US Policy on the South and East China Seas: Is Underbalancing the Future's Wave?

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In an interesting and paradoxical twist, Barack Obama is the US president who wanted to focus on scaling back the USA's commitment to the Middle East and place a greater emphasis on Asia, with an eye on China, but he might be the one who effectively ceded Asian hegemony to China.

Under Obama, the US has engaged in low level, nascent balancing against a rising China. Team Obama clearly sees China as a rival for power and influence in the world, especially throughout the broader Asia, but not as an enemy that needs to be rolled back and thwarted. The centerpiece of this approach has been his so-called "Pivot" to Asia. This Pivot initially tried to create an image of a tough, muscular US that's fully invested in Asia.

A Pivot to Where?

The problem, as we now know, is that the Pivot has lacked teeth. The hardline parts of the Pivot were not significant enough—neither in speed nor capability—to deter China from or punish it for unwanted behavior. The US does plan to shift more military assets to Asia, but by the year 2020. That could be too late to maintain the extant balance of power in the region. The US has also promised to send and rotate 2500 marines to Darwin, Australia. But those numbers are hardly enough to contribute to playing a strong role in securing the Asia-Pacific. In fact, some Australians, such as the late Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, immediately saw the perils of the Marines deployment: they're just enough to send a signal that America and Australia might be militarizing against China, thus a provocative move, but not enough to guard against an irritated, threatened China.

Even the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the large free trade pact that has been negotiated for over a decade now and is a crucial part of Obama's Pivot, has a strategic, tough guy element to it. The US favors the TPP because it will allow Washington, along with its friends in Asia and the Americas, to write the economic rules of the 21st century, while squeezing China out of such a chance to do so (Solis 2015). But such logic is likely misguided. After all, China will be such a large part of the world economy going forward that keeping Beijing out of the rule-writing process will only doom the effectiveness of the pact.

Indeed, the US under Obama has only doubled down on this logic, as it has refrained from becoming a founding member of the China-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The US sees the AIIB as a threat to the World Bank and the Japanese-dominated Asian Development Bank, one more sign—along with its Silk Road and Maritime Road, its desire for a new regional security institution, the BRICS bank, and so on—that Beijing is trying to carve out its own order within the wider web of pro-Western economic and financial institutions and organizations to the detriment of American interests (Phillips 2014). But such a zero-sum logic of the world economy risks leaving the US out in the cold, as its own close friends, including Japan and Britain and Israel, hop on the China gravy train.

So what are we left with? Really, what Team Obama has done is practice a harmful form of exclusionary politics on economic affairs while adopting meek and ineffectual policies on security and strategic matters. It also has not helped that the original creators and supporters of the Pivot in the US government, people like Hillary Clinton, Tom Donilon, Timothy Geithner, are out of office and have been replaced by a set of officials, such as John Kerry and

Susan Rice, whose areas of expertise and interest center on Europe and the Middle East, which has raised fears of abandonment by American allies and created the impression in China that the US is distracted and somewhat uninterested in Asia (Nelson 2013). All of this has created windows of opportunity for China to test America's commitment to Asia, especially to America's friends in the region.

Chinese Aggression, American Weakness: Windows of Opportunity

Just look at the facts. In November 2013, Beijing set up an ADIZ in the East China Sea, which was an effort to place a significant swath of the sea under its control, including islands and waterways contested by Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Team Obama criticized the ADIZ, but did little else. In short, the US was willing to abide by China changing the facts on the ground, which, as expected, alarmed countries like Japan that fear being abandoned by the US and left alone to deal with the growing Chinese behemoth.

Since 2012, China has also sought, with success, to change the facts on the ground in the South China Sea. It captured the Scarborough Shoal, though it is also claimed by the Philippines. Chinese vessels have repeatedly harassed Vietnamese and Philippine fishermen, ramming their boats and blasting them with water cannons. In 2015, China placed an oil rig in the South China Sea, despite Vietnamese protests, in an effort to search for energy deposits. Although China moved the rig after about a month, it proved its point: China can come and go in the South China Sea, doing whatever it pleases, with impunity. And the latest developments there are even more worrisome.

Earlier this year, China has ramped up its reclamation projects in the South China Sea. What this means is that China is building on reefs and rocky surfaces, many of which are either submerged in water or barely visible above water, to create man-made islands and outposts that, Washington believes, totals more than 2000 acres. The presence of these new land features gives Beijing increasingly greater de facto sovereignty over the South China Sea. Why? China is setting up airstrips and bases on these islands, which gives Beijing the requisite muscle to enforce its claims in the area. Some China watchers believe that all the resources now pouring in the South China Sea means that Beijing will impose an ADIZ in the south.

Once we put the pieces of the East and South China Seas puzzle together, that is when we see the real consequences. Let's look at the geography of the situation, much like Robert Kaplan does in his work *Asia's Cauldron* (Kaplan 2014). If China controls both seas, it would be in a good spot to bully East and Southeast Asian nations. And from there, particularly given China's advancing military capabilities, Beijing could turn further beyond its borders by asserting itself vigorously in the Indian Ocean. Hence, this is a wake-up call to the US, of course, but also to Japan, South Korea, ASEAN, and India.

In my view, the above scenario, if it comes true, means that China will have effectively shifted the balance of power in Asia to its advantage. The last straw happens when China refines and perfects its anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to contain and limit the movement of US military power in the air above and seas around Asia. Such a situation would lead to a number of troubling possible outcomes: it would make navigating through Asia miserable for the US as well as other Asian-Pacific nations; American troops and bases in Japan and South Korea would be in a precarious position; China would be in a ripe position to intimidate if not dominate its Asian neighbors; China would also be well stationed to set the rules on security affairs in Asia.

The White House's response to Chinese moves in the South and East China Seas has been purely reactive. Here is what the US has done: it has called for a moratorium on the reclamation projects by all parties in Asia, including China, of course. It has criticized China, saying that Beijing is using its military muscle to bully its neighbors. It also has been beefing up its ties to Vietnam and the Philippines. The US has upgraded its defense guidelines with Japan, and is even considering conducting joint patrols in the South China Sea with Japan. Additionally, to further send a signal to China of America's seriousness about stability in the area, Obama has said that Japanese claims in the East China Sea fall under the US-Japan security treaty.

Is all of this enough to make China think twice before continuing its expansionism? I am quite pessimistic, though I am not the only one. There are calls within Washington, and among policy analysts, to place higher costs on China,

to punish China, as it expands outward and flouts international law and norms. Some US officials, for instance, have called for Washington to cease inviting China to participate in RIMPAC exercises (Rogin 2015). Perhaps, but it should start thinking about more creative measures as well.

Underbalancing?

But this is not the only or even biggest problem for the US in Asia. What the US is currently contributing to Asia—in terms of level of effort and resources, and in terms of strategic thinking and national security affairs—is likely the most that Asia is going to get out of the US for quite some time. If Asia is not satisfied now with America's commitment to Asia, and there are justifiable reasons to think that way, unfortunately, the problem is only going to get worse. There is a great likelihood that the next American president will focus ever more on the Middle East, which many in the US believe has been neglected by Obama.

Face it, there are growing fears within the US of ISIS creating further havoc in the Middle East, harming American interests and credibility in the region, and gaining homegrown sympathizers who wreak death and destruction inside the US (Preston 2014). In fact, depending on how the campaign season goes and how events turn out in the Middle East, the next US president may well find him or herself with a mandate to escalate America's commitment and role there on day one.

As the Middle East rises to the top of agenda of the next president, taking up more attention and resources, it is inevitable that Asia will slide to the back burner, rising up the policy ladder only as crises surface. America's friends and allies should and need to be aware of this potential situation. Put simply, arguably, under Obama, US balancing against China has occurred but been tepid at best in terms of implementation and results; the next US administration will likely permit what international relations scholars call underbalancing on his/her watch (Schweller, 2004, 2006). On the next president's watch, the US will very likely fail to put in place effective policies that restrain and restrict China's expansion throughout Asia.

A New American Strategic Approach to Asia

So what does this mean? Is all hopeless for the US and its friends in Asia going forward? Not necessarily. The US urgently needs to set new patterns of behavior now so as to instantiate them, make them routine and hard to break in the future, no matter who is in the White House in the future. After all, once in place, policies, both foreign and domestic, are costly to amend or even break because vested interests are created and thereafter accrue over time to a host of actors. With this in mind, then, I recommend putting in place now a set of China-oriented policies that can guard against the very possible trend of underbalancing we may witness in the future. A prospective set of such policies would create, and likely expand over time, a number of political and policy interests within US bureaucratic agencies, such as the CIA and the Pentagon, among foreign policy experts, between the US and foreign governments in Asia, and between Asian governments.

In brief, I recommend a two-pronged approach. First, the US should try to impose costs on China's actions in the South and East China Seas. It is currently doing a better job of that in the East because of its strong and durable ties to Japan. But the US should also firm up its commitments in the South China Sea. It should expand its military assistance to Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as any other claimant nation. It should publicly, vigorously support both countries diplomatically during maritime skirmishes with China. It should do much, much more to shame China for its acquisitive actions. The US might also want to prepare for the day in which it might need to extend security commitments to Vietnam and the Philippines. Among other things, a major challenge for the US would be finding a way to make this form of extended deterrence credible in the eyes of Beijing.

Second, somewhat akin to Senator John McCain's suggestion during his run for the presidency in 2008, I believe the US ought to think about forming a maritime league of democracies that spans across Asia (Sidoti 2007). Most importantly, the US should recruit Japan, Indonesia, Australia, and India. These four countries are powerful, influential, politically open and free, and geographically consequential. Indeed, they ring the South and East China Seas and the Indian Ocean. If these four countries could effectively work in concert on the high seas, along with the

US, they just might be able to contain China from recklessly expanding, or breaking out of its neighborhood, thereby hemming in, if not pinning down, China. Yes, it would not be easy, and any signs of a proposed league could provoke China into bellicose behavior. That said, if the US thinks tying down Gulliver is the right thing to do–whether to preserve regional stability or to guard the existing liberal order–then it is an idea to weigh heavily for the future.

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