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The Future of the Asia-Pacific Region: Implications for Australia

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ZAC ROGERS, DEC 14 2012

To What Extent are the General Interests of the US and China Divergent in Relation to the Future of the Asia-Pacific Region? What are the Implications for Australia?

Introduction

The general interests of the state are the starting point of this discussion because they are useful as the point from which all subsequent interests emanate. They pertain to those interests stemming from the anarchic structure of the international system and the geographic position of the state.[1] They help to explain the behaviour of a state, in as much as the state can be conceived as a rational actor, and are expressed at their most salient via the wielding of power in the security realm. For this reason, the focus of attention will be on the strategic rebalancing occurring in the Asia-Pacific driven by China's military modernisation, and the extent to which this rebalancing feeds back into the economic and political relations between itself, the US, and the region. General interests can also reveal something of the way in which a state views itself, its own position in the international system, its fundamental political philosophy, and its normative view of global order. These are also themes I will argue are feeding back into the rebalancing, driving its complexity and posing acute challenges for the region and the maintenance of its ongoing stability. This leads inexorably to the question of increased Australian involvement. I will explore some of the less discussed implications of Australia's strategic choices that arise from a clear picture of its position within the general interest level of analysis.

Hub and Spokes

The 'hub and spokes' alliance system in the Asia-Pacific with the US as the hub and Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia as the spokes remains the major regional security structure. It has allowed the US to retain a relatively benign hegemonic presence in the region and to preserve a balance of power concurrent with its general interests.[2] This presence has been underpinned by the US military's until recently unchallenged ability to project power into the Western Pacific to access areas of vital political and economic interest.[3] In particular, the US has enjoyed uncontested access to its forward air bases in Okinawa and Guam and the freedom of navigation of its carrier strike groups. This freedom, however, has now become contested. The re-emergence of China and the accompanying increase in military capacity of the Peoples Liberation Army and Navy (PLAN) in the post-Cold War era has already seen challenges to US freedom of movement and a narrowing of strategic options in the Western Pacific. The post-Cold War order is yet to be ascertained. If China views the hub and spokes model as containment of itself and as an outdated relic of the Cold War as many commentators have suggested, the divergence of views of the two powers on the shape of regional security is unmistakable, and the stage is indeed set for the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Asia-Pacific.

No country is an island in an inherently insecure world. For much of the Cold War however, Australia found itself at the periphery of the core strategic calculus that drove the great game. The ANZUS alliance had neatly replaced the benevolence of Great Britain at the heart of Australia's national security. With its back to Antarctica, two shoulders in the Indian and Pacific, and northern approaches blocked by a vast archipelago, Australia's physical vulnerability has

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historically been more perceptual than material;[4]the Japanese bombing of Darwin in 1942 the exception. The implicit protection of the US laid the foundation for Australia to focus on its competitive advantages in resource commodities and energy and its prosperity as a maritime trading nation with strong institutions in the liberal and democratic traditions. Australia has an ever growing economic interest in the free and orderly movement of goods in the maritime realm that those key US strategic markers increasingly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) underpin. The security of ocean borne trade through the Strait of Malacca and other vital choke points to the north is of unequivocal importance. These geographical and economic realities mean Australia pursues friendly relations with Asia and places the stability of the region as of top priority.

US Power Projection

The US has for over a century relied on power projection far beyond its shores. Since WWII and the ceding of global leadership from Britain to the US, this reliance has increased for two main reasons. First, the US sees itself as the principle guardian against the attempt by any power or coalition of powers to overturn the global order either by subversion or force. This has seen the US link its security to the security of key allies around the globe with NATO in Western Europe and Japan as primary examples. Second, US reliance on global supply chains for a wide variety of goods and services has increased in the second half of the twentieth century, further tying the well being of US citizens to a global security network.[5]

These pragmatic concerns have had their political and ideological parallels. Previously isolationist, WWII dragged the US beyond the Monroe Doctrine into a new foreign policy paradigm. Liberal internationalism, underpinned by the 'hidden fist' of superior military power, and an emphasis on the building of peace and stability via the promotion of comparative institutions and free trade has characterised US foreign policy since. Democratisation has been a rallying point for successive US administrations to varying degrees since FDR. The platitude that democracies don't go to war, and the rationale that commensurate political systems assist each other by gradually subverting the security dilemma, are among the most salient in post war US foreign policy thinking.[6] Much of this thinking has played out in the last two decades in the Middle East, a region of vast geopolitical importance to not only US but global economic and security interests. This normative vision for global and regional order in the political and economic realms, championed by the US but followed by much of the western industrialised world under the liberal democratic banner, is irreducible from the overall strategic contest arising in the Asia-Pacific signified by China's re-emergence. Nor are Australia's choices insulated from this broader paradigm, a point to which I will return later.

Nonetheless, hard power realism is never easily dislodged from its position at the centre of international affairs. During the major conflicts of the Cold War first in Korea, then South East Asia, and the Persian Gulf region, the US was able to project and sustain significant land, air, and sea forces over large distances. The end of the Cold War saw US pre-eminence in military affairs reach unprecedented levels. In the 1990's the development of Precision Guided Munitions (PGM) were incorporated with satellite and cyber-space systems for their effective operation, further increasing the technological gap to the US' nearest rivals.[7]For the US and its allies, this dominance has facilitated a period of peace and prosperity driven by the freedom of movement of goods around the world, and the dissuading of any potential aggressors by the sheer overwhelming dominance of the US military. US stewardship of the global commons particularly in maritime affairs has been a positive development for the international system as a whole, but this stability has nowhere been more important and effective in terms of facilitating beneficial economic outcomes than in the Asia-Pacific. The growth of first Japan, then the SE Asian tigers and now China are all cases in point.

China's Re-emergence

The phenomenal growth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since economic reforms instigated under Deng Xiaoping of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1970's continues to astound observers. Deng Xiaoping carefully devised and implemented the formula through which the CCP today retains its legitimacy: the party ensures steadily improving living standards for all, and, in return, the Chinese people let the CCP rule as an authoritarian regime. This economic basis for the party's power gives it a credibility that is being projected well beyond its own borders.[8] China's one party authoritarian political economy has managed a growth rate that has so far underscored

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a level of social and political stability long questioned by critics for its salience and potential longevity. China's success has understandably risen to rival the western model of deregulated market economies and liberal democracy as the preferred path to economic growth, most prominently in developing countries. The ideological challenge that presents itself here is often overlooked. While ostensibly a debate contained within the paradigm of capitalism, there are nonetheless as deep and divergent views on the accompanying political pathways to growth in a capitalist system as there are on the pre-eminence of different systems themselves. This divergence branches out in a number of unexpected ways, but its root is in the normative political, social, and economic foundations of the state. Cultural and historical differences play a huge role. History is the narrator of the present and the future. Colloquially, where the US thinks of itself as free and successful because it challenged and overthrew an authoritarian system and championed the rights and freedoms of the individual, China thinks of itself as successful and superior by repressing unrest and prioritising unity and deference to authority.

While China grows increasingly economically powerful and its status as a global player rises, the divergence of its political system from the salient western model upheld and bankrolled by the US and its allies since WWII becomes more stark, and more of a competitor. State owned enterprises (SOE's) have recently increased their presence in the real estate sector for instance, signalling to those who argue China is on the pathway to liberalisation they will be waiting much longer than hoped. While relations between the US and Chinese governments are good, with bi-lateral dialogues of 60 or more annually and daily contact and interaction, strategic distrust over each others long term intentions continues to grow. As Lieberthal explains, "Neither side understands very well the political and institutional constraints in the other's system, and both are inclined to assume the other is more strategic, centralized and internally disciplined than it is." [9] If, as Jacques suggests, China is intent on rebuilding a modern version of the old tributary state system [10], the crucial question for the US is to what extent will the attractiveness of the Chinese growth phenomenon overlap into the acquiescence of China's regional and global peers over its normative vision of a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere? China's broader vision of the nature and shape of the post-Cold War global security order is driven by its own rising self-confidence in the salience of its rationalist/realist worldview at home, and its potential custodianship globally, and is viewed by some analysts as an outright rejection of neo-liberalism and the idea of a society of states. [11] As Lynch points out, "They (China) reject the notion of a solidarist world taking root in future decades because to them, solidarism implies all states becoming institutionally and culturally alike through Westernisation. [12] Here we find expressed the divergence of China's general interests stark and unambiguous.

Cutting across this scenario, Beeson^[13] and others have countenanced that the advantage of military might is not as decisive as it once was, and that the ability of countries like China to challenge US primacy should not be judged on military capacity alone. On the contrary, the notable lack of interstate military conflict in the modern international system^[14] has opened up space for China to challenge the US with relative impunity. The early 2000's saw a shift in western thinking on China's status. Trends suggested the emergence of a co-operative, benign, and integrated actor. China had embarked on the 'charm offensive'. In 2003, Kang wrote that "China perceives the international environment of the past decade as less hostile, and even benign... The evidence so far suggests that although China has outstanding territorial disputes with a number of countries, it has neither revisionist nor imperial aims." [15] This view is not shared here. More recent trends in strategic developments, most notably expressed by the Obama Doctrine and the assertive nature of America's re-engagement in the region, directly contradict the idea of impunity. The US' Pacific Command's (PACOM) new doctrine of AirSea Battle, initiated by the US Air Force and Navy in September 2009, [16] and the importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), has emerged in large part due to China's build-up of capabilities and military modernisation in the Western Pacific. The pursuit of anti-satellite as well as cyber warfare weaponry hold at risk key elements of the US military's battle networks as well. [17] In sum, these developments may signal China's strategic intention to deny the US' ability to meet its defence obligations to its allies in the region. Most analysts agree the centre of Chinese foreign policy thinking is deeply engrained in the realist tradition, making risky, power seeking strategies like these more likely.

Shashoujian: Anti Access, Area Denial (A2, AD)

Since 1996 when the US, in response to aggressive Chinese behaviour toward Taiwan, sailed two of its aircraft carriers through the Taiwan Strait, China has sought to drive the cost of US access to the Western Pacific up to

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prohibitive levels.[18] Translated as 'assassin's mace', *shashoujian*[19] refers to China's A2 capabilities in the event of a military confrontation with the US. It is a doctrine based on the imperative to strike quickly and decisively at the onset of any battle, to negate or delay the enemy's ability to assemble forces, defend itself and strike back. Chinese ballistic missile capabilities are now a factor for Kadena Air Base on Okinawa and eventually Andersen Air Base on Guam, as well as US aircraft carriers out to the second island chain.[20] These capabilities have grown at unprecedented levels over the last decade.[21] China's anti-ship ballistic missile program, as well as its surface-to-surface ballistic missile force, represents an important and growing source of asymmetric advantage over the United States and its allies.[22] They effectively mean having US troops at bases in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, and aircraft carriers anywhere inside the second island chain has been transformed from a strategic asset to a liability in very short time.

The US expects these developments to command the attention of its allies given the stakes involved. It may be that the US eventually has to cede access to these areas, but not after full and careful consideration of the implications for security both in the region and around the globe. For now, the US Air Force and Navy have accepted the challenge. As a result, the IOR shifts into centre frame. Risks and threats in the IOR include both traditional; inter-state or intra-state conflict and threats to the order of the seas, and non-traditional; climate change, crime, energy, food, and human security.[23] Control of the key sea lines of communication (SLOC) that flow under India and through the Malacca Straits are of vital strategic importance. The prospect of a distant blockade[24] of China's vital energy lanes is one scenario underpinning their salience. Consequently, the US is busy establishing closer ties with several of the nations surrounding these waterways such as Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. It is in this context that US interests in Australia's Indian Ocean coast and its territories offshore such as the Cocos Islands can be understood. The US currently has a base in the Indian Ocean on the atoll of Diego Garcia, which is British territory on lease. The atoll is congested. It is much further afield in relation to the South China Sea than Cocos, and the lease is up for renewal in 2016. For Washington, operating long range surveillance drones from the Cocos Islands instead would be a valuable asset as the importance and sensitivity of the South China Sea as a potential theatre for conflict grows.[25] Unlike Diego Garcia, any Cocos facility would not be a naval base, although it would strengthen the US' supply chains and logistics facilities.

The developments described above represent a momentous shift in the geo-political foundation of the Asia-Pacific. I have attempted to align the strategic shifts in military power with their political and ideological threads, further broadening the scope of the shift underway. The Obama Doctrine characterises what I see as a bid to move early by the US in the context of China's growing power. China's naval capacity in the IOR is underdeveloped. In addition, the Obama administration appears to be stacking its hand on the possibility of a significant stumble in China's political economy,[26] opening up the avenues through which the US as custodians of the existing order can exact its influence. But that is precisely what it sounds like; a bet. Even this preliminary account of the state of affairs in Sino-US relations suggests the window of opportunity for a co-operative, non-confrontational accord between the two states may have already passed. White argued in 2011 that "... (*Obama's*) doctrine clearly implies that if China cannot be persuaded, it will be compelled." [27] White reminds us that China's military is still much weaker than the Soviet Union was at the height of the Cold War, but I would argue the asymmetric capabilities outlined above already present a contiguous element in the military sphere. In addition, the economic power of the PRC relative to the US blows away anything the Soviet Union could muster in that sphere. If that window of opportunity for co-operation and an Asia-Pacific where power is shared by the regions two biggest rivals rather than contested is effectively shut, I agree with White's assessment that we can expect escalating strategic competition carrying with it increased risk of conflict and economic disruption.

Australia's Non-sequitur

This discussion commenced with an assertion about the point of emanation of states geo-political interests. It has provided a description of the state of strategic military competition in the Western Pacific concurrent with China's rising power. The paper has highlighted the reasons to believe that competition in the military sphere between the US and China is rising and will continue to escalate, given essentially the trajectories of both states with reference to their normative views on political and economic ideology, and their respective historical narratives. Domestic pressures and regional security flashpoints such as the status quo of the Taiwan Strait, the stalemate on the Korean Peninsula,

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and the competing claims in the South China Sea are all potential potent triggers for conflict. The case for the acknowledgement of the deep divergence of the general interests of the US and China has been put forward here. From this basis and staying with the general interests level of analysis, the conclusion of this discussion will review Australia's position in relation to the re-balancing of the power landscape of the Asia-Pacific.

I describe Australia's position as a non-sequitur for the following reasons. Strategic military competition between our security ally and our largest trading partner is ostensibly a negative development. Getting drawn into a conflict not of our making and not in our immediate economic interests is Australia's worst case scenario. However one need only cast one's eye further down the track to conceive an alternative contingency. As mentioned, Australia's general interests are those of a maritime trading nation with little or no real 21st century fear of territorial insecurity and as a firm friend and ally of the US. The current re-balancing of the Asia-Pacific is being driven by the shifting nature of the power ratio between the US and China, and by definition an equilibrium will eventually arise. During the shift, Australia may well face what I am arguing will be short term difficulties, should China perceive the use of economic statecraft to be in its short term interests. On the longer view, the relationship between the general interests of China and Australia is one of mutual compatibility due to its primarily economic nature. A genuine power balance in the Asia-Pacific, where both a strong China and a strong US reach a status quo acceptable to both and receptive to regional stability is very much in the interests of Australia. US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific has benefited Australia, but if it is no longer feasible a stable power balance will suffice, given Australia's benign security environment and integrationist intentions toward Asia. Conversely, we would not want to see a US withdrawal from Asia and face the uncertain future of a region under Chinese hegemony. While the US pivot to Asia in response to China's rise is the source of tension over our relations with China, it is necessary and an overall long term positive for Australia's national interests. For these reasons, and in conclusion, the general interests of the US and China for the future of the Asia-Pacific are indeed on divergent trajectories. It is however possible to conceive of a future in which the re-balancing has taken place in a way ultimately conducive to greater stability and perhaps the foundations of a thriving and prosperous Asian-Pacific century, in which Australia's general interests are very solidly positioned. Australian policy makers should keep in mind the longer view.

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Date written: June 2012