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Asia's Importance, China's Expansion and U.S. Strategy: What Should Be Done?

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The Obama government focuses on important Asian meetings in November that the President missed a year ago. China continues coercive means backed by military force to expand control at neighbors' expense in disputed territory; this comes despite periodic Chinese moderation during high-level leadership meetings, notably the US-Chinese summit in 2013. So-called Chinese "salami slicing" intimidates neighbors, destabilizes Asia and undermines US alliances and US standing as the region's security guarantor.

The Obama government ignores calls in Washington for an American strategy in the face of China's expansionism. Its posture has been reactive, vacillating between periodic strident statements against Chinese coercive behavior and muting disputes in the lead up to the November 2014 meetings. The Obama "rebalance" policy includes improved surveillance capabilities for allies and partners and proposals dealing with territorial issues according to the rule of law that are criticized by China.

The US government waits to see if US opposition and resistance to Chinese expansionism from Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines will dissuade Beijing from further advance. Unfortunately, forecasts for change in Chinese behavior have been repeatedly undermined by Beijing's expansion and fortification of disputed islands, its impressive buildup of coast guard and supporting naval forces, and its avowed determination to control disputed territories.

The Obama approach clearly does not see Chinese salami slicing as a defining issue in US-China relations. For now, it endures erosion of American regional standing for the sake of other priorities. This approach is misguided given the importance of Asia and the prevailing balance of US-Chinese influence there.

The Obama rebalance policy explains well the importance of Asia for America's strategic, economic and political interests. Of course, the policy depends on Asian countries having faith in American dependability. Chinese expansionism tests US resolve. American friends and adversaries watch closely to see if the United States can come up with means to stop the Chinese expansion. If the United States does not come up with suitable means, pragmatic Asian governments will understand better what they can and can't count on America to do. They will adjust toward Washington and Beijing, foreseeing an Asian order more influenced by China.

Equally important is what Asia means for American ability to influence Chinese decision makers to follow policies in line with US interests. As Americans have become disillusioned about engagement changing offensive Chinese behavior, more attention focuses on leverage America can apply to influence Chinese behavior. The United States used to have more leverage in dealing with China on international economic issues when China needed American support for assistance from world institutions and access to technology, investment and markets. The United States used to have more leverage in dealing with China militarily over Taiwan but the power balance has eroded with China's massive buildup opposite Taiwan.

Despite such trends, the situation in Asia shows significant Chinese vulnerabilities and US strengths that allow US leverage to influence Beijing's cost-benefit calculations to avoid offensive Chinese practices. The balance of American and Chinese power in Asia arguably represents the most important nexus of factors influencing even hard-line Chinese decision

Robert Sutter, Professor at George Washington University, states that the Obama government's "posture has been reactive, vacillating between periodic strident statements against Chinese coercive behavior and muting disputes in the lead up to the November 2014 meetings."

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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makers to avoid confrontation with America. Shoring up American strengths and using them effectively against Chinese vulnerabilities should have a higher priority in US policy; it should supersede the existing reactive American stance witnessing erosion of American regional influence and Chinese expansionism.

Nearby Asia is China’s top foreign priority and yet remains insecure. It contains security and sovereignty issues (e.g. Taiwan) of highest importance. It is the main arena of interaction with the United States. Its economic importance far surpasses the rest of world (China is Africa’s biggest trader but Beijing trades more with South Korea). Asian stability is essential for China’s economic growth—the lynch pin of Communist rule. Facing formidable American presence and influence and lacking a secure periphery, China almost certainly calculates that seriously confronting the United States poses grave dangers.

Chinese strengths in Asia include extensive trade and investment; webs of road, rail, river, electric power, pipeline and other linkages; leadership attention and active diplomacy; and expanding military capabilities. Weaknesses are:

- Regional governments rely on America for costly and risky efforts to support regional security and development. China avoids such efforts.
- Chinese assertiveness toward neighbors revives the PRC’s justified post-1949 reputation for disruption, domination and intimidation.
- China’s achievements in advancing influence in Asia since the Cold War are mediocre. China is very difficult to deal with regarding disputes as Chinese elite and public opinion and resulting government policy are extraordinarily aggrieved and self righteous.

Against this background, the United States should:

1. Conduct a careful assessment of US vs. Chinese strengths and weaknesses in Asia with an eye toward identifying areas of US leverage influencing Chinese practices prejudicial to US interests.
2. Consider the specific options below and other possible options in the context of an overall American approach that avoids confronting China overtly in the disputed seas or on other issues. The United States should build on its strengths, notably US capabilities to project power in the Asia-Pacific, which would quietly but unmistakably cause Chinese decision makers to realize the net costs of territorial advances. It should go much further than the rebalance in strengthening US relationships with Asian allies and associates; and should work closely but quietly with Taiwan in the process. Engagement should continue, but the United States should signal without attribution disappointment with the meager results while China challenges US interests. American leaders should side-step engagement used by China in self serving ways, suggesting in actions and not words that American interests are better served with more attention to American power projection, economic well being and working with various regional friends and multilateral groups.

Specific options include:

- Build an effective defense strategy in the event of rising tensions with China involving closer US defense cooperation with Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan in particular. Possibly move to a more even-handed stance regarding the cross-strait policies of the unpopular ruling government and those of the opposition, with the latter expected to be more forthcoming to closer American military ties against China.
- Increase recent US demonstrations of conventional missile and attack submarines that avoid detection by China.
- Increase recent US demonstrations of conventional surface sea and air power as part of the Pentagon’s evolving Air-Sea Battle concept.
- Counter Chinese ballistic missiles threatening US forces in Asia with Prompt Global Strike conventional weapons—involving multi-warhead ballistic missiles or other systems—to respond promptly and hold at risk targets in China if Chinese missiles were to strike American forces.
- Respond to the nuclear threat posed by the North Korean regime (still supported by China) with discussions with Japan and South Korea involving possible transfers of offensive weapons and perhaps even deploying nuclear weapons to shore up the American extended deterrence in ways that would seriously complicate Chinese interests and policies.
- Options for raising costs for China include greater support for popular sovereignty in Hong Kong and Taiwan—areas of acute sensitivity and uncertainty in recent Chinese calculations; and a pull back from close US economic engagement and reassurance of China that has been artfully used by China as it “games” the international economic system.

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