Rowing between two reefs: China, the United States and containment revenant

The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

"Rowing between two reefs: China, the United States and containment revenant", NAPSNet Policy Forum, August 09, 2012, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/rowing-between-two-reefs-china-the-united-states-and-containment-revenant/

Nautilus Peace and Security Weekly Report Contributor's blog entry for Austral Peace and Security.

Go to the Weekly Report for 9 August 2012.

This year's Shangri-La Security Dialogue had all the hallmarks of a dialogue of the deaf. Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's keynote address put a strong case for regional cooperative security, only to be contradicted US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. Recalling the "time when Southeast Asia was ripped apart by extra-regional powers", Yudhoyono said "the US and China have an obligation not just to themselves, but to the rest of the region to develop peaceful cooperation."

Panetta followed SBY and announced the US was back in the region, and back for good. Principles of "presence" and "force projection" would, he said, guide the US in the region. Outlining the administration's Pacific pivot strategy, Panetta headlined the firming of bilateral alliances, expansion of existing base arrangements, new basing possibilities in Vietnam and the Philippines, and the shift of naval capacities to the Pacific.

Needless to say, Secretary Panetta assured all who would listen that the pivot strategy was not aimed at China. What is less clear is precisely what United States policy towards China actually is, or is trying to achieve. If Panetta was telling the locals that containment of China is the order of the day, the Chinese could be forgiven being a tad confused. Barely a month earlier Hillary Clinton had opened the annual China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue by setting the fundamental issue on the table, saying the two countries are looking to writing "a new answer to the age-old question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet." The US and China both want,

Clinton asserted, "to build "a resilient relationship that allows both of our nations to thrive without unhealthy competition, rivalry or conflict".

The problem for the rest of us is the same as it is for China: which is the real policy of the United States? The answer, of course, is both: the US administration is not a single entity, and a policy mix of cooperation and conflict is not inherently either abnormal or fiercely destructive. Except that in this case, it is destructive and it is dangerous. Those hoary IR Realist nostrums about the consequences of not being able to discern the future intentions of other states come to bear here.

The dangers deriving from confusion about US real intentions are exacerbated by the strong elements of fantasy on the side of the American hawks on China. This is clear both in the application of the notion of containment – recycled from 1947; and in the accompanying pin-up strategy labelled AirSea Battle Concept, focussing on nullifying China's growing capacity to deny the United States its historic freedom of action in China's home waters.

If containment of China is to be the order of the day, then it is surely worth asking what this means, and comparing it to the American grand strategy of containment against the Soviet Union. Is anyone seriously maintaining that the relationship of China and the United States today is in anyway comparable to that of Stalin's Soviet Union and Truman's United States? Then the US had emerged from WW2 as the pre-eminent military, political and economic power. Today, after two disastrous American wars of choice run on credit, US military power is deeply compromised budgetarily. Allied governments such as Australia factor in declining American military strength in their defence planning, and the less said about the core capacities of the US economy the better.

Moreover, the Cold War was a clash of two hostile economic systems. Today, the United States and China are fused at the wallet. As Hillary Clinton asked Australian PM Kevin Rudd, "How do you talk tough to your banker?" More importantly, China is a key production platform for US corporations – just ask Apple and Walmart. This is not the non-relationship between the unparalleled pre-eminence of immediately post-war United States and the autarchic Soviet Union. Abstract thinking about power transition theory needs to be married to the complex, imbricated realities of an unprecedentedly globalised economy.

A Washington Post account of the institutional politics of the new Pacific emphasis focussed on the PR-glossed AirSea Battle Concept. The Post reported the sceptics who find it hard to imagine "that China, which owns $1.6 trillion in U.S. debt and depends heavily on the American economy, would strike U.S. forces out of the blue." The Brookings Institution's Jonathan Pollack cut sharply to the core of doubt about the AirSea Battle Concept:

"It is absolutely fraudulent. What is the imaginable context or scenario for this attack?"

So it is not only the Chinese who are confused as to the Obama administration's true intentions.

Of course, there is a real, unavoidable and global security threat in China – US relations. It derives from the systemic instability of the fusion of those two inherently unstable entities which we can label Wall Street and the increasingly delegitimized Chinese Communist Party. Now, in the midst the global instabilities of GFCs I and II we wait for the inevitable economic and political consequences, foreign and domestic, of the already visible Chinese manufacturing slowdown.

Yudhoyono's call for cooperative security was a rearticulation of Indonesia's foreign policy principle of *mendayung di antara dua karang* or "rowing between two reefs". SBY is reminding us that once again we are all in the same boat, and there is more than one reef out there. Sailors beware.

—Richard Tanter, NAPSNet Contributor

---

*The **Nautilus Peace and Security Weekly Report** presents articles and full length reports each week in six categories: Austral security, nuclear deterrence, energy security, climate change adaptation, the DPRK, and governance and civil society**.** Our team of contributors carefully select items that highlight the links between these themes and the three regions in which our offices are found—North America, Northeast Asia, and the Austral-Asia region. Each week, one of our authors also provides a short blog that explores these inter-relationships.*

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/rowing-between-two--eefs-china-the-united-states-and-containment-revenant/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org