

Is the US Presence in East Asia Good for Regional Stability?

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Introduction

In 1972, US President Richard Nixon made an historic visit to China, effectively welcoming China to the Western world and beginning the process of normalising relations between China and the US. Then, in 1979, the rise to power of reformist Deng Xiaoping saw the gradual opening of the Chinese market, including to foreign direct investment. Together, Chinese market liberalisation and US-China rapprochement set the course for what has been an extremely productive and mutually-beneficial relationship.

Economic interdependence between the two nations is the most striking aspect of their current relationship. However, China's growth since 1972 has been startling; economically, diplomatically and especially militarily. The relationship between the US and China is now extremely important for the peace and stability of East Asia, which both nations openly acknowledge.¹ Nevertheless, as China looks to expand its influence, it brings challenges to regional security, as recent incidents in the South and East China Seas have demonstrated.

This paper examines the critical question of the extent to which America's presence in the region affects regional stability, and China's rising prominence. It analyses the role and effect of America's presence in East Asia, including through the use of Amitav Acharya's model for regional security.² It concludes that despite both positive and negative aspects, the continuing US presence has been and ultimately continues to be a positively stabilising influence from which the whole East Asian region has benefitted.

US presence in East Asia

The military relationship between the US and Japan is the foundation of the US security presence in East Asia. The US maintains the largest of its overseas Asia-Pacific military forces in Japan. In 1983, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone pledged to make Japan an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' for the US military against the Soviet Union.³

Since the end of the Cold War, the continuing US military presence in Japan could appear confronting to China, if not threatening, especially when the US military presence in South Korea and Guam is also considered. So what effect does this presence have on regional stability? If one measure of stability is growth and prosperity, then it could be argued that stability through the US presence has been very positive.

Indeed, notwithstanding the occasional sabre rattling by North Korea, East Asia has been relatively peaceful since the brief clash between China and Vietnam in 1979. There has been no actual conflict between East Asian states and none of the major powers has resorted to the use of military force in any serious way.⁴ Hugh White argues that the US primacy in East Asia has prevented the more powerful nations from excessive bullying of the less powerful, and has also prevented the creation of strategic blocs.⁵

With a so-called 'hub-and-spoke' series of alliances with Japan, Republic of Korea, The Philippines, Thailand and Australia, an extensive military presence and by facilitating unimpeded markets for the region's trade, the US has been comprehensively engaged in the region's security and prosperity, to the extent that:

It is doubtful whether Japan, South Korea, or any of the countries in Southeast Asia would have experienced such rapid economic growth and undertaken political transition without their participation in this US-led liberal hegemonic order.⁶

Ironically, perhaps the nation that has benefitted most from the US presence in the region is China, with Hillary Clinton noting in late 2011 that 'China has prospered as part of the open and rules-based system that the United States helped to build and works to sustain'.⁷ Similarly, Hugh White has noted that it was America's normalisation of relations that paved the way for China - along with the rest of East Asia - to join the US-led economic order, and that it was America that supported the entry of China into the World Trade Organisation in 2001.⁸

However, arguably one of the greatest stabilising factors that the US presence has on the region, including in respect to China, is the 'Japan-US Security Treaty' developed in the aftermath of World War II. The Treaty is essentially an American guarantee for Japan's security and, while some may see that it subordinates Japan to the US presence in East Asia, it has allowed Japan to focus on rebuilding its post-war economy without the need to enter an arms race against China. Japan's strongly-pacifist constitution also places significant restriction on its ability to build or acquire offensive or power-projection capabilities, which similarly has resulted in Japan's reliance on the US to augment its otherwise impressive military.

The substantial US military presence in Japan may well unsettle the Chinese leadership, however several of the alternatives would likely be even less palatable. Since the 1980s, Japan has possessed the world's second or third largest economy, as well as the technology and industrial know-how to develop nuclear weapons. While it has not acquired such weapons, an otherwise heavily-armed, strategically-independent Japan would be significantly more unsettling for China than the potential adversary it faces now, especially over territorial disputes in the East China Sea. Indeed, given the restraining influence of the US-Japan alliance on Japan - and the stabilising effect that an ongoing US military presence has had on the whole region - it seems reasonable to assume that China would actually be supportive of the US role in Northeast Asia, notwithstanding that it might be loath to admit it.⁹

There are, of course, negative aspects to the presence of the US in East Asia for China, and which China would argue are destabilising, related to the ongoing and escalating territorial dispute with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and with The Philippines over parts of the Spratly Islands. In both cases, as the disputing parties turn to the US for diplomatic support and military backing through their alliances with the US, China presumably believes they are emboldened by the US assurances regarding its treaty commitments.¹⁰ Writing about the

US pivot, You Ji recently remarked:

In a way, the US tightening of pressure on Beijing [in the form of the US pivot to East Asia] is behind 'envelope-pushing' by some regional countries for practical gains in sovereignty disputes with China before the [altered balance of power] ... becomes 'unchallengeable'.¹¹

Regardless of the US pivot, it is questionable whether China's power will eventually become 'unchallengeable' on a region-wide basis. However, the US pivot – if successfully implemented – would likely make it even more problematic for the strategic balance of power between the US and China to shift irrevocably in China's favour. Hence, while it might be concluded that the US presence in East Asia has largely been a positive stabilising influence to date, China's assessment of a fully-implemented US pivot may not be so benign.

In 2001, and writing primarily with the issue of Taiwanese reunification in mind, Thomas Christensen articulated what he believed to be perceptions within the Chinese leadership regarding the circumstances under which China might challenge the US forces in the Asian region, even where China's forces are militarily weaker. Key among those circumstances, in his view, is a situation where China feels it has been 'driven into a corner' on an issue that is perceived to be a threat to China's core interests or endangers the existence of the regime.¹² Some would argue that this perception appears no less relevant today, particularly in relation to the US pivot.

The general consensus on Chinese perceptions of the US pivot is that it would largely be regarded as 'an attempt to stifle and contain China and prevent it from playing its rightful role in the region'.¹³ Ely Ratner notes that:

Chinese analysts perceive US policies ... paint an ominous picture of US intentions. [These include] strengthening US security ties with treaty allies ... deepening relations with emerging powers ... increasing US engagement with ASEAN-centred institutions; announcing US national interests in the South China Sea; supporting the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement; re-engaging Burma; and deploying a rotational presence of US Marines to Darwin. Chinese thinkers view these actions as undermining China's security and increasingly believe the unifying rationale ... is to constrain China's rise.¹⁴

Understandably, the US official position differs. In 2011, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasised the broad, strategic objectives of the pivot, noting the importance of locking in a 'substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region'.¹⁵ Yet despite the intention of making the pivot a broad effort for engendering regional security and prosperity, China has generally only seen the pivot in military terms, as an attempt to contain China and as the main cause of regional instability.¹⁶

Some would argue that China's perceptions of the pivot are perhaps not unreasonable, given the high visibility and reporting of its military aspects. Others might argue that China is being unnecessarily paranoid, and that it suits China's leadership to portray the pivot (and US intentions) as a threat to the return of China to its rightful place in the regional and global order. Others would be sceptical of the assertions by the US President and senior White House officials that the pivot is not just about China, largely ignoring the region-wide prospective benefits articulated by Hillary Clinton in relation to trade and economics, as well as other important issues such as the pivot's potential curb on nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia.¹⁷

Certainly, the list of pivot-related actions cited by Ely Ratner appears over-stated and somewhat inflammatory. With the exception of its support for a Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which currently does not include China (nor a number of other countries in the Asia-Pacific region), all the other US actions were already underway before the pivot was announced, suggesting the 'ominous picture of US intentions' should actually be based on a perception of changing emphasis rather than new initiatives.

In essence, other than its recent assertiveness over territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, which was already evident before the announcement of the pivot, China's reaction appears to be a mix of irritated comment and rhetoric in support of its contention that China's resurgence on the world stage is being frustrated by the US. Apart from that, the pivot does not appear to have caused any significant, measurable instability in East Asia.

Regional Order in East Asia

In assessing the regional security order in East Asia, it is useful to draw on the methodology developed by Amitav Acharya. He developed an interpretive framework, which he termed the 'consociational security order', for analysing the impact of the rise of China on the Asian security order, defining the term as:

A [consociational security order] is a mutual accommodation among unequal and culturally diverse groups that preserves each group's relative autonomy and prevents the hegemony of any particular group/s.¹⁸

Acharya's thesis is that four key drivers will determine stability in East Asia: balance of power (defensive realism), multilateralism, economic interdependence, and elite restraint, arguing that where these four drivers are met, stability is most likely.¹⁹

In relation to the balance of power between the US and China, which is the element most obvious and most popular in current security analyses, the overall consensus is that the US is now, and will remain for some time to come, the stronger military power.²⁰ However, Acharya notes that balance of power should refer to multiple balances of power, not just security. Ikenberry similarly notes that East Asia is divided by the two spheres, economics and security, with China the dominant economic power and the US the dominant security power.²¹ Comparing the two holistically in terms of combined military, security and diplomatic capabilities would likely show the US ahead, particularly in a global context, although most would agree that the difference is narrowing in the Asia-Pacific region. It could be concluded, therefore, that there exists a reasonable balance between the two at least in the context of the East Asian region.

In relation to multilateralism, Acharya notes that forums such as the East Asia Summit, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum are important because they engender an open and collective approach to managing regional issues, including economic development, security, disaster response and environmental sustainability. Importantly, while both China and the US are members of the key forums, no single participant leads them and this promotes consensual rule and decision making.²² The US and China are also strengthening their military links through the participation of Chinese observers in multilateral and multi-national military exercises, such as Cobra Gold (a joint US/Thailand exercise), while in 2014, China is expected to participate in RIMPAC, the largest international maritime exercise in the Pacific rim.

In terms of economic interdependence, the hypothesis is that increased dependence drives rational behaviour between states by assuming that each will recognise that the cost of confrontation comes as much from lost trade opportunity as it does from military action.²³ In direct contrast to the power rivalry of the Cold War, the economic interdependence between the US and China is astounding. In 2013, two-way trade was valued at US\$562 billion, China was the US's third largest export market, and China held the largest proportion of foreign-owned US national debt.²⁴ You Ji notes that 'today, Sino-US economic interdependence has so deepened that there is no easy way for Washington to pressure China militarily'.²⁵ Given that the US is China's largest export market, the same can reasonably be said about China.

Acharya's fourth driver refers to the restraint exercised by states in respect of the rights and interests of others, including weaker ones. The commitment comes not from altruism but from an understanding of the attendant risks to political stability without restraint. At first glance, this might seem to be the weakest element of regional stability, noting the apparent assertiveness of Chinese forces in the South and East China Seas or, conversely, the action of US carrier groups sailing through the Taiwan Strait during times of tension. However, another view is that both the US and China demonstrate considerable restraint in their commitment to bodies such as the World Trade Organisation, APEC and the UN. Ikenberry notes that China is rising during a period when international institutions are more developed and more prolific than ever, and that China is increasingly 'working within rather than outside this liberal international order',²⁶ while the US is one of the world's foremost proponents of states adhering to the international system.

Conclusion

On balance, the US presence in East Asia appears to have been positive for regional stability, evidenced in particular by the collective prosperity achieved in East Asia since the China-US rapprochement of 1972, as well as the absence of major power wars since 1979. However, the announced US pivot of 2011 is perhaps somewhat more problematic. On the one hand, it has been openly welcomed by many countries in the region, and appears not to be causing any significantly adverse reaction. But there is some evidence to suggest the US pivot is emboldening certain regional states to 'envelope push' their bilateral disputes with China. There is also a view that China's growing power will ultimately require more strategic space than what Beijing perceives may be achievable under the constraints imposed by the pivot.²⁷

Certainly, the spectacular rise of China seems to have caused a number of regional states to 'hedge' strategically by giving at least tacit support to a continuing US presence, as noted by Henry Kissinger:

Even those Asian states that are not members of alliances with the United States seek the reassurance of an American political presence in the region and of American Forces in nearby seas as the guarantor of the world to which they have become accustomed. Their approach was expressed by a senior Indonesian official to an American counterpart: 'Don't leave us, but don't make us choose.'²⁸

This latent tension and strategic rivalry clearly has the potential to undermine the stability of the region. Nevertheless, an appropriate regional order – based on a viable framework for regional security – may be able to successfully mitigate the adverse consequences of any such tension. Encouragingly, Acharya's regional security methodology suggests that the relationship between China and the US meets the conditions for a 'consociational security order', implying that the key drivers for stability in East Asia are already in place and that any tension between China and the US will be manageable for the foreseeable future.

Endnotes

1. See Henry A Kissinger, 'The Future of US-Chinese Relations: conflict is a choice, not a necessity', Foreign Affairs, March/April 2012, available at <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137245/henry-a-kissinger/the-future-of-us-chinese-relations>> accessed 23 April 2014. Kissinger notes that the joint statement at the end of President Hu Jintao's January 2011 visit to the US said 'the United States ... welcomes a strong, prosperous and successful China that plays a greater role in world affairs ... [while] China welcomes the United States as an Asia-Pacific nation that contributes to peace, stability and prosperity in the region'.
2. Amitav Acharya, 'Power or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order', International Studies Quarterly, June 2013, pp. 1-16. For the purposes of this paper, stability is taken to exist where there is no, or perhaps very low, risk to sovereignty, noting also that stability in international relations theory is often defined with respect to 'balance-of-power' realism. See Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'International Relations, Principal Theories', in R Wolfrum, (ed.), Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011, pp. 1-2.
3. Martin Fackler, 'Japan's Elder Statesman is Silent No Longer', The New York Times, 29 January 2010, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/30/world/asia/30nakasone.html?_r=0>, accessed 24 April 2014.
4. Hugh White, The China Choice: why America should share power, Black Inc: Collingwood, 2012, p. 14.
5. White, The China Choice, p. 14.

6. Takashi Inoguchi and G John Ikenberry, 'Introduction, The Troubled Triangle: economic and security concerns for the United States, Japan and China', in Takashi Inoguchi and G John Ikenberry (eds.), *The Troubled Triangle: economic and security concerns for the United States, Japan and China*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2013, p. 3.
7. Hillary Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, No. 189, p. 59.
8. White, *The China Choice*, p. 14.
9. G John Ikenberry, 'East Asia and International Order: hegemony, balance, and consent in the shaping of East Asian regional order', in Inoguchi and Ikenberry, *The Troubled Triangle*, p. 21.
10. Professor Shi Yinong, director of the Center for American Studies at Renmin University in Beijing, is quoted as saying 'the joint missile defense system objectively encourages Japan to keep an aggressive position in the Diaoyu Islands dispute, which sends China a very negative message. Japan would not have been so aggressive without the support and actions of the US', in Ely Ratner, 'Rebalancing to Asia with an Insecure China', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Spring 2013, p. 25.
11. You Ji, 'US Pivot to Asia and China's Strategic Dilemma and Response', National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) Joint Research Series No. 9, NIDS: Tokyo, 2013, p. 143, available at <http://www.nids.go.jp/english/publication/joint_research/series9/pdf/11.pdf> accessed 25 April 2014.
12. Thomas J. Christensen, 'Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's rise and challenges for US security policy', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Spring 2001, pp. 5-44.
13. Evans JR Revere, 'The United States and Japan in East Asia: challenges and prospects for the alliance', *American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2013, p. 194.
14. Ratner, 'Rebalancing to Asia with an Insecure China', p. 23.
15. Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', p. 57.
16. Revere, 'The United States and Japan in East Asia', p. 10, and Ratner, 'Rebalancing to Asia with an Insecure China', p. 21.
17. Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', p. 57.
18. For a detailed explanation of Acharya's 'consociational security order', see Amitav Acharya, 'Power or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order', *International Studies Quarterly*, June 2013, p. 1.
19. Acharya, 'Power or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order', pp. 2-4.
20. An article in a Taiwanese newspaper, quoting China commentator Dennis Blasko, contends that China is at least 20-30 years away from matching the US military capability: 'PLA still 30 years behind the US, says expert', *Want China Times*, 30 September 2013, available at <<http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?cid=1101&MainCatID=11&id=20130930000068>> accessed 29 April 2014. Acharya believes the US is likely to 'remain for a long time, the pre-eminent military power in Asia': Acharya, 'Power or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order', p. 10.
21. Ikenberry, 'East Asia and International Order', p. 14.
22. Acharya, 'Power or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order', p. 4.
23. For a detailed discussion on economic interdependence, see White, *The China Choice*, pp. 53-6.
24. Wayne M. Morrison, 'China-U.S. Trade Issues', US Congressional Research Service Report, 10 February 2014, available at <<https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33536.pdf>> accessed 5 May 2014; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'China-US Relations in China's Overall Diplomacy in the New Era', available at <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cggb/eng/gyzg/xwdt/t953682.htm>> accessed 29 April 2014.
25. Ji, 'US Pivot to Asia and China's Strategic Dilemma and Response', p. 151 and Gerald L. Curtis, 'Getting the Triangle Straight: China, Japan, and the United States in an era of change', *American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, Vol. 32, No. 3, p. 174.
26. Ikenberry, 'East Asia and International Order', p. 27.
27. Ji, 'US Pivot to Asia and China's Strategic Dilemma and Response', p. 163.
28. Kissinger, 'The Future of US-Chinese Relations'.

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