The Revival of Geopolitics in East Asia: Why and How?

By Robert S. Ross

At the center of the revival of geopolitics in East Asia is the rise of China and the varying concerns among other Asian nations and the United States about its impact on the region's security structure, which has long been dominated by the US. In particular, decades of sharp increases in defense spending by Beijing have given China new capabilities to begin challenging American dominance of maritime East Asia. Robert S. Ross looks at the developments that are reshaping geopolitical thinking on all sides in the region.

Since 2010, the geopolitics of East Asia has captured the attention of observers and scholars throughout the world. Conflict and heightened tension involving differences between the United States and China over freedom of navigation within exclusive economic zones (EEZs), maritime sovereignty disputes and maritime economic rights have come to define regional diplomacy.

Geopolitics is a permanent feature of international politics. During the Cold War, East Asia was the first focus of US-China competition and then of Sino-Soviet competition. Not long after the end of the Cold War, as China's rise became increasingly evident, Beijing and Washington renewed their strategic competition. Each great power took steps to improve its military capacities in the regional balance of power. But the US-China competition remained relatively muted. Since 2010, however, that competition has been characterized by heightened tension. For the first time, there is a long-term trend in East Asia toward protracted strategic conflict as a result of China's more recent rise in maritime East Asia and the challenge it poses to US-China relations and regional stability. There is no returning to the era of China's “peaceful rise” and regional stability premised on US-China co-operation.

Post-Cold War US-China Competition

The rise of China from 1978, when the country began to embrace economic reform and opening, would eventually contribute to great power competition associated with balance of power politics. After the collapse of the Soviet alliance system in 1989 and the onset of China's second post-1978 economic growth spurt in 1992, the US began adjusting to China's growing power. The 1996 revised guidelines for the US-Japan Alliance, which were essentially completed in 1994, recognized the importance of the alliance for responding to the rise of China and reflected American determination to bolster alliance co-operation.

The 1996 Taiwan Strait confrontation — when Beijing fired missiles off of Taiwan as a warning to then President Lee Teng-hui not to declare the island independent — was the catalyst for the first US pivot from Europe to Asia. In the aftermath of that confrontation and the recognition that the United States might fight a war with China over Taiwan, regardless of the casus belli, support emerged in the US for enhancing US-Taiwan defense ties. In 1999, the US Defense Department concluded that the US should repose many of its capabilities from Europe to East Asia. In 2000, the administration of US President Bill Clinton transferred a Los Angeles-class submarine from Europe to Guam. Over the next decade, the US deployed every advanced American weapons system to East Asia, including the F-15, F-16 and F-22 fighter planes, B-1 and B-2 bombers, multiple Los Angeles-class and Virginia-class attack submarines, and converted Ohio-class cruise missile submarines. The US also stockpiled cruise missiles and established a wartime crisis operations center at Guam, and the US Navy designated a second aircraft carrier for operations in East Asia.

In the mid-1990s, the US expanded co-operation with its Southeast Asian security partners. Following the loss of its air and naval bases in the Philippines after the 1992 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, Washington quickly moved to develop an alternative naval facility in the region. In 1999, Singapore opened its Changi naval base. In cooperation with the US, the facility was designed to receive a 100,000-ton US aircraft carrier. During the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, Washington developed improved political co-operation with Malaysia and the navy increased its presence at Port Klang. And since the 1990s, the US and Australia have co-operated on the expansion of US satellite communication and reconnaissance facilities in northern Australia.

China's effort to balance US military power in East Asia similarly began in the early 1990s. In 1992, Chinese defense spending increased by 14 percent over the previous year, and its defense budget has increased by over 10 percent nearly every year since then. In 1991-1992, China placed its first order for Russian Kilo-class submarines and Russian Su-27 military aircraft. As the Taiwan independence movement gained momentum after 1995, China purchased additional Kilo-class submarines from Russia, as well as large quantities of surface-to-air missiles and Su-27s. China's immediate objective was to deter a declaration of independence by Taiwan and, if necessary, engage in a war with the US over Taiwan. But these weapons systems also created a layered defense capability that has been the foundation of China's “anti-access/area denial” capabilities against the US in the 21st century. China's efforts to modernize its surface ship capability, its regional ballistic missile capability and its nuclear forces also date back to the 1990s.

The Rise of China and Alliance Politics

Since 2009-2010, US-China strategic tensions and regional instability have significantly increased. The geopolitical source of this new trend is the latest development in the rise of China. In the 1990s and 2000s, China lacked the capabilities necessary to defend its interests and develop influence in maritime East Asia. Thus, a geopolitical divi-
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Island led the US to increase defense cooperation with South Korea. The 2010 pivot and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s diplomacy at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi reflected US efforts to reassure its Southeast Asian allies of the US “return to Asia” and of American resolve to contend with the rise of China. American diplomacy directly inserted the US into the South China Sea territorial disputes, straining relations with Beijing and contributing to tension between China and the Philippines and China and Vietnam. Similarly, following the Japanese government’s September 2012 purchase of the Senkaku (Daioyu) Islands, US efforts to reassure Japan of American resolve inserted the US into the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute, exacerbating tensions. And from 2010 to 2012, the US increased its military presence in South Korea, challenging Chinese security.

In 2013, US-China relations improved considerably. The June California “Sunnyland Summit” between President Xi Jinping and President Barack Obama reflected US restraint in early 2013 regarding East Asian maritime disputes and Chinese cooperation with US and South Korean efforts to constrain North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. And the summit contributed to greater US-China cooperation through the rest of the year. But China’s abrupt announcement in December 2013 of its East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) elicited renewed regional concern over Chinese ambitions and another round of alliance politics as the US once again aimed to reassure its security partners of its resolve.

In January 2014, the White House threatened China with a more forward defense policy should China declare an ADIZ in the South China Sea — a move many feared Beijing was considering. Washington inserted itself again into the region’s security commitments that are the foundation of the US security system in East Asia.

The US must reassure its partners that it has the ability and the resolve to contend with a more capable China. But this US imperative to support its allies will place it in opposition to China and can lead to alliance policies that undermine Chinese security, eliciting Chinese perceptions of heightened US “containment” and contributing to greater regional tension. The challenge for US policy is to sustain its regional security partnerships while simultaneously minimizing unnecessary US-China tension.

China also faces policy challenges. As a rising power, it will use its improving maritime capabilities to defend more actively its security interests. But it must also manage its growing power and foreign policy to avoid excessive US concern that China is intent on challenging US strategic partnerships in East Asia, leading to a US security policy that undermines Chinese security and regional stability. As China rises, its leaders must exercise patience and restraint so as to both promote greater Chinese security as well as cooperative US-China relations and regional stability.

**CHINA’S RISE, ALLIANCE DYNAMICS AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF EAST ASIA**

Heightened US-China tension and regional instability since 2009 have reflected the rise of China and the complexities of alliance politics. China’s improved maritime capabilities and its corresponding forceful assertion of its maritime economic and sovereignty claims have aroused concern among US allies over American resolve to contend with a rising China and the credibility of US security commitments. The Obama administration’s response was its “pivot” to East Asia. Similarly, China’s refusal to restrain North Korea after its 2010 sinking of the South Korean Navy ship, the Cheonan, and its shelling of Yeonpyeong Island led the US to increase defense co-operation with South Korea.

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The Cold War as a Guide to the Risk of War in East Asia

By Øystein Tunsjø

During the long Cold War in Europe, the bipolar world defined by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union posed an existential risk to countries on both sides because of the threat of invasion and use of nuclear weapons.

With the emergence of a new bipolar world in Asia shaped by relations between China and the US, an existential threat of invasion and nuclear war isn’t the greatest risk, but maritime disputes and other sources of friction could more easily spark a conflict between Beijing and Washington than was ever the case between Washington and Moscow, writes Øystein Tunsjø.

IN THE AFTERMATH of Sino-US rapprochement in the 1970s, a security order emerged in East Asia that saw China dominate mainland East Asia, while the United States maintained maritime superiority. The balance of power was consolidated during the post-Cold War unipolar system dominated by the US, and East Asia became the most peaceful region in the world. Since China was still relatively weak and its rise required a benign security environment, it was constrained and reluctant to seek regional hegemony. Instead, Beijing sought to bide its time and to rise peacefully within the existing US international order.

Today, as US unipolarity wanes and US-China bipolarity emerges, the “geography of peace” in East Asia is increasingly challenged. Growing capabilities now allow China to assert its interests in the US sphere of influence in maritime East Asia more forcefully. Much of this is due to China’s economic growth. Between 1991 and today, for example, the ratio of US gross domestic product (GDP) to Chinese GDP has narrowed from 15:1 to 2:1. China’s economic growth has facilitated the build-up of “anti-access/area denial” military capabilities that allow the naval forces of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to challenge the US Navy in coastal waters and the near seas. China has developed advanced submarine capabilities and its fleet has become more modern and capable of patrolling blue water seas. This allows China to promote its claimed sovereignty in East Asian waters. With increased capabilities, the PLA Navy now operates in closer proximity to US carrier battle groups, harassing US Navy ships and planes. It has also begun to resist US surveillance activities within its exclusive economic zone.

China has also channeled increased resources into coast guard and maritime surveillance activities that can better safeguard its interests and enforce its interpretation of the international law of the sea. US defense expenditures remain roughly three
territorial disputes. For the first time, the US publically challenged China’s “nine-dash line” in the South China Sea, which effectively claims the vast majority of the sea for China. Then, senior US officials began to accuse China of using coercion against other claimants to the disputed territories to alter the status quo in East Asia. In April, before he arrived in Tokyo and twice during his visit to Tokyo, Obama declared that the US-Japan alliance covers the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. No US president had ever made such a statement. Then, during Obama’s visit to Manila, Washington reached an agreement to station US troops in the Philippines. As before, the US had backed its allies against China, contributing to greater Chinese perceptions of “containment” and to heightened tensions.

Whereas China’s role on the Korean Peninsula reflects its traditional reliance on its ground forces to influence countries on its territorial periphery, the recent modernization of Chinese maritime capabilities has blurred the geopolitical mainland-maritime division of East Asia, contributing to heightened US-China competition and greater US concern for the credibility of its alliance commitments. This is the predictable outcome of rising power dynamics; observers have long understood that power transitions contribute to heightened power conflict and that the rise of China would challenge regional stability. The US-China power transition is far from the point where conflict dynamics become especially perilous, but great power conflict increases along the course of a power transition.

China and the US face complex policy-making challenges. China will seek a greater voice in East Asian maritime affairs, but it also requires regional stability and US-China co-operation so that it can focus on its demanding domestic agenda of economic, political and social problems. The US will respond to the rise of China with efforts to sustain its regional security system, but Washington also requires US-China cooperation to realize its global interests and to minimize unnecessary regional tension.

Successful US and Chinese management of East Asian security will be difficult. It will require both China and the US to avoid demonizing the other, to recognize their respective impact on the other’s security and the corresponding necessity for restraint, and to avoid policies that seek to simply impose compliance on the other. The alternative is a downward spiral in relations. It is incumbent on both China and the US to effectively contend with the complexities of East Asian geopolitics, or incur unnecessary and costly conflict.

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