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by Jimmy Peterson

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POLICY UPDATE

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The grand strategy of the Obama administration, in terms of the Asia Pacific region, has been to "pivot" away from Europe and towards Asia. This is part of a broader form of strategic primacy, relying on coercive diplomacy against China over security issues in the Asia Pacific. This approach has provoked aggressive and nationalistic responses from the Chinese government and military officials. Coercive diplomacy assumes that an adversary will act rationally, but perceptions of U.S. ambitions are in the eyes of the beholder. Domestic pressures may rapidly precipitate irrational actions. The U.S. must make concessions to the Chinese on some areas of shared global leadership, instead of asserting itself as a leader on all major issues. Both sides recognize that they have a mutual interest in easing tensions throughout Asia and cooperating on crucial global initiatives. This paper will demonstrate that domestic factors are imperative as a driver of grand strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Literature on U.S. grand strategy theory identifies four main approaches. 'Neo-isolationism' outlines an active foreign policy as counterproductive, spurring other states into counterbalancing against the U.S. (Posen and Ross 1996, 9). Advocates of 'selective engagement' recognize that scarce resources must be judiciously employed; however, the U.S. should retain sufficient military power in order to prevent conflicts from undermining international stability. 'Cooperative security' emphasizes international institutions as central to the coordination of collective action and therefore relies on many states to contribute to the maintenance of peace (Posen and Ross 1996, 28). 'Primacy' theorists contend that U.S. hegemony has been instrumental to the relative international peace enjoyed by most states since the end of the Cold War and the underlying objective of U.S. foreign policy is to maintain U.S. dominance (McDonough 2009, 10). The Obama administration's pivot has shifted financial, diplomatic, and military resources away from Europe and the Middle East and towards Asia (Ignatius 2012, A17). Yet, while U.S. administration officials have been careful to allay the perception of the pivot as part of a broader containment strategy against China, it is mainly targeted at reducing "China's rise as a regional military power" (McDonough 2013). This grand strategy, which is largely a combination of selective engagement and primacy, unnecessarily risks escalation over relatively meaningless, although symbolically important, islands. A superior strategy would emphasize areas of common interests for China and the U.S.

OBAMA'S VISION FOR SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND COOPERATIVE SECURITY

Selective engagement is the essence of the Obama administration's foreign policy strategy. In 2010, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued that due to its "scarce resources", the U.S. plans to "invest (resources) wisely where they will yield the biggest returns" (Clinton 2011, 63). A reduction in overall military commitments is the result of increased pressures to focus on domestic and economic issues; this leads Obama to focus on the craft of nation-building (Friedman 2011, A27). Without the domestic popularity or available means to support an ambitious foreign policy agenda, Obama has reiterated the importance of reducing commitments abroad. Additionally, Obama repeats that U.S. foreign policy is most effective when it demonstrates a shining example of democracy at home (Brands 2013, 13). Obama has acknowledged that "no system of government can or should be imposed on one nation by any other" (Patterson 2011, 33). To endure, democracy must be brought about by people in their respective countries through a bottom-up process.

Simultaneously, there has been a re-allocation of resources away from Europe and towards the Asia-Pacific. The American public has increasingly turned its attention to Asia and the purported economic threat that China presents (Kliman and Small 2011). The shift of diplomatic posts from Europe to Asia has accelerated under Obama. Prior to becoming President, an anonymous former advisor to Obama stated that Europe was not high on Obama's agenda (Wolf 2008). As chairman of the Senate European subcommittee, Obama failed to convene a single policy meeting. Obama wanted to become a "Pacific President" (Mardell 2011).

Obama's vision for cooperative security is nonetheless evident in his rhetoric promoting greater burden sharing to bolster a stable international order (Mead 2002, 61). Obama is respectful of Wilsonian principles such as soft power, multilateralism, and the use of international norms to gain legitimacy (Obama 2006, 310). In his first presidential speech at the UN, Obama quoted Theodore Roosevelt: "we have learned... to be citizens of the world, members of the human community" (Vasconcelos and Zaborowski 2009, 12). Obama's administration generally rejects unilateralism and views military force as a last option to resolve crises.

In 2011, Clinton asserted that the U.S. plans to "keep credible strategic and economic commitments" in Asia, arguing that U.S. long-term prosperity and security depended on the pivot (Radia 2011). In particular, investments in the region strengthen institutions and partnerships that help the U.S. "establish a system and habits of cooperation that, over time, will require less effort to sustain" (Radia 2011).

However, Obama's disappointments on the cooperative security front have been palpable. Obama hoped that the European Union (EU) would "contribute more troops to collective security operations and invest more in reconstruction and stabilization capabilities (within NATO)" (Obama 2007, 12). Obama's insistence on an increased European troop presence in Afghanistan faced stiff opposition. Many U.S. officials viewed EU states as free riding and not contributing enough to NATO in Libya. In 2011, departing Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, told EU members that without increased investment in their militaries, NATO faced "military irrelevance" (Gates 2011).

Support for a cooperative security regime was setback after Libya. Although the no-fly zone was authorized by the UN Security Council, the NATO mission quickly faced opposition from China, Brazil, South Africa, Russia, India, and many African states.[1] The overarching concern was that the implementation of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) had become a means for regime change, and that the line between civilian protection and regime change in R2P operations had become blurred. They argued that they should have had a larger role in determining how the operation was conducted (Chalk, Dallaire and Matthews 2012, 38). The R2P had gradually matured as a concept politically, organizationally, and institutionally since its endorsement at the World Summit in 2005, but then consensus disintegrated in 2011 (Evans 2012, 32). Substantial practical cooperation between NATO and the AU was sidetracked. NATO assistance to the AU emphasized strategic airlift and sealift support, the training of the African Standby Forces, and the provision of logistical and technical expertise. However, little dialogue between the organizations to reconcile disagreements over Libya has occurred.

[1] Although African states were by no means unanimous. The Arab League supported NATO action.

THE "PIVOT"

SELECTIVE PRIMACY

In the Asia Pacific region, the U.S. has become increasingly assertive under Obama's administration (Anonymous 2013, 86). Although U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, called on all countries to stop using coercion to advance claims to resources and territories in the South China Sea at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in July 2013 (Glaser and Vitello 2013, 8), U.S. actions have often been at odds with its rhetoric. Many recent actions can be considered part of a broader coercive diplomacy. In theory, coercive diplomacy is a defensive strategy employed to persuade an adversary, which seeks to change the status quo in pursuit of its national interest, to stop short of its goal, reverse its policy course, or make changes to its government (George and Simons 1994, 8). It is a flexible alternative to the direct use of military force. Coercive diplomacy involves negotiations, bargaining, and signalling. Yet, its success depends on the credibility of its military threat.

Obama's administration has increased its military cooperation with many of China's neighbours. China's military modernization has caused angst among its neighbours and propelled them to welcome greater U.S. involvement in the region (Obama on Charlie Rose 2013). The U.S. is central to setting the political agenda during meetings in the Asia Pacific region, often pushing back against Chinese proposals (Obama on China 2013). America's military force structure increasingly prioritizes naval and air services to enhance its operational access to the Asia Pacific (McDonough 2013). The U.S. has stationed 2,500 marines in Darwin, Australia and negotiated for increased access for its fighter jets and warships. It recently awarded construction contracts to upgrade housing units at its naval base facilities in Guam (Defence Industry Daily 2013). In 2010, Clinton warned China that the American security treaty with Japan covers the disputed Senkaku or Diaoyu islands (McDonough 2013). Clinton also broke from the long-standing engagement policy with China over the Spratly Islands, claiming that they legally belonged to the Philippines and Vietnam (Ross 2012, 77). Coastal battleships have been stationed in Singapore as a component of the new air-sea battle doctrine (Xiang 2012, 113). Deepening military and diplomatic ties with India is seen as a way to limit China's rise; India is described as a "linchpin" in the pivot (McDonough 2013). Obama's administration has expanded joint military exercises with South Korea (Ross 2012, 77). The U.S.-led proposal for the economic Trans Pacific Partnership excludes China and seeks to neutralize China's economic rise (Sevastopulo, Donnan and Bland 2013). The easing of sanctions on Burma is partly motivated by reducing Burma's dependence on China (McDonough 2013). Even long-term continuation of the Taiwanese problem has been perceived by Chinese military strategists "as a chess piece to check China's rise" (Nathan and Scobell 2012, 42). U.S. allies in the region are elevated to act as military, economic, and political counterweights to China (Keagle, Fisher Jr. and Johnson 2013, 60).

The Obama administration considers the U.S. to still be the leader in Asia. Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta assured American allies that it would remain a significant "presence in the Pacific for a long time" (Ross 2012, 70). Clinton asserted that the pivot "fits logically into [America's] overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership" (Beitelman 2012, 1091). Obama has rejected President Xi Jinping's vision for a "new model of major country relationship" (Glaser and Vitello 2013, 3). The proposed Chinese model is founded upon mutual respect, win-win cooperation, non-conflict, and non-confrontation. Obama contends that China "can't [expect to] have all the rights of a major world power but none of the responsibilities" (Obama on Charlie Rose 2013). Most high-level Chinese officials view the pivot as a containment

strategy (Xiang 2012, 117). A comprehensive arms race is underway in the Asia Pacific emphasizing research and development to achieve escalation dominance in the region. Conversely, advocates of selective engagement support restraint that relies on Japan, India, and other powers to counteract Chinese aggression (McDonough 2013).

UNDERLYING PROBLEMS WITH THE PIVOT

The major risk of coercive diplomacy is that a state may refuse to back down (George and Simons 1994, 9). Coercive diplomacy is based on the assumption that an opponent will act rationally. However, Chinese leaders may not act rationally because of domestic pressures from nationalists to avoid humiliation. Many Chinese writers and online patriots criticized their government's handling of two American B-52s flying through the East China Sea Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), as declared by the Chinese government (Beech 2013). They argued that the lack of a timely response would undermine China's image. Nationalists see China as "reclaiming its rightful place in the world power structure" (Keagle, Fisher Jr. and Johnson 2013, 61). Most Chinese policymakers believe the U.S. is attempting to curtail its political influence (Nathan and Scobell 2012, 32). Prior to the pivot, Chinese policymakers generally referred to the U.S. strategy against China as hedging (Xiang 2012, 114). The pivot has given military hawks more sway among policymakers. Xi has stated that strategic differences between the U.S. and China may be irreconcilable.

Overextending a coercive diplomatic approach strengthens an opponent's resistance (George and Simons 1994, 15). Coercive diplomacy was utilized successfully to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis; however, that situation contained exceptional circumstances (George and Simons 1994, 126). The leaders' personalities were crucial to the onset and resolution of the crisis, in particular their perceptions of one another as rational, albeit, in fundamentally different ways. Both saw nuclear war as mutually assured destruction, which generated compelling incentives to dissolve the crisis peacefully.

Moreover, considerable public and private concessions have to be made by the U.S. to defuse tensions with China peacefully. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. chose a mixture of negotiating tools with the Soviet Union (Allison 2012). The U.S. provided a public carrot by promising not to avoid Cuba; a private threat in giving the Soviet Union 24 hours to withdraw its missiles; and a private carrot in secretly removing its missiles from Turkey (George and Simon 1994, 123). Similarly, U.S. administrations will need similar flexibility with China today.

Much of the Chinese leaders' tough diplomatic talk stems from "a deep sense of insecurity" (Ross 2012, 71). China has many domestic problems that hinder a more aggressive external policy. Environmental concerns, rising income inequalities between inland and coastal areas, growing civil society and democratic movements, internal threats to the Communist Party and corruption, and an ageing population are long-term obstacles for the Chinese government.

By 2050, over half of China's population is projected to be over 50 years of age, much higher than its potential rivals including the U.S. (Zakaria 2012). Environmental pollution is causing social unrest, driving farmers to protest violently (Shirk 2007, 60). In 2004, approximately 10,000 farmers gathered in Sichuan Province, storming a government building to protest environmental pollution and land seizures for a government dam project. 10,000 paramilitary police members were sent to the province to restore order. Moreover, more than ten thousand chemical companies operate near the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, which provide most of China's

clean drinking water (Zhou 2010, 25). An accident there would be catastrophic. Ninety percent of China's urban ground water is already contaminated (Zhou 2010, 25).

The relaxation of the one-child policy announced by the Chinese government in November will have little immediate impact on improving demographic challenges. Allowing more than one child per family may lower the national rates of ageing and increase the number of younger individuals supporting the elderly (Peng 2011, 587), but the economy will struggle to support such a large labour force, as the pace of economic growth will eventually decline. The gender imbalance will persist for a considerably long time. Some estimates predict that China will have 25 million more young males than young females in 2020 (Beech 2013). Not disenfranchising millions of young, unemployed, and angry males in society may be unachievable. In addition, the one-child policy was inaccurate in that Chinese women have, on average, 1.5 children (Kristof 2013). The relaxation is unlikely to produce a real impact on the labour force for at least another fifteen years (Economy 2013).

To address its domestic challenges, the Chinese government appeals to nationalists to strengthen its legitimacy. U.S. coercive diplomacy has provoked nationalism and a more hard-line response from Chinese leaders on claims regarding the South China Sea (Ross 2012, 75). U.S. actions have heightened tensions in the region and undermined the strategic trust necessary to ensure manageable relations between China and the U.S. (Beitelman 2012, 1075).

Although the recent Chinese military build-up has been substantial, China's power projection capabilities and ambitious global agenda are overstated (Bandow 2013). The U.S. military remains far superior to China's in terms of global scope. China's major foreign policy tasks have been principally defensive, to sustain its economic growth, diminish destabilizing international influences, and avoid territorial losses (Nathan and Scobell 2012, 32). China's main security emphasis has been the development of military forces able to prevent the U.S. from intervening along its borders and in the Asia Pacific region. It is unthinkable that the U.S. would accept a great power mobilizing its military near U.S. borders. Only recently did it declare the end of the Monroe Doctrine, the foreign policy established in 1823 that stated any attempt to interfere with territories in the entire Western Hemisphere would necessitate a U.S. intervention (Investors Business Daily 2013, A13).

The rewards from comprehensive involvement in disputes in the Asia Pacific region are minor compared to the potential risks of escalation. U.S. support for Vietnam and the Philippines in the Spratly Islands is a faulty analysis of risk-reward calculations. The waters around the Spratly Islands have fish stocks, but are of little economic or strategic consequence (Ross 2012, 77). They are labelled as "Dangerous Ground" because they are so perilous for ships to navigate around (Schofield 2012, 3). The South China Sea is often cited by interested parties and the media to be a major source of gas and oil reserves. They rely on highly speculative geology-based assessments. Little exploratory drilling and few three-dimensional seismic surveys have taken place (Schofield 2012, 6). Estimates inflate the levels of oil in the seabed, which is primarily gas-based.

During the Cold War, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger argued that the U.S. could not divorce its policies toward the Soviet Union from its relations with China (Cleva 1989, 191). Similarly, today, the U.S. cannot divorce its policies toward China without considering the outcome of pushing China closer to other powers, particularly Russia. Russian technological

assistance to China has helped to improve China's maritime forces in its anti-access/area-denial strategy (Lien 2012, 117).

Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of the pivot is in doubt (Xiang 2012, 119). Driven in part by a desire to disassociate from failures in the Middle East, the U.S. looks to score diplomatic victories in Burma and Vietnam (Bianchi 2013, 105; Etzioni 2012, 399). It aims to stem the tide of Islamic countries including Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iraq, bolstering their ties to China. Moreover, most of China's neighbours need and must appease China more than they need the U.S. (Bianchi 2013, 103). Economically, they will be drawn towards greater integration with China, especially as it will eventually surpass the U.S. economy. Even India, which has augmented its strategic partnership with the U.S., treads carefully with China. India coordinates with China in many international forums, often criticizing U.S. policy[2] and calling on the replacement of the U.S. Dollar as the international reserve currency (Qazi 2012, 30). U.S. rhetoric with respect to the pivot should be cautious not to convey indifference towards Europe or else the U.S. also risks alienation from traditional allies (Cox 2012, 71). Containment needlessly takes the U.S. along a path that inflames tensions before retreating anyway.

No single worldview of how to respond to the pivot in China exists (Zhang 2012, xiv). The Sino-American relationship may be seen as threatening or as an opportunity to enhance international cooperation on key issues. The majority of the Chinese public is enthusiastic about friendly relations and recognizes the great costs associated with being viewed as an adversary by the U.S. (Zhang 2012, 202). However, the media often sensationalize nationalist sentiment against the U.S. in China.

Chinese policymakers need to confront security challenges from diverse and complex geopolitical regions including Oceania, South Asia, Central Asia, Northeast Asia, continental Southeast Asia, and maritime Southeast Asia (Nathan and Scobell 2012, 34). China shares land borders with 14 states, each with differing core national interests. Moreover, a strong Confucian element in society underscores moral adjustments, as opposed to rational domination, of the world (Xiang 2012, 126). While many in the U.S. foreign policy establishment have grandiose visions of universal liberal values, China has expanded by "cultural osmosis" (Kissinger on China 2011, 23). Historically, China has opposed the projection of values abroad.

Although China and the U.S. have conflicting interests, their mutual interests are underemphasized (Zhang 2012, 203). Addressing problems such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and climate change requires global cooperation. Nuclear proliferation needs all states, particularly the U.S., China, and Russia, to participate in preventing accidental launches or the spread of weapons to dangerous regimes (Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn 2013, A21). Many practical obstacles to cooperation exist on these issues, but a cooperative approach is essential to attain peaceful settlement of conflicting Sino-American interests (Kissinger on China 2011, 522). Meaningful dialogue is a necessary first and ongoing step. As Kissinger stated, states should realize that we are increasingly moving toward the "age of compatible interests" (Kissinger 2007). The U.S. and China can focus on these common goals by demonstrating shared leadership. U.S. and Chinese leaders would be wise to establish a consultative mechanism and conceptual framework on their shared long-term objectives (Kissinger on

[2] Often as part of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Criticism of the Libyan operation and the misapplication of the R2P is a prominent example.

Avoiding War 2011). This will require U.S. policymakers to recognize changing geopolitical power shifts.

A positive development was the official working meeting held in California between Obama and President Xi Jinping in June 2013. The last time the Chinese and American president met in an unofficial setting was in 2002 (Glaser and Vitello 2013, 1). Xi and Obama met for eight hours over two days and conducted more "honest discussions" than in regular official meetings (Obama on Charlie Rose 2013), agreeing on conducting strategic dialogue to pressure North Korea to act less provocatively (Glaser and Vitello 2013, 2). Obama and Xi also agreed to upgrade discussions on energy policy to ministerial levels, recognizing the need to cooperate on climate change and energy policy.

At the same time as the U.S. needs to pull back from its coercive diplomacy, China's government needs to make more meaningful efforts to participate in building mutually beneficial relations. In particular, the issue of cyber espionage, suspected to have been conducted by China's government, are responsible for widespread theft of intellectual property from U.S. companies such as Apple (Glaser and Vitello 2013, 2). Both the U.S. and Chinese governments must increase transparency to minimize misperceptions.

CONCLUSION

Although scholars often want policymakers to have clear grand strategies, ad hoc responses are necessary due to unexpected crises. Sensible strategy is often an "illusion" that rarely works (Betts 2000, 46-50). Strategy fails when the means are insufficient to fulfill the goals or if the ends are overly ambitious. Pursuing hegemony forces U.S. involvement in continuous conflict (Monteiro 2011, 38). And yet disengagement or relying on the balance of power heightens the security competition of states in other geopolitical regions. Obama's administration relies on a pragmatic mix of selective engagement, cooperative security, and primacy. For China, the pivot has been a form of strategic primacy.

Domestic influences account for much of the success or failure of grand strategy, including whether they will be pursued. The decline of cooperative security is attributable, in large part, to a lack of domestic political will in the U.S. and in allied countries. Austerity will presumably cause further sequestration to the U.S. defence budget. Significant demographic, environmental, civil society and economic challenges in China will keep Chinese policymakers preoccupied primarily with domestic policy.

Yet, the American pursuit of hegemony in the Asia Pacific region is provoking more aggressive and nationalistic responses from the Chinese. Coercive diplomacy assumes that an adversary will act rationally, but perceptions of U.S. ambitions are in the eyes of the beholder. Domestic pressures could precipitate irrational actions. The U.S. must make concessions to the Chinese on some areas of shared global leadership, instead of asserting itself as a leader on all major issues. Both sides recognize that they have a mutual interest in easing tensions in Asia and cooperating on major global initiatives. However, the U.S. pivot hinders improving that mutual interest.

About the Author

Jimmy Peterson is pursuing an MA in political science at Simon Fraser University. He has written for the NATO Defence College on attempts to develop a cooperative security regime in Africa and the application of Responsibility to Protect in Libya. Graduating at the top of his class in 2013 he was awarded the Governor General's medal. His research focuses on Asian security matters, and was recently hosted by the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of a Young Leaders' Delegation.

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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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