane point to make the issue of increasing immigration and the immigration debate in general is one of fractiousness and hostility in parts of the wider community. It should be noted this is also the case in Japan. Furthermore, Australia has no independent, dedicated sovereign POL assets, and is increasingly dependent on imports, nor does it have an industry that manufactures a wide variety of equipment and hardware for defence purposes.

To be sure, all of these factors need not matter if Australia is able to gain allies that will fight a battle as the personnel can come from elsewhere, though this is highly unlikely. Australia's need for equipment will also be solved if it can be purchased and the personnel be trained in a timely manner however, the delays in the Joint Strike Fighter purchase, and the current debate over submarine asset acquisition would suggest that the purchase of equipment is also fraught with political; and fiscal tensions.

## Conclusion

There is common agreement that China will reach a power-zenith with the US and then continue to rise. The moot point is 'how much' will it rise? Whether China rises at a four- or a seven-percent rate is irrelevant to the outcome, it will be a force in what will become a multi-polar A-P region, although the PLAN will seek to make it a unipolar region in the same manner as the US has attempted in the post-WWII era. Therefore, and based on the evidence it is safe to argue the following points: China will not be content to achieve a commensurate *realpolitik* mutual-understanding/agreement with the US; Australia's geo-strategic 'place' in the A-P will be continually be underpinned by the US; China will not ignore Australia's hostile geo-political and geo-strategic history in the region; China may take a 'with us or against us' political stance in the region and treat their enemies accordingly; China will seek to create as many allies or proxy-allies to contest US dominance; and Australia may face a bloc of opposition that is able to retard and diminish its POL-import facilities. It is through this prism that Australia must view the realities of the worst-case scenario coming to the fore: a military collision with China brought on by inarticulate policies on the part of Australia, and continuing the current *status quo* relationship with the US will be part of that downfall.

Notwithstanding, perhaps the most disturbing issue remains that even though Fullilove stated the US is our best ally, he also commented "... the United States is turning inward." Should this take place with a newfound impetus—as happened after the League of Nations disputes in 1919, commonly referred to as 'Wilsonian-isolationism' or 'non-interventionism' which lasted until 1941—Australia could be on its own for decades. Therefore, the time has come for the Australian government to treat the notion of a military collision with the PLAN as a probability rather than a possibility if current policies toward the US are maintained; and new geo-strategic possibilities not encompassed. The government should begin to position Australia as a politically-astute player in the region and in doing so, make decisions that create *realpolitik* rather than frictions, as it is obvious Australia simply does and will not have the capabilities to withstand a sustained kinetic conflict. As has been alluded to is because, but not limited to its geographic locale, small industry base, lack of a robust population, vulnerabilities as an island nation and a small non-conscript military overall.

Essentially, Australia's position is not dissimilar to that of Japan in WWII and this state-of-affairs should not be dismissed, nor misunderstood. Therefore, should Australian governments choose to actually shift—or be perceived to be shifting—against China, the dangers for Australia will become exponentially greater. Assuming the current geo-strategic and geo-political position, that of remaining a compliant and obedient US ally will encourage the PRC is likely to observe Australia as being 'complicit' in US preponderance; and of supporting US primacy within the region. To have this situation develop will increase the probability of the PLAN striking at the Royal Australian Navy, blockading the Malacca Strait; or launching a ground-strike on Australian soil. Whether the stated scenarios will happen remains a moot point however, should either, all, or a similar incident happen, and if the US hesitates or once again drops Australia as a first priority, then Australia will be on a military, economic and fiscal downward spiral and a 'larger Australia' will be reduced to rhetoric.

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The most pertinent point to make is the PRC government will pursue its agenda with a vastly superior force than that which has gone before; and the chances of success—of controlling the A-P region for a much longer time than the US—have a core driving-force. China intends to *continue* on its geo-political and geo-strategic rise far beyond the six decades the US has been in control. The sheer numbers of people moving into their society's middle- and upper-classes will see a rise in 'nationalism,'[14] which tends to prompt expansion. Consequently, the PRC's ongoing development of a 'blue water/ocean-going navy' heralds all of the advances and advantages the US displayed in the post-WWII era; and as previously stipulated the British utilized in their late- and post-Industrial Revolution (*circa* 1800) era; and as did the French during their Napoleonic phase. Attendant to all of the aforementioned and to place China's rise and offer a Chinese perspective 'the Chinese consider their rise as regaining China's lost international status rather than obtaining something new ... '[15]

## Notes and References

[1]'[I]n fact [according to a secret US Army list] behind seven other priorities, beginning with maintaining Britain, keeping Russia in the war as an enemy of Germany, and maintaining the status quo in India the Middle East and China.' See: Bob Wurth. *1942 Australia's greatest peril*. Sydney: Macmillan, 2008, 139.

[2] British sea-power and its successes and uses by numerous English governments has a long and complex set of strategies and tactics. See: Basil Liddell-Hart. *When Britain Goes to War: Adaptability and Mobility*. London: Faber and Faber, 1932.

[3] Total war is a complex event however, a succinct explanation is, 'Total wars involve a high mobilization of society ... Because total wars take on the characteristics of a fight for survival, they tend to mobilize resources and means to wage battle with few restraints ... The goals in total wars are much more open-ended and often expand as the war progresses. Total wars often demand the complete overthrow of the leadership of the other side whether through demand of unconditional surrender as in World War II, or complete annihilation, as in the Third Punic War.' See: John Vasquez. *The War Puzzle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 67.

[4] See: Coral Bell. *The end of the Vasco da Gama Era: the next landscape of world politics*. New South Wales: Longueville Media, 2007.

[5] Mark Hearn. 'A shifting centre of gravity.' *The Canberra Times*, Canberra, Federal Capital Press, 3 Nov, 2014, 1.

[6] Edward Said. *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. England: Penguin Books, 1978, 60. With regard to the West and the inculcation referred to, Said further states: 'Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority he (sic) is entitled to own or expend (or both) the majority of the Worlds resources.' *Orientalism*, 108. Emphasis in original.

[7] John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats. 'The Imagined West.' *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*. Edited by John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats. London: Verso, 2014, 33.

[8] Kuo-kang Shao. *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Houndsmills: MacMillan Press, 1996, 206-207.

[9] *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 208.

[10] Michael Levin. *The Next Great Clash. China and Russia vs. the United States*. Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008, 91.

[11] The notion of what is *laissez-faire* is complex, however from an economic perspective it has as its premise that an economic system (in this case Capitalism) should be completely free of government intervention.

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[12] The enormity of this problem and the knock-on effect alluded to is summed up by Kolko as the US having a 'critical national debt of almost \$10 trillion, most of it owed the Arab states, [and] China ... [and] since much of this [China's foreign currency reserve] is invested in US Treasury notes, the threat of withdrawal of that investment gives China strong leverage over American actions.' See: Gabriel Kolko. *World in Crisis. The End of the American Century*. London: Pluto Press, 2009, 15.

[13] A 'blue water navy' consists of having a navy which is able to venture into open ocean and/or the high seas, as opposed to littoral waters. A navy of this kind is according to Kirtz able to defend against 'open ocean naval threats...and [is consistent with] gaining command of the sea.' See: James Kirtz. 'Introduction.' *Naval Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Operations. Stability from the sea*. Edited by James Wirtz and Jeffrey Larsen. Oxon: Routledge, 2009, 1.

[14] 'Nationalism' as a concept is also much debated. It is however, stated by Kupchan in a straightforward way as being part of a 'national grouping that is defined in civic terms, share a participation in a circumscribed political community, common political values, a sense of belonging to the state in which they reside, and, usually, a common language.' See: Charles Kupchan 'Nationalism Resurgent.' *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*. Edited by Charles Kupchan. London: Cornell University Press, 1995, 4. And continuing what 'nationalism' encompasses and how it 'embraces' societies, there are common features in what Calhoun describes as the 'rhetoric of nations' and though they do not completely define what a nation comprise, they include boundaries of territory, indivisibility, sovereignty, legitimacy, participation in collective affairs, direct membership, culture, temporal depth, common characteristics and special histories. See: Craig Calhoun. *Nationalism*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997, 4 -5.

[15] Yan Xueton. 'The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes.' *Journal of Contemporary China*. London: Taylor and Francis, Vol 10:26, 34.

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**Strobe Driver** completed a PhD in War Studies in 2010 and since then has been writing on War, Conflict, Terrorism and Asia-Pacific Security. During 2018 he was awarded a year-long Taiwan, ROC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fellowship to write an independent analysis of Taiwan – China relations with a focus on when and whether a conflict would break out. The analysis is entitled 'Asia-Pacific and Cross-Strait Machinations: Challenges for Taiwan in the Nascent Phase of Pax-Sino.' All other writings by Strobe can be found on his blog.