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Keeping the Peace in the Pacific: The Next Steps in American Policy

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*April 2014
Briefing Paper*

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Keeping the Peace in the Pacific: The Next Steps in American Policy

By John Lee and Charles Horner

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Executive Summary

U.S. administrations and officials are consistently caught flat-footed by the increasing assertiveness of the People's Republic of China (PRC) over disputed territories in the East China and South China Seas. This assertiveness is strident, yet controlled. Beijing's objectives in the region, with respect to maritime issues in particular, have been apparent for several decades. While the United States is well aware of the PRC's "talk and take" approach—speaking the language of negotiation while extending de facto control over disputed areas—U.S. policy has been tactical and responsive rather than strategic and preemptive, thus allowing China to control the pace and nature of escalation in executing talk and take.

This paper points out that the PRC's increasing assertiveness in Asia's maritime domains is not simply a "structural" inevitability caused by the reemergence of a powerful Chinese nation-state outside the American-led alliance system in Asia, a security order that has been in place since the end of World War II. Instead, the PRC is currently rising in the most benign and stable external environment that any Chinese dynasty has faced for several hundred years.

But the PRC is committed to a vision of a "greater China" that encompasses foreign-administered or neutral areas in the East and South China Seas. China's claims in both seas are now inextricably linked to its ruling Chinese Communist Party's assertion of domestic legitimacy and central to that party's political *raison d'être*. These claims are therefore seen as morally justified by China's history, and thus increasingly indivisible—just as the PRC's singular claim over almost 90 percent of the South China Sea is becoming indivisible. As far as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is concerned, these claims are part and parcel of a greater China conception that the PRC is committed to pursuing.

If Beijing is already committed to an uncompromising stance on issues in the East and South China Seas, Washington can do little to shape the PRC's preferred end game, but it still has good options to shape China's behavior in the region. The

basic goal of the PRC, as a strategically isolated rising power, is to *simplify* the region in strategic terms. This means reducing disagreements down to one-on-one negotiation or, when confronted with competition from regional powers, removing the influence or diluting the political will of the still-more-powerful United States. Any American response should be designed to *complicate* the region for the PRC. This can be done in a number of ways:

1. The United States should publically and frequently reaffirm the vital contribution of a robust U.S.-Japan alliance to peace and prosperity. The PRC seeks to dilute the credibility of American alliance commitments in the region and to weaken the appetite of allies to rely on American security guarantees. In this context, the U.S. relationship with Japan is the most important alliance, and its robustness provides assurance to other states that the San Francisco alliance system can adapt and endure. Thus, the United States should articulate frequently, openly, and eloquently—as President Barack Obama did during his April 24, 2014 press conference in Tokyo—why honoring alliance commitments to Japan serves enduring core American strategic and economic interests, rather than reaffirming those commitments only when a Sino-Japanese crisis appears imminent.
2. The United States should encourage reinvigoration of Japan’s strategic ambition. This means publically embracing Shinzo Abe’s pronouncements that Japan will never be a “tier two” nation and that Tokyo plans to play a significant role in “contributing to the peace and security” of the region.
3. The United States should assertively make the case to other Asian maritime powers that Japan’s strategic ambition is indispensable to regional security and economic growth. Implicit in this argument is that an inward-looking and “pacifist” Japan is more likely, not less, to embolden Chinese assertiveness, and that an effective strategic and military balance is a sine qua non for restraining PRC behavior and actions in the region. Conversely, an artificially weak or strategically paralyzed Japan is more likely to encourage PRC assertiveness in the East China Sea, since its ambitions in the region are unlikely to subside.
4. The United States should link territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas and promote regional, not bilateral, negotiations. Just as Beijing seeks to negotiate individually with various Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea—to maximize its leverage and prevent competitors from “ganging up” against it—Beijing also seeks to define its dispute with Tokyo in the East China Sea as an issue affecting only the legitimate interests of the PRC and Japan. In response, the United States should explicitly link both the East and South China Sea disputes, and ensure that

other states do indeed “gang up” on the PRC so long as it refuses to accept a negotiated and peaceful settlement of all relevant claims in each case.

5. The United States should insist that a binding code of conduct prohibiting the use of force to settle territorial disputes—the stated preference of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—be applied as a singular framework in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Straits. If this is done, any PRC code violation in these areas should immediately draw the ire and condemnation of Southeast Asian signatories to the code.

Finally, it should be noted that the United States has a broader political, diplomatic, economic, and even military relationship with China than does any country in Asia. This, along with the still-dominant U.S. military position in Asia, means that Washington is uniquely placed to manage any crisis involving the PRC. The U.S.-China relationship has continued even as strategic competition and rivalry between the two countries are deepening. Beijing’s approach is that it has no option but to increase its engagement with a country that can beneficially or adversely affect its interests. In other words, meaningful engagement is not primarily an act of Chinese friendship, but of necessity.

If Washington decides to play a more proactive and strategically astute role in the East China Sea, the PRC will be forced to be more responsive to an American role in this and other disputes.

Introduction

In November 2013, the People’s Republic of China announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, which includes waters and islands claimed by both the PRC and Japan. The zone requires airlines to provide formal notification to China of any flight plans over the area. Failure to do so will allow Chinese air authorities, including the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), to take “defensive emergency measures” against infringing commercial or military aircraft.

Although it is unclear whether the unilateral PRC declaration of the ADIZ will lead to any tangible change in Chinese behavior over the disputed region, this is obviously yet another move by Beijing to “normalize” general PRC authority and control over the region even as the issue of sovereignty over particular territories in the region remains unsettled. Although the PRC does not control the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Beijing has made clear that it no longer

accepts de facto Japanese control, which is evidenced by the almost daily Chinese patrols in the disputed waters.

Such moves are an illustration of the PRC's "talk and take" approach to maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas: speak the language of negotiation without conceding any ground and gradually exercise greater de facto control over disputed areas. Beijing's hope is that over time, it can change the territorial and maritime status quo through a series of small but progressive actions designed to exercise "creeping sovereignty" over these territories.

The U.S. response to China's declaration of an ADIZ is seemingly robust and decisive. Days after the Chinese announcement, in an immediate act symbolically rejecting the declaration, American B-52 bombers flew over the disputed islands without informing Beijing. In unusually blunt language, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel proclaimed that the United States viewed "this development as a destabilizing attempt to alter the status quo in the region," adding that "this unilateral action increases the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation."



A P-3C patrol plane of Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force over the Senkaku Islands in Japan and Diaoyu Islands in China, in the East China Sea, October 13, 2011. (JAPAN POOL/AFP/Getty Images)

More broadly, the United States has repeatedly reaffirmed that while it does not hold a view on the sovereignty of the disputed territories, it will honor its obligations to come to Japan's aid militarily under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.

Even so, Washington's responses to Chinese incursions and declarations about disputed territories have been hampered by a tendency for incoming

administrations to "reset" relations with the PRC, even though Beijing's objectives in the region—with respect to disputed maritime issues in particular—have been apparent for several decades. In more recent times, and as the PRC's power has grown, U.S. administrations and experts have been caught flat-footed by increasingly strident—though controlled—PRC assertiveness in executing the talk and take strategy. Consequently, American policy in this context has been tactical and responsive rather than strategic and preemptive.

Admittedly, there is a necessary element of reactivity with these issues, since the PRC's behavior in the East China Sea at any given moment cannot be predicted. Nevertheless, if the United States manages crises as they arise and periodically reaffirms alliance commitments to dilute the fears of security allies

and partners, this will allow Beijing to control the pace and nature of escalation and strategy in its interactions with Washington and U.S. allies such as Tokyo. Indeed, the tendency for each new administration, or even incoming officials within the same administration, to “reset” relations with Beijing is driven by the hope that diplomacy and renewed engagement can shape relations with the PRC for the better.

It is a worthy objective to shape bilateral relations for the better and in the process strengthen the American role in managing ongoing disagreements between Japan and the PRC. Peace and stability, after all, have been a prerequisite for a number of “Asian economic miracles,” in addition to the spread of multiparty parliamentary democracy throughout the region. Yet the curiosity is that while the PRC has been the biggest beneficiary of the “Thirty Years’ Peace” since the 1970s, it has become a great disturber of this peace in recent years. China’s stake in preserving peace and stability is so obviously enormous that the United States must seriously ponder why Beijing would put increasing pressure on the regional order and risk the consequences—through its claims and actions in the East China Sea, for example.

Dominant strains in international relations, which is largely an “American” political science, tell us that tensions generated by the PRC’s rise are a structural—and therefore predictable, perhaps even inevitable—phenomenon of global competition: this is just what happens when a great power (re)emerges. Yet Washington is unperturbed by the rise of India, a power with some two hundred nuclear devices, a large army, and two aircraft carriers, with another under construction. Why is this? Because the United States (and the region at large) do not see India’s type of political system and regime as a threat to regional stability and peace. The PRC, however, is a one-party dictatorship which seeks to perpetuate its control over what is, in effect, a large multi-ethnic empire. In the first thirty years of its existence, the Communist Party, which controls the PRC, was committed to dismantling the existing Asian order, and it created and backed violent insurgencies throughout the region in pursuit of that goal. In the late 1970s the ruling party abruptly changed its strategy and sought to integrate the PRC into Asian and global politics. But today it is apparent that the CCP has again reversed course and again seeks major alterations to—if not an outright upending of—existing Asian arrangements, especially where territorial matters are concerned.

History thus suggests that successful integration of a CCP-ruled China into the existing Asian order—without fundamental changes to that order—is at least *conceivable*. But today’s PRC is richer, more powerful, and more ambitious than it was 30 years ago. Every day, China declares itself dissatisfied with things as they are and describes the existing Asian order as a product of crimes committed

against its people. All this makes prospective PRC acceptance of that order highly improbable. Accordingly, this conclusion, not unfounded speculation about other possibilities, should inform and shape how the United States proceeds in dealing with Sino-Japanese tensions and differences in the first instance, and the rise of the PRC more generally.

U.S.-China Tension and Distrust: What History Tells Us

Although no country is immovably bound by its historical interactions with another country, history will offer clues to the nature and pattern of enduring mindsets and interactions with that country. The growing strategic rivalry and competition between the PRC, on the one hand, and the United States and its Asian security allies and partners, on the other, is often seen as a structural phenomenon. According to this perspective, the preeminent power in the region post-World War II is ineluctably resisting the rise of a potential “peer competitor” (in the region). Although such significant changes in relative power tend to create awkward transitions, the challenge of “managing” the PRC’s rise goes far deeper than merely facilitating a smooth transition of relative power. Indeed, the history of American policies towards what we now call “China” is far more multilayered than these deterministic accounts tend to imply.

In the last days of the Manchu Empire, which fell in 1911-12 and of which China was a major part, the United States, like other world powers, came to support replacing the dynasty with a republic led by Sun Yat-sen. This was seen as an act of friendship towards the Chinese people, a way of moving them into the modern world and reversing the country’s long slide into misery. The United States, which had once thought well of Japan, turned against it after World War I, as Japan’s actions towards China became increasingly predatory. Japan’s “New Order” in Asia involved dismembering China by detaching Manchuria and Balkanizing Chinese politics by supporting dependent warlords around the country and a Vichy-like regime in Nanjing. During World War II, the Republic of China (RoC), led by Chiang Kai-shek, was a U.S. ally. President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw China as a future great power and insisted that it should be a permanent member of the new United Nations Council after World War II, while the RoC emerged as a founding member of what is now the World Trade Organization.

Despite promising expectations, America’s relations with the PRC were poisoned by Mao Zedong’s decision to join the Communist bloc headed by Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union. During the Korean War, with North Korea on the brink of collapse, the PRC intervened militarily until an uneasy stalemate was achieved and then a truce in 1953. U.S.-PRC relations further deteriorated when Beijing shifted its revolutionary focus to Southeast Asia, with Washington viewing much of the

PRC's activities in that region as proxy warfare. From the U.S. point of view, the PRC's opposition to the de-Stalinization efforts underway in almost all of the rest of the Communist bloc was especially disturbing. But it was that very opposition that grew into the Sino-Soviet split which, in turn, became the basis for a U.S.-PRC rapprochement beginning in 1972.

This brief history is not just of academic or historical interest. It shows that the United States has responded to rising Asian powers according to the perceived *character* of the regimes guiding them—in particular, whether they were expansionist and revisionist and not merely powerful. The mere fact that these Asian powers were rising, and the resulting structural tensions caused by changes in the distribution of power, are far from sufficient to explain the various U.S. policies towards what we now call China.

China's Rise and Structural Adjustments in Relative Power

In the contemporary period, given the demise of Mao and of Maoism as an ideology, China's rise and problems in specific areas, such as the East China Sea, are widely seen as a structural issue that can be smoothed using skillful diplomacy



Chinese missile frigate, the Yancheng, sailing in an undisclosed location.
(STR/AFP/Getty Images)

and de-escalatory measures. There is no doubt that structural factors—and related military implications—have a role. For example, China dominates military spending in the region. According to 2013 figures from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, when Asia (including South Asia) is taken as a whole, China accounts for 32.5 percent of military spending, followed by Japan at 18.9 percent and South Korea at 9.2 percent. If one considers that the most

powerful Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, accounted for 3.1 percent, 2.5 percent, and 1.7 percent of regional spending respectively, Chinese military dominance in budgetary terms is clear. While it is true that China's size, growth, and population will naturally lead to a dominant share of military expenditure in the region, it is also the case that spending on the PLA has been growing at rates exceeding GDP growth over the past decade and is likely to continue to do so for the immediate future. In other words, the observation that China's growing military capabilities are "natural" cannot ignore

the discomfiting reality that Chinese military dominance over the region in spending terms will only increase.

To be sure, size matters because capabilities matter. Even if one takes a neutral position on the credibility of the disputed maritime claims that variously involve China, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, China is the country whose actions will have the greatest impact on stability in the region. Whereas none of these other countries, including Japan, would have the capacity or the inclination to challenge American naval preeminence in the region, China appears to have that ambition and at some point, may have acquired the means to do so. Adventurism by Japan and South Korea is likely to be restrained by their reliance on the United States as security provider, and assertiveness by Southeast Asian nations is not likely to disturb the broader regional strategic balance because they lack military clout. However, China is not subject to either of these two constraining factors.



Figure 1: “The First and Second Island Chains. PRC military theorists refer to two ‘island chains’ along China’s maritime perimeter. The First Island Chain includes Taiwan and the Ryuku Islands, the Second Island Chain extends from Japan to Guam.” (*Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Regarding the People’s Republic of China*, Department of Defense, 2012)

Moreover, it is not just the size of China’s military budget that is significant, but its military doctrine and its highly tailored anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. These are based on advanced submarines, ballistic missiles, mines, and cyber and other networked disruption enhancements specifically designed to deny American forces the capacity to acquire and/or maintain sea control over the so-called First Island Chain (see figure 1). This chain consists of the islands that surround China’s maritime periphery, stretching from the Kuril Islands in the Russian Far East, to Japan, and then to the northern Philippines, Borneo, and Malaysia.

As the Pentagon observed in its *2013 Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, “China has developed measures to deter and counter third-party intervention, particularly by

the United States. . . . China's A2/AD focus appears oriented toward restricting or controlling access to China's periphery, including the Western Pacific."

Even if the 2011 assessment that "it is unlikely that China will be able to project and sustain large forces in high-intensity combat operations far from China prior to 2020" is correct, the A2/AD approach is primarily designed to deter the United States from intervening in a theater conflict in the Chinese periphery such as the Taiwan Straits, the East China Sea, or the South China Sea. It is intended to raise the prospect that China will inflict prohibitive damage on American naval assets or, failing that, delay the arrival or reduce the effectiveness of intervening U.S. naval and air forces. China could present any seizure of a disputed island or territory as a *fait accompli*.

Even gaps in the PLA Navy's "joined-up" capabilities mean that it will not be able to exercise sea control on its periphery for decades, if ever. The change in the military balance, from uncontested American naval supremacy towards a situation in which the United States may have to suffer substantial military costs to protect its allies' territories and interests, is highly significant. Fears of Chinese capabilities and assertiveness are in turn causing regional capitals, such as Tokyo, Seoul, and Singapore, to upgrade their military capabilities to defend their interests. In the process, they may be reviving and intensifying the still-dormant military competition between East and Southeast Asian rivals, which had previously been held in check by uncontested U.S. naval supremacy.

Beyond Structural Tension: Managing the Rise of a CCP-Led China

None of the above observations based on changes in power are novel or rare. A focus on the changes in power and military relativities is relevant because it highlights the challenge of China's rise to a pre-existing regional and strategic order. But it is also incomplete as an explanation for why rivalry and tension are increasing in East Asia—and by extension, what the United States ought to do about it. It is more accurate to define the challenge as one that requires the United States to manage the rise of a CCP-led China—which is more fraught and difficult than the simpler problem of managing yet another rising power in Asia.

This is where history or, more precisely, the CCP's misuse of history, comes in. The party has spent vast resources producing and disseminating an official history of the rise of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), and then, from 1949 onward, of the modern-day PRC under the party's control. At its core is the notion that a once-great China was brought to its knees and humiliated by outside powers, first by the British, in the mid-1800s, and then by the Japanese, from the late 1800s onward. To justify the party's own authority and legitimacy, many in the party

argue that the United States and its allies will do the same if China continues to rise. As the narrative goes, a strong and proud party is the only thing preventing outsiders from undermining and carving up the 5000-year-old civilization-state.

The assault on the Qing dynasty by outside powers is historical fact, even if the country's weakness from 1949 onward was mostly self-inflicted during the Mao Zedong years. But the notion that there has been one enduring and permanent China struggling against avaricious outsiders across several millennia is a mischievous misrepresentation of history. The reality is that what we now call China was forged through thousands of battles across five millennia. By the time the Qing dynasty fell in 1912, it ruled four million square kilometers more than the Ming emperors had bequeathed to it, and its landmass had almost doubled.

When Mao took power in 1949, his goal was to reestablish the “Greater China” of the Qing dynasty, and he created the convenient myth that the entire Manchu Empire was the permanent and enduring China. Following the so-called peaceful liberation of the East Turkestan Republic (now Xinjiang) in 1949 and the invasion of Tibet in 1950, this was achieved, and it promptly increased the size of Mao's China by more than one-third.

No major foreign country disputes China's authority in Tibet and Xinjiang, only Beijing's treatment of ethnic minorities and suppression of religious freedoms. The point is that the PRC's rule over Greater China is widely accepted, settled, and uncontested. Since the early 1990s, apparently hostile outside powers have played an enormous role in helping China's economic rise for mutual benefit. Except for the goal of eliminating the legacy of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists by acquiring the now democratic and economically vibrant Taiwan—which was never itself a part of the PRC, though Beijing asserts ownership—the party has already fulfilled its self-defined historic mission with little resistance from outside great powers.

In reality, the PRC is currently rising in the most benign and stable external environment it has faced for several hundred years. It has resolved historical land disputes with twelve of its continental neighbors, even as it claims



A China Coast Guard ship (top) and a Philippine supply boat engage in a stand-off as the Philippine boat attempts to reach the Second Thomas Shoal, a remote South China Sea reef claimed by both countries, on March 29, 2014. (JAY DIRECTO/AFP/Getty Images)

the Indian-administered territory of Arunachal Pradesh. Its control over Tibet and Xinjiang is not being questioned or challenged by any major power. It does not fear invasion by any maritime power to its east or southeast. Even so, the CCP is now committed to the fiction that China is simply restoring the proper order that has stood for millennia, ignoring the reality that the self-designated Middle Kingdom is only one of several historic kingdoms and polities with longstanding interests in the region. More seriously, this fiction has been entrenched in state-sanctioned official histories, and it increasingly shapes the contemporary outlook and expectations of a growing number of Chinese elites. This is clearly evident in regulated and unregulated Chinese blogs and in articles in the Chinese media. Now inextricably linked to the CCP's claims of its domestic legitimacy, the PRC's claims in the East (and South) China Sea are also central to its political *raison d'être*. They have been reaffirmed as essential elements of President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" and figure prominently in various official documents produced by the PLA, such as the *Defense White Paper*.

More broadly, history tells us that differing conceptions of how the region should be organized ought to be taken seriously by policymakers. After all, European liberals in the twentieth century had to prevail against the Nazi vision and then against the Soviet one. In the first half of the twentieth century, Imperial Japan proclaimed a "new order" and then tried to implement it. Despite the PRC's advancements within the American-backed liberal order in Asia, official PRC discourse now gives growing prominence to what noted China scholar William Callahan calls "Sino-speak." As he describes it, Sino-speak is a new vocabulary and grammar of naturalized identity to describe—and prescribe—China's rejuvenation to greatness. This emerging discourse looks to China's eternal civilization to determine social, cultural, and territorial borders and rejects key elements of the U.S.-led, post-World War II liberal order—great and small equal and sovereign nations behaving according to the post-war laws, rules, and norms. Sino-speak is not yet irreversibly entrenched in PRC foreign policy, but it carries the explicit support of government officials, state media, and state-sanctioned intellectuals. It provides much of the intellectual foundation for President Xi's China Dream vision, meaning that this revisionism is endorsed from the very top.

It is also critical for American policymakers to realize that the PRC's deep discomfort with the liberal order in Asia, though not its wholesale rejection, is one reason China is becoming more truculent about these claims. They are seen as morally justified by China's history, and therefore increasingly indivisible, just as the PRC's singular claim over almost 90 percent of the South China Sea is becoming indivisible. Such claims are now part and parcel of a Greater China conception that the PRC is committed to pursuing.

Implications for U.S. Attempts to Manage Disputes in the East China Sea

Relations between Japan and the PRC have become the front line of Beijing's pressure against existing regional arrangements. While it is true that China has also placed less powerful countries, especially the Philippines, under stepped-up naval pressure, its focus has been on Japan. To be sure, the anti-Japanese sentiment forged during the decades of Japanese hostility leading up to, and including, World War II has survived to this day. But it is also true that the CCP has nurtured and encouraged anti-Japanese sentiment over the past decade, after it was seemingly subsiding. The idea that current Sino-Japanese tensions are being driven simply by Chinese "score-settling" is therefore inadequate. Instead, a more complete explanation must focus on the character of the CCP, the party's commitment to a Greater China, and its revisionist view of the PRC's place in the existing order.

If so, American policymakers need to realize that the standard ways of managing maritime disputes in the East China Sea are increasingly unacceptable to the CCP



Chinese para-military policemen at the entrance of the Japanese Embassy as demonstrators protest over the Diaoyu islands issue, known as the Senkaku islands in Japan, in Beijing on September 18, 2012. (MARK RALSTON/AFP/Getty Images)

as permanent solutions to these disagreements. These include joint exploitation of seabed resources and/or fishing stocks; referring disputes to international bodies for resolution according to international law; and signing binding codes of conduct to regulate behavior without actually resolving the sovereignty issues. In other words, the PRC's dispute with Japan in the East China Sea is not primarily about access to resources, nor is it amenable to customary legal, political, or

diplomatic negotiation. In fact, a worsening bilateral relationship with Japan that allows further opportunity for the PRC to focus on past Japanese aggression and war crimes appears to be an important part of the CCP's attempts to entrench its authority at home. The party has constructed a sacred mission to right past grievances and to recapture previous glories. Accordingly, the Chinese government is resisting a negotiated resolution of disputes in the East China Sea and the CCP, which controls it, is becoming less interested in arriving at one. Instead, for the CCP, a perpetual "contained crisis" with Japan is politically expedient.

Therefore, Washington must now consider the possibility that Beijing is already irrevocably committed to an uncompromising stance. If this is indeed the case, and regaining control over disputed territory in the East China Sea has become the PRC's undeviating objective, then Washington can do little to shape Beijing's preferred "end game." Similarly, little is likely to be achieved by calling on Japan to reconsider its insistence that there is no sovereignty issue to be resolved concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as some U.S. experts have done. In fact, even if Japan did so, this would certainly not be a game changer, it would not provide fertile ground for a future negotiated settlement, and it might even embolden the PRC and persuade it to push its claims more assertively.

Policy Recommendations

What, then, does the United States do if one of the disputants—the PRC—has become uninterested in finding a negotiated solution and prefers to pursue a talk and take or a "protect, contest, and occupy" approach?

Even if the proverbial horse has bolted when it comes to shaping the PRC's objectives in the East China Sea, Washington is not without good options that can influence Beijing's behavior, if not its strategic and political objectives. The PRC is still a strategically isolated rising power. As such, its basic goal is to *simplify* the region in strategic terms—by reducing disagreements down to one-on-one negotiation, or, with competition with regional powers, by removing the influence or diluting the political will of the still-more-powerful United States. The American response should be to *complicate* the region for the PRC. Fortunately, regional strategic dynamics are conducive to this U.S. counter-strategy, and there are a number of ways that this can be fruitfully achieved.

1. The United States should publically and frequently reaffirm the vital contribution of a robust U.S.-Japan alliance to peace and prosperity.

The PRC seeks to dilute the credibility of American alliance commitments in the region and weaken the appetite of U.S. allies to rely on American security guarantees. Knowing that the United States needs the acquiescence of host governments to maintain its forward positions in the region, China sees the dismantling of U.S. post-World War II alliances as the first step towards eventually "kicking America out" of Asia. If the U.S.-led alliance system is weakened, the PRC will be in a far stronger position to achieve its territorial goals through a combination of coercion, bullying, and economic co-optation. This, if you will, is Sino-speak, brought up to date and applied in the twenty-first century.

Twenty-five centuries ago, Sun Tzu taught that in war, the first wise step is to attack the enemy's plans and the second is to attack his alliances.

Today, all states in Asia are in a strategic holding pattern, watching carefully what close U.S. allies and partners are doing. So far, no U.S. security ally or partner has moved towards the PRC in strategic terms. In this context, the U.S.-Japan alliance is the most important relationship; its robustness provides assurance to the other states that the San Francisco alliance system can adapt and endure. Japan is the single most important ally of the United States in Asia for several reasons: the size of the Japanese economy, which is equal to that of Germany and Britain combined; Japan's actual and latent military capabilities; its technological prowess; and its long tradition of thinking strategically about the region and the world (even if this led to the trauma of the Pacific War and has been in seeming hibernation since 1945). If the credibility of this relationship were significantly diminished, and in particular, American willingness to fulfill security obligations, the structure and credibility of U.S. alliance relationships in the region would likely unravel.



U.S. guided missile cruiser leads Japanese destroyers during 'Keen Sword', a U.S.-Japan military exercise in the Pacific Ocean on December 10, 2010. (TOSHIFUMI KITAMURA/AFP/Getty)

Washington has noted this. Its recent reaffirmations that it will honor treaty obligations to Japan in the event of any military action against it, and a conviction in the region that Washington will indeed do so if and when the time comes, are the requirements for a continued American strategic role in the Asia-Pacific.

It would serve U.S. interests for the administration to articulate frequently, openly, and eloquently why core and enduring American strategic and economic interests are served in honoring alliance commitments to Japan, rather than doing so only when a Sino-Japanese crisis appears imminent.

2. The United States should link territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas and promote regional, rather than bilateral, negotiations.

It is in the PRC's interest, politically and diplomatically, to separate its claims in the East China Sea from those in the South China Sea, even if these claims have

the same drivers, described earlier. Just as Beijing seeks to negotiate individually with various Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea in order to maximize its leverage and prevent them from “ganging up” against it, it also seeks to define its dispute with Tokyo in the East China Sea as an issue affecting only its legitimate interests and those of Japan.

The United States ought explicitly to link the disputes in the East and South China Seas and ensure that other states do indeed “gang up” on the PRC so long as it refuses to accept a negotiated, peaceful settlement of claims in both.

3. The United States should insist that the ASEAN preference for a binding code of conduct prohibiting the use of force to settle territorial disputes be applied as a singular framework in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Straits.

If the PRC signs a singular code and then violates it in the East China Sea, this should immediately draw the ire and condemnation of Southeast Asian signatories. To be sure, Southeast Asian states have long been reluctant to become involved in disputes between two regional giants over issues in the East China Sea. Even so, the United States ought to offer the argument, which should be compelling, that partial or complete realization of PRC claims in the East China Sea would give the PLA far greater uncontested access to maritime regions in the Western Pacific. Any uncontested “strategic breakout” by the PRC beyond its First Island Chain (which stretches from Japan down to Taiwan, the Philippines, and the northern tip of Indonesia) would have adverse strategic and military consequences for American forces, and therefore, the strategic interests of all maritime Southeast Asian nations.

The United States should explain to Southeast Asian nations that failure to prevent the PRC from exercising sovereignty over its claims in the East China Sea would severely strain the credibility of the U.S.-led alliance system in Asia more generally. This would fundamentally recast the strategic order throughout East and Southeast Asia and would be adverse to the interests of all Southeast Asian maritime states. The role of American naval power and security relationships in maintaining stability in the region would be severely degraded. In other words, and given the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance to regional security, Southeast Asian nations need to accept that the “red line” is in the East China Sea, rather than further south.

A similar logic, directly relevant to the Sino-Japanese dispute and related American interests, ought to be applied to Taiwan. The forceful “unification” of Taiwan and the PRC—akin to a modern-day East Asian Anschluss—would

similarly lower the credibility of the American alliance system in Asia. Moreover, if the PLA is allowed physical access to Taiwanese ports and untrammled access to Taiwan's exclusive maritime economic zone, this would offer the PLA Navy the "strategic breakout" into the Western Pacific that it needs to significantly alter the strategic balance in the wider East and Southeast Asia region.

While unification of the PRC and Taiwan under a mainland government that more closely resembles the multi-party democratic system in Taiwan would be far more palatable to the Taiwanese and to the Americans, current U.S. policy in the Taiwan Straits is deliberately ambiguous. This casts doubt on Washington's clarity about its own strategic interests in East Asia vis-à-vis an ambitious and increasingly assertive PRC. The American failure to adopt a clear and robust position on sovereignty disputes involving the PRC in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Straits also enhances the effectiveness of Beijing's approach of dividing opponents and probing U.S. resoluteness. *This means that China is allowed to dictate the pace and extent it asserts its claims in these various regions, even as it increasingly views these claims as indivisible.*



A rocket launched from the Thunderbolt 2000, a Taiwan-made multi-rocket launcher system, during a military drill in western Penghu islands on April 17, 2013. (SAM YEH/AFP/Getty Images)

Instead, the United States should counter with the proposition that one binding code of conduct against the use of force to settle these issues should be applicable to all of these contested regions. The high likelihood that the PRC would reject such a proposal is beside the point: the onus would be upon Beijing to justify its rejection of such a code—and it would suffer region-wide diplomatic fallout as it goes about doing so.

4. The United States should encourage reinvigoration of Japan's strategic ambition and assertively make the case to other Asian maritime powers that such ambition is indispensable to regional security and economic growth.

Washington should publically embrace Shinzo Abe's pronouncements that Japan will never be a "tier two" nation and that Tokyo plans to play a significant role in "contributing to the peace and security" of the region.

Furthermore, it should encourage other Asian maritime powers to view the Abe government's intentions in the same favorable way. Implicit in this argument is that an inward-looking and "pacifist" Japan is more likely to embolden China and that an effective strategic and military balance is a sine qua non for restraining PRC behavior and actions in the region. Conversely, an artificially weak or strategically paralyzed Japan is more likely to encourage Beijing to be assertive in the East China Sea, given that its ambitions in the region are unlikely to subside.

Indeed, there are strong indications that Abe's more proactive vision for Japan is widely shared among his political colleagues, suggesting that his priorities will prevail even if he is no longer in power. If so, then encouraging Japan to play a more proactive strategic role will give Washington more sway and leverage over Tokyo, not less—especially in persuading the Japanese to proceed constructively towards stabilizing the East China Sea dispute.

Conclusion

The United States has a broader political, diplomatic, economic, and even military relationship with China than any other major country in Asia. This, in combination with the still-dominant U.S. military position in Asia, means that Washington is uniquely placed to manage any crisis or escalation of a crisis between the PRC and Japan. Beijing has deepened its relations with Washington because it feels it has no other option, given that the United States can beneficially or adversely affect its interests. In other words, meaningful engagement is not primarily an act of Chinese friendship, but of necessity. In spite of this relationship, strategic competition and rivalry have been increasing between the two countries. If Washington decides to play a more proactive and strategically astute role in the East China Sea, then the PRC will be forced to be more responsive, not less, to an American role in this and other disputes.

One should not overestimate the PRC's strengths or underestimate its capabilities or ambition. Despite China's size, rapid economic growth, and expanding military capabilities, politically, the CCP cannot afford a foreign policy disaster that would have grave economic consequences for the country and possibly trigger an existential crisis for the party. The United States, in coordination with allies like Japan, needs to ensure that it is positioned to control the pace of diplomatic, military, and economic escalation in the event of a crisis—and in doing so, ensure it is in a position to impose prohibitive costs on the CCP at any stage of an escalation.

Although the United States has a strong preference for more rapid and meaningful progress towards political reform within the PRC, the policies

suggested in this paper are not intended primarily to bring about the demise of the CCP, but to ensure that Beijing's revisionist and expansionist objectives are kept in check, eventually moderated, or even abandoned. If this can be achieved, then a negotiated and peaceful settlement with the PRC in the East China Sea (and possibly also the South China Sea) is at least conceivable, and maybe even probable.