

# Retaining Strategic Influence in Asia: China, Maritime Power, and U.S. National Security Strategy

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The loss of U.S. global maritime dominance would put at risk fundamental national interests, essentially most of what we take for granted. Certainly, it would call into question the ability of the United States to command offshore lines of communication, and thereby execute operational plans to counter provocation and proliferation, preserve the independence of democratic allies and partners, ensure the free flow of commerce, and keep potential adversaries on their back foot and far from our shores.

Yet to all appearances American maritime power is steadily eroding. Partly this is a natural consequence of rising new centers of power resulting from a worldwide redistribution of wealth and technology.<sup>1</sup> But it is not the generalized maritime challenge so much as the particularized threat posed by the rise of China's blue water navy—and its ancillary enabling capabilities, all backed by comprehensive instruments of power—that should arrest the attention of U.S. officials and, to the extent they still exist, strategic planners.<sup>2</sup> The United States is being outmaneuvered in China's Near Seas, and the resulting pressure to fall back could result in severely limiting future U.S. power in the world's most consequential region, what Nicholas Spykman called the "Asiatic Mediterranean."<sup>3</sup>

A decision to resist or effectively counter China's strategy of indirection and emergence as a maritime power must be addressed within the larger context of U.S.-China relations. Is it possible to fashion a sustainable and successful American foreign policy that seeks to preserve U.S. national and especially maritime power, without falling prey to the myriad pitfalls put forth by scholars (the 'Thucydides' trap, security dilemmas, inadvertent escalation, regional polarization that would result from forcing allies and partners to choose between China and the United States, etc.)?<sup>4</sup>

A forceful response that does not catalyze world war is indeed possible, and I have dubbed this approach to be one of "cooperation through strength."<sup>5</sup> It is based on maintaining a balance of power as articulated by realists in U.S. foreign policy, such as Henry Kissinger, Robert Zoellick, Richard Armitage, Robert Kaplan, and by Kurt Campbell, and Michael Green, among others.<sup>6</sup> While they might not agree with all my arguments, I think it is possible to craft a mainstream foreign policy in which bounded competition and peace-through-strength are core principles. If such an American strategy can develop and take hold, it will spring from these mainstream realists and others like them.

The alternative to shoring up our economic, diplomatic, and military power in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region—something dubbed the pivot or rebalance in the last administration—is to give China unimpeded strategic influence to shape the most populous and increasingly most powerful region of the world to its liking and often at the expense of U.S. national security interests and prosperity. This is a significant competition, because it represents a struggle over the global operating system that was largely devised and sustained by the United States after World War II.<sup>7</sup>

But even if we agree that we should be preparing for heightened competition with China, then we should admit that we have been careless, haphazard, and ill-organized and ill-prepared to run that race. We have not yet taken the challenge seriously and as a result we have not thoughtfully, let alone brutally, prioritized our policies, budgets, and organizations to give us a better chance of success.

Where is the serious debate about how the United States can intelligently tackle its foremost long-term competitor? Instead, we seem to be satisfied with annually adjusting downwards our expectations, acquiescing to creeping (and ordinarily breathtaking) assertions of Chinese sovereignty and mounting Chinese capabilities supported by propaganda, capital, and law fare. As a Nation, we seem satisfied with losing influence provided it happens in phases.

Assuming we wanted to be serious and self-interested, we would wish to craft a strategic vision in which one of the central priorities would be how to compete with China over the long term. Some Chinese have been said to drop the pretext of creating a new type of great power relations with the United States, and instead opted to accelerate China's leading role, centered on economic rubrics such as "One Belt, One Road" and the development of maritime power that dominates the *San Hai* (the Three Seas—Yellow, East China and South China) but includes a global reach by ensuring access to two major oceans.

So, too, the United States should forego the liberal conceit of thinking that we will persuade China into convergence, or that we can ever provide Beijing with sufficient strategic reassurance to give up on competition. We should instead embrace a realistic U.S.-China relationship in which both heightened competition and cooperation are adjustable elements.<sup>8</sup>

Geopolitical competition with China should not and cannot mean containment of the world's second largest economy. But it should mean that the United States adopts an overall foreign policy designed to preserve a favorable economic, political, and military order. That means defining a national economic policy that supports higher growth and parallel investment in the sinews of comprehensive power. It also means keeping pace with joint military power -- but especially in maritime and air power -- supported by nuclear deterrence, ballistic missile defense, and superior space and cyber systems. Finally, it means maintaining active and compelling diplomatic engagement, including inter alia the retention of effective allies and the fostering of a broad network of capable security partners to check Chinese adventurism or aggression.

Provided we invest sufficiently in the maintenance of deterrence (and granted this becomes more complicated in a future of artificial intelligence and autonomous defenses), the bounded military competition will mostly remain a battle over gray-zone situations in the contested peacetime environment.<sup>9</sup> Seeking cooperation where we can and conflict-avoidance where we must, we can help to narrow down the salient of geopolitical competition. Further, because we can live with a non-zero sum, general balance of power, we can decide when and how to press our advantages, and hold at risk China's strategy of slow-motion hegemony and key vulnerabilities to include a critical dependence on chokepoints.

I do not believe we can separate Vladimir Putin's Russia from pursuing a global foreign policy in cooperation with China. The best way for Putin to resurrect Moscow's stature to where it was during the existence of the Soviet Union is for him to work with China to weaken America's residual dominance over the international system. But there are specific areas where cooperation at China's geopolitical expense may be possible (missile control regimes, for instance), and over time (and after Putin) further areas of cooperation may emerge.

Dan Blumenthal's idea of ensuring that China must contend with "unsafe zones" at sea suggests the need to preserve or build American maritime advantages in submarine warfare, ASW, ISR, and distributed fires—something made more feasible when done in tandem with capable allies

and serious partner capacity-building programs designed to allow dispersed access, a network of counterweights, and sowing political-military uncertainty to induce greater caution on the part of Beijing officials.<sup>10</sup>

This competition with China will not be limited to the Indo-Pacific region, but over the next two decades the biggest implication of China's blue water navy capabilities could well be its potential for complete dominance of the Yellow and East and South China Seas. An India that fails to develop faster, and furthermore the breakdown of U.S.-India cooperation, perhaps accelerated by a future China's distant operations that pin down U.S. security forces to a fortress American posture focused on homeland security, would expose both the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific to Chinese domination.

The U.S. Armed Forces, especially the U.S. Navy in tandem with allies, would have to find a way to check China from dominating the Near Seas bounded by the First Island Chain, and be able to hold the chokepoints leading out to the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans. This geostrategic maritime capability would have to retain qualitative edges in key areas such as submarine warfare and ASW. It would have to depend upon an industrial base necessary to sustain and maintain sufficient numbers of qualitatively superior forces necessary to check a technological peer with greater numbers of forces.

While there is no one scenario for how this might be executed, it would at a minimum require joint and combined military power to be able to mobilize quickly to threaten critical chokepoints that in turn would compel China to find non-military paths to achieve its objectives. It would also require being willing to assume sufficient risk at sea to engage in quick, short skirmishes that reinforce this standoff without escalating into wider conflict or collapsing global markets. This is, of course, generally a page from the Cold War playbook, albeit with electronic warfare increasingly important and space and cyber warfare added to the mix.

Paul Giarra has written trenchantly about how to think about and possibly counter China's maritime salient and search for guaranteed control over vital chokepoints leading out of the South China Sea.<sup>11</sup> The strategy envisioned in Giarra's thinking would require a top-down decision to prioritize sustainability and resilience. It would not allow budgets to drive the strategy, but to find a way to pursue a strategy despite fiscal constraints. The military costs would not be small but would require both near-term sustainment and long-term technologies that preserve competitive capabilities in critical areas. Robert Work's emphasis on a Third Offset strategy highlights the need for innovative defense acquisition, but pursued in isolation could constitute our own Assassin's Mace, lulling us into a false sense of security that we could win a short, sharp war, as though a more assertive, confident, and powerful China will always back away at the first blush of high-tech pressure.<sup>12</sup>

The Trump administration's call for a larger defense budget, which in and of itself appears politically difficult, would be but the first of many necessary steps – including the purchase of such basics as more naval munitions, that will be required to retain maritime power both ready and credible to contest gray-zone situations and, if necessary, to wage war at sea.<sup>13</sup>

However, at the present we are victims of our own historical success, because over the last 75 years when we had to fight at sea we prevailed, both in 1941-1945 and throughout the hotly-contested Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. We have come to assume without convincing scrutiny that we can dominate and hold and exploit the First Island Chain and reach the Asian landmass at will. But as suggested above, that assumption is increasingly open to question and provides a dangerous basis for future planning.<sup>14</sup> This is where a deliberate campaign of net assessment and red team gaming must ensue.

Yet our Services and Beltway braintrust seem determined to let budgets drive our strategy.

This is a warning sign that we are preparing to fail. We must instead be determined to succeed, to be unremitting in the pursuit of brutal prioritization of our finite national assets. We should be determined to compete in the 21st century's most vital maritime theater, as foreseen by Nicholas Spykman as the Mediterranean of Asia with all the centrality that metaphor implies. The alternative will be to draw back east of Hawaii, focus on the homeland and Western Hemisphere, and allow others to drive the world's future at the expense of freedom, prosperity, and our fundamental security.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council, January 2017), <https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/documents/GT-Main-Report.pdf>. For two recent discussions of the distribution of power to and within Asia see Gideon Rachman, *Easternisation: War and Peace in the Asian Century* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016) and Enrico Fels, *Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific? The Rise of China, Sino-US Competition and Regional Middle Power Allegiance* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See Patrick M. Cronin, et al., *Beyond the San Hai: Strategic Implications of China's Emerging Bluewater Navy* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, forthcoming May 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Francis P. Sempa, "Nicholas Spykman and the Struggle for the Asiatic Mediterranean," January 9, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/nicholas-spykman-and-the-struggle-for-the-asiatic-mediterranean/>.

<sup>4</sup> Among the numerous scholars issuing such warnings are: Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, forthcoming May 2017); Amitai Etzioni, *Avoiding War with China: Two Nations, One World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, May 2017); Jonathan Holslag, *China's Coming War with Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015); and Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Collingwood, Australia: Black Inc., 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick M. Cronin and Robert D. Kaplan, "Cooperation from Strength: U.S. Strategy and the South China Sea," in Patrick M. Cronin, ed., *Cooperation from Strength: The U.S., China and the South China Sea* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, January 2012), [https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS\\_CooperationFromStrength\\_Cronin\\_1.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS_CooperationFromStrength_Cronin_1.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> See especially Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence – Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), 2017.

<sup>7</sup> See Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York, NY: Twelve, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> I base this argument on many sources, including the influence of classical Chinese strategic thinking. For instance, see Derek M C Yuen, *Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read the Art of War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Concerns about how war could be catalyzed by artificial intelligence, autonomous machines, and other technologies are the subject of many current researchers. For example, see Fred Kaplan, *Dark Territory: The Secret History of Cyber War* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2016), and the fictional treatment of the nonfictional subject by P. W. Singer, *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Blumenthal, "A Strategy for China's Imperial Overstretch," *The American Interest*, March 1, 2017, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/03/01/a-strategy-for-chinas-imperial-overstretch/>.

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<sup>11</sup> See Paul S. Giarra, “China’s Maritime Salient: Competitive Strategies on the Oceanic Front for the 21st Century,” in Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> For a superb consideration of the alternative to a short, sharp war, and its requirements, see the Office of Net Assessment’s 2016 Summer Study, “Protracted Great Power War: A Scenario-based Approach.”

<sup>13</sup> Reporting on China’s stated official reduction of defense spending juxtaposed against Washington’s desire for military budget increases misses vital context to include China’s ability to close the qualitative and quantitative gap in U.S.-China defense capabilities. For instance, see Emily Rauhala, “As Trump Pushes for Bigger U.S. Defense Budget, China Slows Growth Rate of Its Military Spending,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-trump-pushes-for-bigger-us-defense-budget-china-slows-growth-rate-of-its-military-spending/2017/03/04/ace6105c-0094-11e7-a51a-e16b4bcc6644\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.202c8acbf73](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-trump-pushes-for-bigger-us-defense-budget-china-slows-growth-rate-of-its-military-spending/2017/03/04/ace6105c-0094-11e7-a51a-e16b4bcc6644_story.html?utm_term=.202c8acbf73).

<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the briefings emanating out of U.S. Pacific Command point to how much China has improved its ability to contest sea control over the past two decades, moving in that time from its coastal waters to beyond the First and event Second Island Chains.