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# An Unintended Consequence of US Strategic Ambiguity: a Russia, China and Iran Troika

Washington just doesn't get it, argues Samir Tata. Its recent strategic ambiguity is not only endangering its status as a global power, it is also aiding and abetting the above three nations' axis of expediency, whether intentionally or not.

By Samir Tata for ISN

In order to provide maximum flexibility in addressing difficult policy choices, current US grand strategy has reflected a preference for ambiguity over clarity. Three major examples of this ambiguity include NATO's expansion into Russia's perceived sphere of influence, the Senkaku/Daioyu Islands dispute between Japan and China, and Iran's nuclear power program. Strategic ambiguity has, in turn, led to increased bilateral tensions between the United States and the main protagonists in these disputes. In response, an axis of expediency has emerged among China, Russia and Iran that's driven by a shared desire to neutralize Washington's efforts to use energy sanctions to coerce them into accepting particular policy preferences. As a result, the United States will need to have greater strategic clarity and a deeper appreciation of the vital national interests of its adversaries or risk its position as the sole global power.

## The Coming Storm

In the decade and a half following the end of the Cold War, NATO and Russia seemed to have arrived at a *modus vivendi* based on an implicit understanding to respect each other's sphere of influence. Between 1992 and 1997, an enfeebled Russia managed to patch together a European *cordon sanitaire* across its vulnerable southern underbelly, stretching from Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova through to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. By not raising any objections, NATO had, in effect, acquiesced to Moscow's efforts to craft a sphere of influence. Likewise, Russia accepted NATO expansion as it unfolded through 2004. NATO's new *cordon sanitaire* stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea taking in several former Soviet states and Russia's erstwhile Warsaw Pact allies.

Since then, Russia's strategic priority has been on preserving the stability of its status quo with NATO. However, this implied bargain was effectively upended in 2006, when NATO used its [Riga Summit](#) to encourage Georgia and Ukraine into becoming full members of the Alliance. Neither the US nor its NATO partners have articulated a strategic rationale for this *volte face*. For its part, Moscow has cut through the fog of strategic ambiguity on several occasions. The 2008 invasion of Georgia, 2014 annexation of Crimea, and continuing support for pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine demonstrates

unambiguously that Moscow will safeguard its *cordon sanitaire* and enforce its red line against further NATO expansion along its border in Europe.

The type of ambiguity that underpins US-Japanese relations might one day be exploited by China. Probably only next to the NATO Treaty of 1949, the most consequential defense commitment the US has is the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security with Japan. [Article V](#) of the Treaty states that “each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger”. However, there are two glaring omissions in this clause that create ambiguity with respect to the nature of the US response in the event of an armed attack on Japan. First, an armed attack on Japan is not considered to be an armed attack on the US but merely dangerous to its peace and safety. Second, the clause is silent with respect to the option of a military response, which raises doubts as to whether the initial American response would involve the use of military force. By contrast, under Article V of the NATO Treaty, a similar armed attack against a NATO ally would be considered an armed attack on the US, and the option of a military response is explicit.

The potential impact of this ambiguity on the status of the disputed Senkaku/ Daiyou Islands should not be underestimated. Over the last two years, the dispute between China and Japan (and to a lesser extent Taiwan) over the sovereignty of this island chain has become increasingly tense. Indeed, emboldened by [Washington’s affirmation](#) that the Senkaku Islands are covered by the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, Japan might one day pursue a course designed to provoke Chinese intervention. For instance, one month after receiving Washington’s assurances, Tokyo [announced plans](#) to build military facilities on the nearby Nansei Islands. Six months later, China responded by declaring that it was [building a military base](#) on the Nanji Islands (about 100 km from the disputed islands). Accordingly, China’s willingness to escalate its standoff with Japan might reflect an implicit assumption that the US is unlikely to invoke the military option so long as only Japanese forces are targeted in a limited confrontation (such as a Chinese seizure of the islands).

Much like its relations with China and Japan, tensions between the United States and Iran are also obscured by two layers of ambiguity: concerns over the exact nature of Tehran’s nuclear program and control over access to the Persian Gulf and its natural resources. Under three presidents – Nixon, Ford and Carter – the US encouraged the Shah of Iran to develop nuclear power to meet his country’s domestic energy needs. Nuclear power was also expected to assist [Tehran’s efforts](#) to maximize its oil production capabilities in order to generate hard currency revenues. Yet, while Washington supported the Shah’s ambitious plans for civilian nuclear power, it also consistently refused [requests](#) to develop a domestic capacity to enrich nuclear material.

In fact, Washington’s interpretation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as articulated during Senate hearings in 1968, was that non-nuclear weapons states could only pursue nuclear enrichment activity under safeguards. This also reflected the US’ fear that the Shah’s ambitions for nuclear enrichment could [pave the way](#) for Iran to develop a nuclear weapons capability. A nuclear-armed Iran, even under the friendly regime of the Shah, could jeopardize US control over access to oil from the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the substance of the US - Iranian negotiations over nuclear enrichment that proved so vexing under the Shah is once again the central challenge facing negotiators as they try to resolve the current impasse over Tehran’s nuclear program.

### **A Troika to Counter Energy Sanctions**

In its confrontations with Iran and Russia, the United States’ weapon of choice has been energy sanctions. Key elements of the sanctions imposed by the US and its allies (the EU, Japan and South Korea) include an embargo on oil and gas imports from Russia and Iran, and a prohibition of investments in both states’ energy sectors. The aim is to deny Moscow and Tehran export markets for

their energy resources and to cripple their ability to sustain high levels of oil and gas production, thereby depriving them of much-needed hard currency revenues. In the case of China, energy sanctions would most likely be focused on denying it access to oil and gas imports from the Persian Gulf and Africa.

US sanctions have severely hampered Iran's oil and gas industry, and seriously diminished its role as an energy exporter. However, the inexorable pressure of sanctions has also pushed Iran into the arms of Russia and China - not by choice but by necessity. As a result, Russia has built [and provides supplies for] Iran's first nuclear power plant at Bushehr and also agreed to construct up to [eight additional plants](#) for the Islamic Republic. Moscow is also [Tehran's largest supplier](#) of conventional military equipment. Indeed, in a high profile visit to Tehran earlier this year, the Russian defense minister, Sergey Shoygu, signed an [expanded military cooperation agreement](#) that underscores Moscow's determination to maintain its defense ties with Iran.

Closer Sino-Russian defense ties are by no means in the offing. However, Moscow is more than capable of using its energy resources to strengthen its relations with Beijing. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates Russia's oil exports to Europe amounted to 5.8 million barrels per day in 2012. In the same year [China's oil imports](#) were about 5.6 million barrels per day (of which only 0.5 million barrels per day were provided by Russia). So Moscow could satisfy all of Beijing's oil import requirements by switching sales from Europe to China. Indeed, the same is also true for natural gas. In both instances, Russia can neutralize American and European sanctions targeted at its energy industry, while China can enhance its energy security.

Indeed, China is acutely aware of its vulnerability to US energy sanctions as tensions between the two countries grow. According to the EIA, in 2014 China surpassed the United States as the [world's largest importer of oil and gas](#), virtually all of which is delivered via tankers passing through the Malacca Straits to the South China Sea. Since the US Navy controls all of the vital maritime chokepoints and the associated sea lines of communication, Washington could successfully enforce an embargo on Chinese energy imports via a naval blockade. Russia and Iran are obvious energy suppliers who could deliver all of China's oil and gas import needs via land-based pipelines outside the control of the United States.

Not surprisingly, Russia and China have stepped up their [energy cooperation](#) in an effort to counter a US-led energy sanctions strategy. And despite the embargo on energy imports from Iran, China continues to be Tehran's largest oil customer. Clearly, American strategic ambiguity has triggered unintended consequences in terms of bilateral tensions between the United States and Russia, China and Iran, respectively, and encouraged these adversaries to try to band together and form a troika to counter Washington. As a result, the US must reassess its current preference for ambiguity. It also needs to articulate the strategic rationale for NATO's current boundaries and affirm the status quo with Russia. With respect to its defense treaty with Japan, Washington should be absolutely clear about its commitments to Tokyo (along the lines of the NATO treaty) but distinguish this commitment from territorial disputes. Finally, Washington must reaffirm its 1968 interpretation of the NPT in finalizing an agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Only greater US strategic clarity will help to ensure that this embryonic axis of expediency does not morph into a grave threat.

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