

Turbulence in the South China Sea and re-thinking of a new Asian Order

Abstract

As China is growing in economic and military might, the dynamics of great power transition between the United States and China are coming to a head in the South China Sea. Following America's Pivot to Asia, several of China's neighbours have become emboldened to assert their rival territorial claims against China over various islands in these waters, resulting in a series of stand-offs with Chinese fishing vessels and civic activists in the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu island disputed by Japan. Rising nationalism on both sides is fuelling the confrontation, including right-wing politics in Japan. Meanwhile, with strengthened U.S. military ties and more frequent American naval exercises with China's neighbours, China is becoming alarmed at a tightening of a perceived military encirclement around a series of island chains marked by U.S. naval presence. To China this is not only a matter of threats to her territorial integrity in the region but also to the security of China's vital sea lanes on which China relies for international trade and the importation of resources essential for economic survival. Beijing has now seized the moment to establish a new prefecture-level unit on one of the largest Chinese-inhabited Parcel islands so as to administer a large swath of claimed territories in the environs. All these are happening at a time when China has signalled the establishment of a blue-water navy with the commissioning of her first aircraft carrier, albeit a re-fitted Russian model. The Chinese military is also demonstrating "access denial" and other advanced missile capabilities. The reality is that while free-riding on America's military protection, none of China's neighbours, including Japan, wants to join an overt anti-China military bloc as all depend for their economic growth on China as their largest market and trading partner at the centre of a regional production and supply chain. China, for her part, has been pursuing a peaceful development trajectory, trying to build harmonious relations around and beyond her periphery. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area is the world's largest by population and the "ASEAN way" has been gaining traction based on a consensual and win-win process, upholding equality between states. Meanwhile, tensions over the Taiwan Strait have become much less acute as relations with Beijing have improved and economic integration with the mainland is becoming irreversible. Against this background, recent turbulence in the South China Sea suggests that perhaps a broader re-think is now opportune for a new, more sustainable Asian Order and for the roles to be played by the two leading world powers, the United States and China. Various foreign policy strategists have offered some new prescriptions. While actual developments and events are unlikely to fit neatly into any recipe, deeper understanding and debate of the changing dynamics at work may help in better managing the evolving U.S.-China relationship, which is proving to be the most important of bilateral relations in the 21st century.

Key Words

Asian Order, South China Sea, Senkaku/Diaoyu, island chains, Sea Lanes of Communication, regional security, Pivot to Asia, great power transition

Turbulent waters in the South China Sea

Nationalistic protests in China are flaring up across the country (1) , having been stoked by a series of stand-offs between Chinese civilian activists and Japanese authorities over the disputed Diaoyu 钓鱼岛/Senkaku island in the South China Sea. They are fuelled by high-profile moves of right-wing Japanese politicians to formally showcase Japan's claimed sovereignty, including planting Japanese flags on rocks and “nationalization” by purchasing this island from purported private Japanese “owners”.

Historically, this tiny island outcrop dates back to the Ming dynasty. It became annexed by Japan towards the tail-end of the nineteenth century. According to both China and the Taiwan governments, it reverted to Chinese sovereignty at the end of the Second World War. However, in 1972 its administration was handed back by the U.S. to Japan along with that of the Ryukyu Islands (2).

Sino-Japanese relations have not been very cordial at the best of times. In recent years, they have been further soured by visits of various Prime Ministers (such as Koizumi) and other senior Japanese politicians to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honours several Class A Japanese war criminals along with other Japanese war deads. To the Chinese people, Japan, unlike Germany, has never really wanted to atone for its war crimes.

The flare-up of nationalism is exacerbated by a feeling of the Chinese people that even after "centuries of humiliation" at the hands of foreign occupiers, the country in this day and age is still failing to stand up to perceived “aggressors” . However, this time around, rather than fanning nationalism as a means to bolster the Party's rule as some academics have postulated (3) , the Chinese government is now trying to restrain a rising tide of aggressive nationalism which threatens to scuttle the nation's efforts to project an international image of peaceful "rise" or "development".

- (1) Financial Times, 19 August, 2012. (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/97805eaa-e9ee-11e1-929b-00144feab49a.html#axzz24ZHX8eQD>, accessed on 25 August, 2012)
- (2) See an account of the history of the Diaoyu/Senkaku island at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senkaku_Islands (accessed on 25 August, 2012).
- (3) See, for example, "*China's New Nationalism*", Peter Hays Gries, University of California Press, 2005.

In any case, the geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea have changed rapidly as China's military strength has been growing by leaps and bounds, commensurate with the size of China's economy. An article in *The Economist* (7 April, 2012) "*China's military rise -The dragon's new teeth*" provides "A rare look inside the world's biggest military expansion" (4).

China's expanded military capabilities have materialized not only in response to the geopolitical risks over Taiwan but also to those over strategic Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) in the South China Sea. These are critical conduits for essential energy and other resources vital to China's economic survival. Such risks are increasingly being felt over the so-called "First and Second Island Chains" encircling China's maritime periphery marked by powerful American naval presence.

U.S. Pivot to Asia

The perceived threats of U.S. military containment are accentuated by America's recent "Pivot to Asia", following Secretary Hilary Clinton's declaration of America's new "*Pacific Century*" (5).

This has ushered in renewed and enhanced formal and informal U.S. military ties and large-scale joint naval exercises with China's neighbours, including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines. In particular, a US-Japan 37-day joint military drill off the coast of the Northern Marianas starting 21 August 2012 focussed on simulations to re-take invaded islands. This was ostensibly aimed to counter any Chinese offensive over the Diaoyu/Senkaku island, notwithstanding US-Japan denial. While America officially pronounces neutrality over disputed territories in the South China Sea, these military manoeuvres hardly create trust between China and the United States.

Moreover, amongst this group of countries, a handful have territorial disputes with the Middle Kingdom. They have now become emboldened to proactively

(4) The Economist article can be viewed at <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193> (accessed on 25 August 2012)

(5) See her article in *Foreign Policy*, November 2011. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century (accessed on 25 August, 2012)

exert their rival sovereignty claims over such territories as the Spratlys, the Paracels, and the Scarborough Shoal, historically all claimed by China, resulting in several stand-offs with Chinese civilian vessels in recent months.

The geopolitical reality is that virtually all of China's neighbours, including Japan, depend on China economically as their largest trading partner. They are unlikely to wish to form an anti-China military bloc. Nevertheless, they all welcome a free-ride on America's naval protection as a strategic hedge against a rising China.

Meanwhile, China has been strengthening her naval defences in the South China Sea. The refitting and commissioning of China's first aircraft carrier, the *Varyag*, an old Russian model, was China's first open demonstration of a clear intention to build a blue-water navy. While China's naval force still remains decades behind American global naval assets, technology, readiness, outreach and manoeuvrability, military strategists are becoming alarmed by China's advances in "A2/AD (anti-access/area-denial)" capabilities, including mobile "aircraft-carrier killer" missiles, as well as in "C5ISR" (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Combat Systems, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), not to mention high capabilities in cyber-warfare and space technologies. These are being deployed and continually developed to deter and delay potential adversary military deployment in case of a war over the Taiwan Strait, as Taiwan remains China's predominant core interest. (6)

Mounting military tensions

China is becoming more and more alarmed at her neighbours' increasing assertive rival territorial claims and at what seems to be a tightening of military encirclement around China's periphery. It is no surprise that on 24 July 2012 China moved quickly to upgrade a county-level administrative unit to a new prefecture given the name of Sansha (三沙, short for the three groups of islands in the south, east and west in the South China Sea). This is set up to "administer" several island groups and undersea atolls in the area, including the Spratly, the Paracel Islands and the Macclesfield Bank, right in the heart of the disputed waters. The new prefecture-level administrative unit, equipped

(6) See my analysis "*China's military expansion versus America's "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific*" at

<http://www.andrewleunginternationalconsultants.com/new/2012/04/military-and-security-developments-involving-the-prc-2011-annual-report-to-congress.html>

with a new garrison, is located on Yongxing 永兴岛(Woody) Island, the largest of the Paracel and Spratly islands with an area of about 5 square miles, on which some 600 Chinese civilians currently live.

To counter China's rising military capabilities, it is reported that the U.S. military is planning a major expansion of missile defences in Asia, to be located in regional allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia. At the centre of these defences is a powerful radar, the X-Band, to provide an early-warning arc against potential hostile missile strikes from North Korea or China (7). At around the same time, the Communist Party-run Global Times reported that China was developing a multiple-warhead ballistic missile that could potentially overcome US anti-missile defences.

While China's rising military strength is perceived as a threat by America and China's neighbours, many Chinese people, particularly the young generation and some in the Chinese military, remain dissatisfied with a perceived weakness in response to challenges to China's sovereignty. Hence the rising tide of Chinese nationalistic anti-Japan protests over the Senkaku/Diaoyu island stand-off. These opposing forces, coupled with the discovery of rich potential gas reserves in these waters, are driving negative feed-back loops characteristic of a classical "security dilemma" between the various players, including America. This feeds at best into a mistrustful Cold War mentality and at worst runs the risk of misunderstanding, miscalculation, and misadventure, which do not augur well for regional stability or world peace.

Regional dynamics of China's Rise

According to Professor Zhang Yuling and Associate Research Fellow Tang Shiping, both of the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, there are four core concepts underpinning China's current grand strategy for the nation (8). The first dates back to Dr Sun Yat-sen, modern China's founding father. It suggests that China, by virtue of its size, population, civilization, history and economy,

(7) Wall Street Journal, 23 August, 2012.
http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444812704577605591629039400.html?mod=djm_Aug_MU_Link3 (accessed on 25 August, 2012)

(8) *China's Regional Strategy* in "Power Shift, China's and Asia's New Dynamics", David Shambaugh (ed.), University of California Press, 2005.

rightly belongs to the “great power club”. Second, China needs a stable and peaceful international environment to continue its development. Third, following the advice of Deng Xiaoping, until China has become fully developed and possesses the necessary capacities, the country should refrain from seeking leadership. This is his famous “*buyao dangtou*不要当头” strategy. Fourth, as China’s ongoing economic welfare and national security depend on integration with the world order, it would be in China’s interest to behave as a “responsive great power” (*fuzeren de daguo*负责任的大国).

This grand strategy implies avoiding confrontation with the United States as the world’s sole superpower, maintaining amicable relations with neighbours, embracing multilateralism, and upholding a traditional definition of national sovereignty that opposes foreign intervention unless expressly authorized by the United Nations. In other words, as a matter of priority, democracy between nations (not so much within nations) should be upheld.

Following this strategy, China has become the centre of the region’s supply and production chain, making her economic growth a dynamic opportunity for the region rather than a threat. China became the first nation outside the ASEAN to sign in 2003 the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. She has now established the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, the world’s biggest by population size and has deepened her interest and participation in the security confidence-building-measures (CBMs) at the ASEAN Regional Forum.

However, for those with a “realist” zero-sum mindset, any gain in China’s regional engagement can be interpreted as diluting America’s regional dominance and therefore “may not be good for America”. (9) Nevertheless, China’s rise has been characterized by the exercise of “normative” and “remunerative” rather than “coercive” power (10). This trajectory of “peaceful rise” conforms with an earlier “*new security concept*” articulated by China’s former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, which consists of reassurance based on cooperative security, dialogue, and mutual economic benefit.

(9) “*China’s Regional Strategy and Why It May Not be Good for America*”, by Robert Sutter, Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in “*Power Shift, China and Asia’s New Dynamics*”, David Shambaugh (ed.), University of California Press, 2005.

(10) According to Amitai Etzioni’s power classifications in “*A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*”, revised ed., New York: The Free Press, 1975.

China has therefore been operating within, and stands to benefit from, a stable international order largely underwritten by the United States. While a rising China can no longer unreservedly accept America's dominance, it would not be in China's best interest to dislodge the United States from the Asian region, let alone China's current lack of comprehensive capacity to do so. Seen in this light, "China's rise in Asia need not be at America's expense." (11)

Moreover, in the coming decades of the 21st century, while the United States' leadership is expected to remain, its capacity to lead is likely to continue declining, according to the National Intelligence Council (12). In an increasingly inter-connected and inter-dependent world, there has emerged a host of complex challenges with global dimensions, such as terrorism, piracy, nuclear proliferation and climate change. As a diminished superpower, America needs to work more closely with a host of state and non-state actors as well as allies and non-allies alike, including a rising China, in maintaining global and regional order and stability.

On the part of America, therefore, it would be undesirable and unrealistic to arrest the historical trend of China's rise. Even King Canute could not command the tide.

Fractured regional peace and stability

For decades Asia has enjoyed relative peace and stability in an Asian Order guaranteed by the United States as the world's unrivalled military and economic superpower. Within this order, Asian nations have benefitted from rising trade, investment, technology and other flows within and outside the region. China, in particular, has become the centre of a regional production and supply chain and as the largest trading partner and a key driver of economic growth for China's neighbours. Through active and non-assertive participation in the

- (11) "China's rise in Asia need not be at America's expense" by David Lampton, George and Sadie Hyman Professor and Director of China Studies at the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, in "*Power Shift – China and Asia's New Dynamics*", David Shambaugh (ed.), University of California Press, 2005.
- (12) "*Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*", National Intelligence Council, Washington D.C, 21 November, 2008.

ASEAN community and other regional forums, China has built up a relatively cordial relationship with nations in the region. Territorial disputes rose from time to time but have never threatened to undermine the regional security system. This is because the system's stability is supported by China and America, the region's two world-power adversaries, who have embraced an inter-connected and inter-dependent relationship, which was coined "*chimerica*" by historian Niall Ferguson in 2006.

Now the regional security system appears to crack. This is due to a looming split in the symbiotic relationship between the United States and China. America is feeling the pain of outsourcing jobs to China. It has become alarmed by excessive consumption of China's goods through rising levels of national debt financed by China's largesse of buying up a vast quantity of U.S. treasuries. On her part, after the lessons of the global financial crisis, China has become aware of the risks of over-reliance on exports and the folly of tying up so much of her hard-earned savings in a "U.S Dollar Trap" (13). Moreover, a combination of China's rapidly growing economic and regional influence, coupled with the country's problematic political image and increasing military capabilities, adds up to a pervasive sense of "China threat". This has resulted in unease, suspicion, and mistrust, if not paranoia. A "*Great Sino-American Divorce*" is now looming on the horizon (14). The growing regional instability calls for a re-think for a more sustainable Asian Order to take account of changed geopolitical realities.

Tentative Models for a future Asian Order

David Shambaugh categorized the evolution of a new Asian Order under different hypothetical scenarios (15) –

- (13) "*China's Dollar Trap*", by Paul Krugman, in the New York Times, 2 April, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/03/opinion/03krugman.html> (accessed on 26 August, 2012).
- (14) "*The Great Sino-American Divorce*" by Mark Leonard, Reuters Columnist and Co-Founder and Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 August 2012, in his Column on Reuter.com. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/23/us-sino-american-idUSBRE87M17H20120823> (accessed on 25 August, 2012)
- (15) "*The Rise of China and Asia's New Dynamics*", Introduction to "*Power Shift – China and Asia's New Dynamics*", David Shambaugh (ed.), University of California Press, 2005.

- (a) an hegemonic system dominated by a rising China, either coercive (*badao* 霸道) or benign (*wangdao* 王道) in nature, predicated on American withdrawal from the region;
- (b) a zero-sum power rivalry between the United States and China;
- (c) a regional system of bilateral U.S military allies centred on the United States as the hub, including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia;
- (d) a delicate balance between regional powers in the kind of stability which lasted for half a century in the Concert of Europe in the wake of the Congress of Vienna of 1815;
- (e) a regional power condominium between the United States and China, accommodating China's core regional interests;
- (f) a normative community supported by institutionalization of the "ASEAN Way" based on a consultative and consensual process upholding individual sovereignty and statehood;
- (g) a complex network of inter-dependent economic, technological, cultural, educational, ideational and other non-state actors linking Asia's subregions of Northeast, Southeast, South and Central Asia together; and
- (h) a mixture of the above.

Whatever model or mixture of models may emerge in the long run, there is no doubt how a rising China is engaged in the coming decades by the world at large and by the region in particular would go a long way in shaping what China may look like as a superpower. A deciding factor is the relationship between the United States as the existing superpower and China as its perceived rising challenger.

Prescriptions for a new Asian Order

Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at Australian National University and a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute, has advanced a new power-sharing approach to avoid a possible "deadly strategic rivalry". Taking realistic account of China's rise as a regional power, White proposes a kind of "Concert of Asia" where America would share power and partner with China as an equal in maintaining Asia's regional stability, accommodating or balancing China's

core regional interests, along with those of India and Japan. The article draws on his thought-provoking book “*The China Choice*” (16).

White’s “Concert of Asia” idea is heavily criticized as unworkable by Rory Medcalf, director of the international security program at the Lowy Institute, pointing to the impracticability of defining spheres of influence between the core powers of this Concert and how medium-size states like Australia could fit from the outside (17).

Nevertheless, White’s balancing approach in treating a rising China as an equal regional power may well serve to build a more sustainable US-China relationship. The challenge is how this can be achieved without compromising the interests of America’s key regional allies.

China’s regional power, however, cannot be separated from the country’s growing influence globally. Europe and China are increasingly integrated economically as Europe has become China’s largest trading partner, ahead of the United States. China’s footprint is almost ubiquitous in Africa and is also spreading in Latin America, right in the backyard of the United States. So balancing against China’s power cannot be confined to only the Asian theatre.

- (16) “*The China Choice: A Bold Vision for U.S.-China Relations*”, in *The Diplomat*, an international current-affairs online magazine for the Asia-Pacific region, by Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at Australian National University, visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute, and author of the new book “*The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*”, Black Inc. 20 August, 2012.

https://thediplomat.com/2012/08/17/the-china-choice-a-bold-vision-for-u-s-china-relations/?goback=.gde_4154415_member_148088666 (accessed on 25 August, 2012).

- (17) “*Why a U.S.-China ‘Grand Bargain’ in Asia Would Fail*”, in *The Diplomat*, by Rory Medcalf, director of the international security program at the Lowy Institute, Australia, 10 August, 2012

<http://thediplomat.com/2012/08/10/why-a-u-s-china-grand-bargain-in-asia-would-fail/> (accessed on 26 August, 2012)

Zbigniew Brzezinski, a doyen in American foreign policy, has recently advanced a global U.S. grand strategy (18). It has two main strands.

The first is that he sees Europe as an inseparable part of a Western whole which underpins US leadership. He postulates that the US should act as “promoter and guarantor” of a renewed “Larger West” by drawing Russia and Turkey into the European Union through gradual democratization and eventual conformity with Western norms. (*Paving the way for Russia to join the WTO would be part of this trajectory.*) At the same time, instead downplaying Europe, he emphasizes the importance of deepening the unification of the European Union through fostering close cooperation among the key players of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The second, and inter-related, strand is the “Complex East”, where the U.S. best interest would be served by acting as “regional balancer”, “replicating the role played by the United Kingdom in intra European politics during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.”

Seemingly echoing America’s “Pivot to Asia”, he suggests that the United States “should help Asian states avoid a struggle for regional domination by mediating conflicts and offsetting power imbalances among potential rivals”.

However, contrary to the popular rhetoric of American military power projection in the Asia-Pacific, he points out that “the United States must recognize that stability in Asia can no longer be imposed by a non-Asian power, least of all by the direct application of U.S. military power. Indeed, U.S. efforts to buttress Asian stability could prove self-defeating, propelling Washington into a costly repeat of its recent wars, potentially even resulting in a replay of the tragic events of Europe in the twentieth century. If the United States fashioned an anti-Chinese alliance with India (or, less likely, with Vietnam) or promoted an anti-Chinese militarization in Japan, it could generate dangerous mutual resentment”. He recognizes that “in the twenty-first century, geopolitical equilibrium on the Asian mainland cannot depend on external military alliances with non-Asian powers”.

(18) “*Balancing the East, Upgrading the West - U.S. Grand Strategy in an Age of Upheaval*” in *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2012), by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert E. Osgood Professor of American Foreign Policy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, a scholar at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, and United States National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter from 1977 to 1981. The article was adapted from his soon-to-be published book, “*Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power.*” A copy of the article can be downloaded at http://www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/FA_BalancingWest_UpgradingEast.pdf (accessed on 25 August, 2012).

Instead, Brzezinski advocates that America “should respect China's special historic and geopolitical role in maintaining stability on the Far Eastern mainland. Engaging with China in a dialogue regarding regional stability would not only help reduce the possibility of U.S.-Chinese conflicts but also diminish the probability of miscalculation between China and Japan, or China and India, and even at some point between China and Russia over the resources and independent status of the Central Asian states. Thus, the United States' balancing engagement in Asia is ultimately in China's interest, as well.”

It is clear that Brzezinski's Asia is a much wider region which includes Central Asia connecting all the way to the “Larger West”

A lynchpin of this realism is a “U.S.-Japanese-Chinese cooperative triangle” to be nurtured through progressive, but lasting reconciliation between China and Japan, similar to that between France and Germany and between Germany and Poland after World War II. In this context, “the guiding principle of the United States should be to uphold U.S. obligations to Japan and South Korea while not allowing itself to be drawn into a war between Asian powers.”

“In that context, China should not view U.S. support for Japan's security as a threat, nor should Japan view the pursuit of a closer and more extensive U.S.-Chinese partnership as a danger to its own interests. A deepening triangular relationship could also diminish Japanese concerns over the yuan's eventually becoming the world's third reserve currency, thereby further consolidating China's stake in the existing international system and mitigating U.S. anxieties over China's future role”.

What is perhaps the most striking in Brzezinski's China engagement strategy is his recognition of and suggestions for resolving the three sticking points in US-China relations with suggested timelines:

(a) “First, the United States should reassess its reconnaissance operations on the edges of Chinese territorial waters, as well as the periodic U.S. naval patrols within international waters that are also part of the Chinese economic zone. They are as provocative to Beijing as the reverse situation would be to Washington”.

(b) “Second, given that the continuing modernization of China's military capabilities could eventually give rise to legitimate U.S. security concerns, including over U.S. commitments to Japan and South Korea, the United States and China should engage in regular consultations regarding their long-term military planning and seek to craft measures of reciprocal reassurance”.

(c) “Third, the future status of Taiwan could become the most contentious issue between the two countries. Washington no longer recognizes Taiwan as a sovereign state and acknowledges Beijing's view that China and Taiwan are part of a single nation. But at the same time, the United States sells weapons to Taiwan. Thus, any long-term U.S.-Chinese accommodation will have to address the fact that a separate Taiwan, protected indefinitely by U.S. arms sales, will provoke intensifying Chinese hostility. An eventual resolution along the lines of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's well-known formula for Hong Kong of "one country, two systems," but redefined as "one country, several systems," may provide the basis for Taipei's eventual re-association with China, while still allowing Taiwan and China to maintain distinctive political, social, and military arrangements (in particular, excluding the deployment of People's Liberation Army troops on the island). Regardless of the exact formula, given China's growing power and the greatly expanding social links between Taiwan and the mainland, it is doubtful that Taiwan can indefinitely avoid a more formal connection with China”.

Brzezinski suggests that the first of these sticking points be resolved in the near future, the second over the course of the next several years, and the third probably within a decade or so.

Brzezinski 's whole rationale is summarized in his opening remarks - “The United States' central challenge over the next several decades is to revitalize itself, while promoting a larger West and buttressing a complex balance in the East that can accommodate China's rising global status. A successful U.S. effort to enlarge the West, making it the world's most stable and democratic zone, would seek to combine power with principle. A cooperative larger West -- extending from North America and Europe through Eurasia (by eventually embracing Russia and Turkey), all the way to Japan and South Korea -- would enhance the appeal of the West's core principles for other cultures, thus encouraging the gradual emergence of a universal democratic political culture.”

Drawing a distinction from the historical geopolitics governing the separate fates of the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, Brzezinski opines that in a globalized and inter-connected world, “the West and the East cannot keep aloof from each other: their relationship can only be either reciprocally cooperative or mutually damaging”.

Conclusion

China's re-emergence as a world power signifies a turning of the tide in the flow of history. A classic drama of transition with the status quo superpower, the United States, is playing out. The fracturing of the Asian Order in which

both powers are key players is a clear manifestation. Containing or confronting this transition militarily is fraught with uncontrollable risks of a “security dilemma” that has all the tendency of escalating into a regional if not global war. Managing and accommodating it without sacrificing American interests takes a great deal of insight and strategic thinking in the broadest context.

The increasing instability of the Asian region calls for fresh thinking and maturity beyond military manoeuvres. It is instructive that amidst China’s unease with large-scale U.S. joint military exercises in the South China Sea, PLA deputy chief of general staff Cai Yingting paid a three-day visit (25-27 August 2012) to Washington and the Pentagon. The purpose is to reaffirm the development of a "win-win" relationship based on "respect, fairness and tolerance" between the US and China, paving the way for a subsequent visit of US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta to China the following month.

What is clear is that events and developments in the Asian theatre are unlikely to follow any pre-scripted model. Yet understanding the underlying dynamics may go a long way into better managing the critical U.S.-China relationship, the most important bilateral relationship in the 21st century.

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