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The Emerging Strategic Dynamic in Southeast Asia

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Marvin C. Ott, Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Adjunct Professor and Visiting Research Scholar at Johns Hopkins University, discusses why Southeast Asia “has become the arena where Chinese power and ambition confront an established US military presence reinvigorated by renewed American attention to the region.”

Southeast Asia, long quiescent in a turbulent international environment, has suddenly become the focal point of what promises to be the signature strategic contest of the 21st century—between the United States and China. But the evolving dynamic is far more complex than a simple binary face-off between an established superpower and an emerging rival. The overarching backdrop is the profound and ongoing economic transformation of Asia. Three centuries of global economic, political and military domination by the industrialized West has given way to a fundamentally new configuration. Economic modernization that began with Japan has spread to the Sinicized populations of the region and beyond, including Southeast Asia. The global center of economic gravity has shifted westward across the Pacific—and economics is the foundation of power. The world has entered the oft-touted “Asia-Pacific Century.”

At the heart—geographically and economically—of Asia’s transformation lies China. With sustained economic growth over three decades, China’s economy has now surpassed Japan and is on track to overtake the United States by 2020. This extraordinary growth in economic capacity has been matched by equally dramatic increases in military capability and strategic ambition. As Asia’s emerging great power China is the driver of strategic change, the country to which all others—including the United States—must now react. The natural focus of China’s strategic ambition is south toward Southeast Asia—including the South China Sea. The reasons are not hard to discern and include:

Geographic Proximity – Southeast Asia is next door with a long common and porous boundary. *History* – For millennia China enjoyed a “tribute system” relationship with the region. Kings, sultans and other traditional potentates of Southeast Asia would periodically send missions bearing gifts and offering ceremonial obeisance to the Son-of-Heaven. *Ethnicity* – Thanks to European colonialism there are large, relatively wealthy and influential “overseas Chinese” diasporas throughout Southeast Asia. For a Chinese policymaker these co-ethnic populations are a fact of considerable strategic importance. *Opportunity and Vulnerability* – Southeast Asia is attractive for its resources, its growing and potential wealth, and its climate. This is the “Nanyang” (South Seas) and “Golden Lands” of Chinese lore. Chinese diplomats among themselves actually refer to the region—using the Churchillian phrase—as the “soft underbelly” of Asia.

What emerges from an examination of Chinese official statements, unguarded comments, authorized academic analyses, geopolitical logic, actions and reactions is a remarkably clear strategic agenda. It reflects powerful influences associated with growing nationalism—as the salience of Maoist ideology declines, nationalism fills the void—and animated by a fierce determination to collect history’s debt for the “100 years of humiliation” suffered at the hands of the West and Japan from the Opium Wars through World War II. After a long and unwanted interregnum due to the Western colonial presence, history is now free to return to earlier and deeper patterns whereby Southeast Asian regimes paid tribute to the Middle Kingdom. China’s contemporary blueprint most probably includes the



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following major objectives.

Bind the Region to China Economically. Growing trade and investment facilitated by a China-ASEAN FTA are augmented by the increasing movements of Chinese tourists, students, workers, and settlers. Infrastructure projects—river, road and rail networks, pipelines and electrical grids—are a central component in the emerging economic relationship. The most dramatic—and for many Southeast Asians the most disquieting—is a colossal network of dams, some among the largest ever built, in southern China on the Upper Mekong. When completed they will not only generate electricity, they will also provide China with the capability to completely control the flow of the river—and with it the very livelihood of the downstream states: Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. This is a capability with stunning strategic implications.

Render Japan Strategically Irrelevant. Tokyo’s decades-long unwillingness or inability to play a significant security role in East Asia has made Beijing’s task easier than it might have otherwise been. As China steadily supplants Japan as Southeast Asia’s most important economic partner, the potential leverage inherent in Japan’s economic prowess declines—effectively removing Tokyo as a plausible challenger for preeminent influence in Southeast Asia.

Establish China’s *De Facto* Exclusive Authority Over the South China Sea. Chinese statements and actions are an evident attempt to redefine the meaning of “Exclusive Economic Zones” under international law so they become nearly indistinguishable from territorial seas. More ominously, Chinese statements and actions clearly indicate that Beijing views the “nine-dotted line” that encompasses virtually the entire South China Sea on Chinese maps as, in fact, China’s *de jure* rightful boundary. In other words, the South China Sea is sovereign Chinese territory.

Marginalize and Ultimately Expel US Military Power from Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. For Chinese strategists the US military is an unwanted interloper in a region that comprises historically validated sovereign Chinese territory and is critical to China’s security. This is given powerful impetus by China’s growing dependence on imported oil and gas—most of which traverses the sea-lanes through the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea where the US 7th Fleet is a regular presence.

Against this backdrop, recent diplomatic developments have been dramatic and laden with strategic import. The marquee events were the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi comprising 26 nations and the November 2011 East Asian Summit (EAS) of 18 leaders in Bali. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the ARF made two points regarding the South China Sea: (1) the United States preferred to see the multiple territorial claims resolved peacefully through a multilateral process and (2) the United States has a vital interest in maintaining the sea lanes through the South China Sea as an “international commons” not subject to the control or sovereignty of any one state. Most ASEAN Ministers supported the Secretary’s position. This produced an angry reaction from Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and subsequent official statements asserting China’s “indisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea. US President Barack Obama affirmed US commitment to the region at the EAS: “Let there be no doubt. In the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century, the US is all-in.” He reiterated Secretary Clinton’s message and he too received overwhelming support from Asian colleagues in a pointed message to the attending Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

As 2011 drew to a close Southeast Asia and the South China Sea presented an extraordinarily dynamic and complex strategic landscape. From a quiet backwater in the 1980s and 1990s it has become the arena where Chinese power and ambition confront an established US military presence reinvigorated by renewed American attention to the region. The task facing diplomats, military planners, and political leaders on all sides could hardly be more challenging.

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