The launch of the ASEAN Regional Forum resonated with the ideas of comprehensive security enshrined in ASEAN processes and the new ideas of co-operative security developed in Europe in the late 1980s. That fusion, what might be called 'Co-operative Security 1.0,' has been an integral part of a system that has enjoyed peace for a generation. But it is no longer enough to address increasing nationalism and the tensions produced as the rise of China challenges the predominance of the US. It’s time to develop “Co-operative Security 2.0.”
The Shifting US-China Balance of Power in the Western Pacific: Getting the Transition Right

By Zhang Tuosheng

Often obscured in media reports about points of contention in Asia between China and the US — such as the South China Sea maritime disputes or the exclusion of China from the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement — is that the balance of power between the US, the longtime hegemon, and China is changing slowly in favor of Beijing. This need not lead to conflict, writes Zhang Tuosheng.

DURING THE COLD WAR and in the years immediately afterward, the US held a huge advantage in its balance of power against China in the Asia-Pacific region, especially with regard to military power. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the gap between them has been narrowing. The US is still in the dominant position, but in East Asia and the Western Pacific, a new strategic balance of power is emerging. Neither country has adapted well to this change, leading to increased security frictions and strategic suspicions, which have had adverse effects on both the bilateral relationship and regional security and stability. Will China and the US develop a new balance of power in the Western Pacific? What influence will it have on China-US relations? How can the two sides develop a stable balance of power in this part of the region? These are some of the key questions for the two sides to answer.

In my view, it is possible for the two countries to develop a new balance of power in the Western Pacific in the coming decade or two; in the long term, this new balance will be conducive to better bilateral relations.

SHIFTING TOWARD CHINA
As some experts and scholars in both countries have pointed out, after the end of the Cold War, on the basis of China having a strong land-power advantage and the US having a strong sea-power advantage, the military strengths of the two countries found a certain strategic balance in the Western Pacific along the lines of China’s border or territorial seas. Since the beginning of the new century, however, the original strategic balance has been broken, with China’s strengthening, both economically and militarily, and its accelerated defense modernization. In the coming decade or two, if there is no fundamental change in the current trend, the balance between their military strengths and strategies may shift to the first island chain in the Western Pacific. By then, China will have the strategic advantage in its near sea and the US will maintain its strategic advantage and dominance in the vast sea, outside of the first island chain.1

In this process, there will be fierce games between China and the US. But so long as the games do not get out of control, frictions between the two countries in the Pacific will gradually weaken as the new balance of power emerges. This will have a positive influence on their long-term relations.

As is well known, security frictions between China and the US for a long time have occurred mainly within the first island chain. Chinese efforts to safeguard its territory, sovereignty and maritime rights and interests on the questions of Taiwan, the East China Sea and the South China Sea face incessant US interference and intervention. The development of a new balance of power will be marked by China’s enhanced capacity to safeguard its territory and sovereignty and a weakened US capability to intervene. That will be beneficial not only to stability across the Taiwan Strait and the development of cross-strait relations, but also to independent and peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes between China and its neighbors. The result will be a significant decrease in China-US security frictions.

When the new China-US balance of power in the Western Pacific is formed, Chinese power may still develop beyond the first island chain. However, judging from such variables as technologies, geopolitics and the reliability of military systems, the first island chain will for a long time to come be the line along which their powers balance. This will increase bilateral stability and be conducive to its future development.

MANAGING A BROKEN BALANCE
The process leading toward this new balance of power will inevitably see the original balance broken. For some time, destabilizing factors will increase. If these are not well handled, China and the US may enter into vicious competition, or even confrontation, in the Western Pacific. This is worrisome. In recent years, frictions in East Asia and the Western Pacific have rapidly increased. For example, the US rebalancing strategy has strengthened bilateral military alliances, increasing its military presence in the Asia-Pacific and intensifying efforts to guard against and tie down China, causing serious concerns in Beijing and leading to rising calls to break American “containment” or “encirclement.” In another example, as the US openly intervenes in maritime disputes between China and its neighbors — particularly the way it put itself into the foreground in the South China Sea in 2015 in the name of freedom of navigation with its so-called routine patrols in waters surrounding Chinese islands and reefs — the risk of a US-China crisis or conflict has markedly grown. In yet another example, as China becomes more capable of opposing external military intervention close to its shores (the American jargon for this is A2/AD, or anti-access/area denial), the US is deliberating such concepts and strategies as “air-sea battle” and “offshore control and deterrence by denial,” in order to maintain its capability to intervene in the Western Pacific and East Asia. The concept of air-sea battle appeared in a US Department of Defense document, targeting mainly China. These new strategic concepts have caused serious concerns in China, and even many Ameri-
can scholars believe that their implementation will pose enormous risks, with limited possibility of success. In particular, air-sea battle might rapidly escalate into war, with severe consequences on China-US relations. In addition, economic competition between the two countries is intensifying. China is actively promoting the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), while the US is pushing the Trans-Pacific Partnership to maintain its dominant position in trade policy and economic co-operation in the Asia-Pacific. Although this competition is not as tense as the one in the military and security field, bilateral relations may also be undermined if it is protracted.

**FINDING THE STEADY PATH**

How, then, can we ensure a relatively steady path toward a new balance of power and avoid vicious competition or confrontation between the two countries? This will require both sides to have an objective and accurate judgment of the situation in the Western Pacific, the changing balance of power between them and the other party’s strategic intentions. On the basis of that judgment, both sides need to make far-sighted strategic decisions and adopt pragmatic policies and actions. To be specific, the two sides should make efforts in four areas outlined below.

First, Beijing and Washington need to think long-term, develop a strategic dialogue on the emerging balance of power in the Western Pacific and strive to achieve at an early date a basic common understanding on how security and stability in this region will be best maintained. The content of the dialogue should include:

1) Trends of development and change in the strategic balance in the Western Pacific and the positions, roles and responsibilities of China and the US in the Western Pacific;
2) How China and the US will avoid conflict or confrontation and develop a relationship that is mutually adaptive and inclusive, with benign competition and active co-operation;
3) How to promote resolution of disputes in the region and strengthen non-traditional security co-operation; and,
4) Interactions between regional multilateral security-co-operation mechanisms and America’s bilateral military alliances.

The basic objectives of this dialogue should be for the US to gradually change its long-term policy of diplomatic and military intervention in the Western Pacific and accept China’s effective maintenance of state sovereignty and territorial integrity and greater say in regional affairs (including in regional multilateral dialogue and co-operation mechanisms). China, for its part, should explicitly assure the US that its policy of striving for peaceful reunification with Taiwan and peaceful resolution of maritime disputes with its Asian neighbors will not change, that China does not intend to demand US withdrawal from East Asia or deny the US freedom of navigation in the Western Pacific so long as it’s pursued in a manner consistent with international law or to challenge its global leadership. Undoubtedly, it will not be easy for the two countries to achieve such a common understanding. But they have to make unswerving efforts in this direction, because the maintenance of security and stability in the Western Pacific serves the common interests of not only China and the US, but all other countries in the Asia-Pacific.

Second, the two sides should endeavor to have balanced strategic-hedging policies. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has implemented a hedging policy towards China, with co-operation and engagement, on the one hand, and counterbalancing and preventive measures, on the other. China has responded with a similar two-handed policy. In recent years, frictions between the two countries in the Western Pacific and East Asia have increased and started to spread to new strategic domains. Both countries, their militaries in particular, have started to regard each other as potential adversaries and are preparing for worst case scenarios. Some Chinese scholars believe that current US policy toward China is moving dangerously from “preventive hedging” to “containment hedging.” To avoid serious consequences for bilateral relations, the two countries and their militaries should cooperate in areas of common interest, so that their hedging policies will remain roughly balanced rather than being heavily dominated by counterbalancing and preventive measures, let alone moves toward containment. In addition to co-operation in global governance, trade and finance in order to strengthen economic development and co-operation in the Asia-Pacific, co-operation on non-traditional security issues and non-proliferation in the Western Pacific (especially the de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula) will be important ways to contain and mitigate differences or frictions. The two sides should set their eyes on the long term and strive for more engagement and co-operation. (In academic exchanges, many American scholars and former government officials have expressed agreement on this proposal of mine.)

Third, the two sides must significantly improve management of differences and crises. The increasingly prominent geopolitical differences between the two countries have had serious adverse impacts on their relationship on the question of sea lines of communications (SLOCs) and in other strategic fields such as cyberspace, outer space and nuclear issues. Both China and the US should regard the no-conflict, no-confrontation agreement between their leaders as the bottom line that must be protected, and place a priority on crisis avoidance and the prevention of escalation. They should be highly vigilant against any

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2 There are two types of strategic hedging policies in the world: preventive hedging and containment hedging. The former has a certain rationality and may produce hedging effects, while the latter contains huge risks and may intensify differences and lead to conflict.
crisis or conflict caused by differences between them and those caused by third-party factors.

Among the many hotspots in East Asia and the Western Pacific, the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait should always be the most important focus in crisis management between China and the US, while the most pressing demand of the day is to prevent a conflict in the South China Sea. To this end, the diplomatic and defense services should further improve the relevant security dialogue and crisis management mechanisms and redouble efforts to strengthen security confidence-building measures. This includes strengthening the crisis management function of bilateral hotlines; further enriching the nascent mutual-notification mechanism for major military operations and the code of conduct on military encounters in the air and at sea (CoC); establishing joint working groups in the foreign affairs or defense departments to deal with unexpected incidents; engaging in discussions on signing a bilateral no-first-use agreement on nuclear weapons; and refraining from conducting attacks on outer space assets or conducting cyber-attacks against each other.

In short, the two sides should be fully aware that their relationship is in nature different from that between the US and the former USSR. China and the US are not enemies. The extensive economic co-operation, and some major security co-operation, between them did not exist between the US and the USSR. Both countries should be confident of managing well their differences and crises.

Fourth, China and the US should strengthen co-ordination and co-operation in the various multilateral security-dialogue and co-operation mechanisms in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. They, of course, have differences and competition within these mechanisms. However, in multilateral arenas, the common interests of countries are discussed and pursued. And, as such, the possibility of virtuous competition between China and the US is greater than that of vicious competition. The two sides should seek opportunities for co-operation in the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and other ASEAN diplomatic and security talks, and create conditions for ASEAN+3 and RCEP integration and APEC and TPP co-operation to be mutually accommodating, inclusive and complementary. In the future, as regional co-operation develops, East Asian and Asian economic integration should be open to the US, and the TPP should welcome China’s participation. Positive interaction between the two countries in multilateral dialogue and co-operation mechanisms will help mitigate frictions and turbulence caused by the changing balance of power in the Western Pacific.

In the near future, if China makes progress on properly settling territorial and maritime disputes with Japan and some Southeast Asian neighbors by agreeing on a code of conduct, a breakthrough on joint development of maritime areas and sustained bilateral negotiations, this will play an important role in facilitating a stable China-US balance of power in the Western Pacific. It would also help if America’s bilateral military alliances in the region — the US and Japan, the US and South Korea and the US and Australia — would each develop a security dialogue with China.