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Vanity and Bias: The “Cold War” Redux?

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US-China relations should not be studied via the lenses of containment/engagement, but in terms of security.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that bilateral ties between the United States and China is the most important international relationship today. As talk of a “new Cold War” between the two states heats up, we need to be clear-eyed about the actual dynamics of the relationship rather than rely on faulty analogical reasoning.

Broadly speaking, during the ideological Cold War between the capitalist-democratic bloc led by the US and the communist bloc led by the former Soviet Union and China, the US approach was mainly one of containing the communist threat.

This included various proxy wars, such as in Vietnam. The fear was that if South Vietnam was lost, it would trigger the spread of communism, and the other Southeast Asian states would succumb and fall like a row of dominoes. After Saigon did fall in 1975, effects were arguably more subdued than this “domino theory” suggested.

Moreover, the US did not maintain containment against China throughout the Cold War. It eventually pursued rapprochement, culminating in Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China. The common strategic explanation for this was one of “tripolarity”, with the former USSR as a mutual adversary of China and the US amidst greater Sino-Soviet divergence and widening US-Soviet military disparity in favour of the USSR in the 1960s. The three US-China communiques became emblematic of improving and widening ties during the Cold War.

This defrosting détente was not to last though. On top of peaks and troughs during the Cold War, the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident decisively worsened US-China ties towards the Cold War’s end. The US sanctioned China for Tiananmen, which the Chinese generally perceived as attempts to weaken China.

Following Tiananmen, the Clinton Administration linked renewal of China’s most-favoured nation status to its human rights standards in 1993. This proved futile, however, and the Administration did away with such

linkage a mere year later, instead pursuing “comprehensive engagement” – the idea of increasing trade, cooperation, and dialogue to condition China and draw it closer to western norms.

Overall, particularly post-Cold War, many perceived the US to have been caught in a dilemma, swinging like a pendulum between the opposing poles of containment and engagement as it sought equipoise in its relations with China. Scholars have coined awkward terms such as “congagement”, “constrainment”, or “coopetition” to describe such a difficult US-China relationship.

For instance, the Bush Administration called for China to be a “responsible stakeholder” even as it courted China to support the Global War on Terror. China also sent diplomatic démarches to the member states of the Quadrilateral Grouping, or Quad for short, for their participation in Exercise Malabar 2007, seeing it as a signal of the Quad surrounding and containing China. Likewise, some saw the Obama Administration’s pivot as a containment of China. Even as analysts saw the Trump Administration as taking more of a hard line towards China, it also continued engagement, such as the phase one trade deal between them.

Yet, thinking of the US as containing or engaging China, or anywhere in between these extremes, reinforces stereotypes on, and of, both sides. On the one hand, the US is seen as trying to prevent the rise of China and maintain its hegemonic grip, whilst on the other hand, China is identified as an outsider and a delinquent rule-breaker. This is akin to how Elizabeth Bennett was prideful and biased, whilst Fitzwilliam Darcy was also vain and prejudiced in Jane Austen’s classic novel.

Instead, breaking away from the excesses of containment/engagement and analysing the Sino-US relationship in terms of security – in the timeless words of Arnold Wolfers, “the absence of threats to acquired values” and the “absence of fear that such values will be attacked” – enables a sharper understanding of the conflicts within the world’s most crucial relationship. In other words, what is the character of the specific security concerns between the US and China?

Analysing the US-China relationship in terms of security highlights two main interlinked areas of threat between the US and China: economic competition and cyber security.

In the economic sector, the US started the biannual Strategic Economic Dialogue with China to manage economic relations and the trade imbalance from 2006. This led to the Chinese currency, under a fixed exchange rate, to appreciate by a fifth against the US dollar by 2009, easing the economic conflict. Nevertheless, problems persisted, and by the Trump Administration, it should not have come as a shock that this became a full-fledged trade war between the US and China. Whether this trade war or the phase one trade deal will alleviate economic competition between the two states remains to be seen, but should not be taken as “congagement”, however.

Similarly, the cyber threat from China has also percolated, with attacks on military and other commercial interests. For example, the Financial Times reported that the Chinese military hacked the Pentagon in 2007. In 2015, a high-profile meeting between the presidents of the two states resulted in both “pledging that their governments would refrain from computer-enabled theft of intellectual property for commercial gain”. Nonetheless, these policies did not seem to have worked. Given this, that the Trump Administration banned Huawei from the US’s 5G network is but a logical step to deal with the Chinese cyber threat, and not so much as containing China’s rise or sounding the death knell of the multilateral order and heralding the start of a “new Cold War”.

To be clear, this is not to say that there are no other conflicts, disputes, or disagreements between the US and China in other areas. Rather, economic competition and cyber security are the most intense security issues between the two, as opposed to diplomatic parleys turning into a blame game, headline-grabbing rhetoric, or sensational but faulty analogical reasoning.

Ultimately, being clear-eyed in assessing the Sino-US security relationship as opposed to simplistic containment or engagement, or a conjunction of these, clarifies policymaking. This is not just for both the US and China, but also for states who do not want to choose between the two.

Maritime Southeast Asia 2021

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As we consider the changes we are confronted with since the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also important to recognise some of the persistent issues in the maritime domain. These include great power contestation, unilateral responses to competing maritime interests, and challenges to good order at sea. The safety and security of sea lanes are now more important than ever to the regional and global community.

Regional maritime development over the past year featured contestations between the great powers and unilateral responses to competing maritime interests. ASEAN member states are keenly aware that these developments have direct implications on their own interests in the oceans, and are calling for more support for open and inclusive regional security architectures and ASEAN-led mechanisms which promote and strengthen collaborative partnerships at sea.

MORE THAN A YEAR INTO THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19 has bought about a disruption which governments did not foresee. Countries had no choice but to realign domestic, regional, and international priorities, and reassess the way they view and work with friends and partners. Most bilateral and multilateral naval exercises were postponed or cancelled the year before. But soon enough, navies and enforcement agencies started adopting new pandemic mitigation measures in operation, training, and exercises. The Maritime Information Sharing Exercise (MARISX) was held virtually in July 2021. Multinational defence diplomacy events such as the International Maritime Security Conference 2021 (Singapore) and the 7th Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (in the French Indian Ocean territory La Reunion), were hosted in a hybrid format.

Although news of procurement delays and stalled acquisition programmes have emerged due to COVID-imposed financial constraints, the region as a whole is still trending towards developing stronger naval and maritime forces in response to increasing levels of great power competition. This is evidenced by ASEAN member states trying to speed up its modernisation process in part to enhance interoperability with stronger naval players

from outside the region, and that China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia have all been developing bigger and more offensive platforms.

CHINA'S MARITIME ASPIRATION AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The intentions and future roles of China remain contentious, and China's claims in the South China Sea have led some to believe that freedom of navigation is at stake. Hence, China's action, reaction and inaction vis-à-vis the South China Sea were often used as evidence (whether justly or not) to support a perception of malign aspirations. The introduction of a Coast Guard Law and a newly revised Maritime Traffic Safety Law also drew much attention within the maritime and shipping community outside of China.

For the most part, the South China Sea saw fewer high profile confrontational incidents compared to the preceding few years but still hogs headlines with Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines all complaining of increased incursions at sea (and in the air). The ASEAN-China consultative process on the Code of Conduct, stalled for a whole year due to the pandemic, is back on track since the beginning of 2021 albeit virtually. While there is no illusion that an agreed Code of Conduct will change behaviour overnight, the process is still viewed as important to help ASEAN and China improve maritime cooperation, and manage, if not prevent maritime incidents in the South China Sea. In the meantime, territorial and maritime disputes continue to persist in the South China Sea.

But tensions in the South China Sea is no longer only about the complex competing territorial and maritime disputes between the claimants. Today, the core contention arising from the South China Sea is also about the broader question on the universality of rules, laws, and regulations, where the stakeholders are no longer limited to the claimants alone. We saw many extra-regional stakeholders consider anew the role they should be playing in the region. The United States for one, and the Europeans too, are acutely aware of the economic weight and strategic importance of the South China Sea. While US-China strategic competition is the single most important factor shaping regional stability today, other powers including India, France, and the United Kingdom have also stepped up their naval deployments in the region, amidst a growing climate of mistrust.

The "battle of Note Verbales" in the last couple of years saw China receiving more serious pushback from Southeast Asian states (both claimants and non-claimants) as well as from extra-regional powers including US, Japan, Australia, and major European states. All the objecting states referred to the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and have challenged the legality of China's claims to sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea based on historic rights (or the nine-dash line). A significant point to note is the attitude of more governments in and out of the region emphasising the importance of UNCLOS and its arbitral provisions on issues under the ambit of UNCLOS.

SAFETY IS A CONCERN TOO

Maritime Southeast Asia remains heavily exposed to the various non-traditional security threats, such as Theft, Robbery and Piracy at Sea (TRAPS), Illegal Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, illicit trafficking and smuggling of people, drugs and weapons, severe weather conditions, and environmental degradation. Although the surge in the numbers of TRAPS incidents still grabbed headlines, the safety of naval operation and commercial shipping drew very serious reflections in the region and beyond.

The tragic loss of Indonesia Navy's KRI Nanggala reminded us of the perils of the Silent Service, and the importance of establishing international submarine emergency response procedures. The USS Connecticut incident which fortunately saw the safe return of crew and vessel highlighted the navigational risk.

As countries started closing borders and imposing travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many seafarers were stranded out at sea. It created significant hurdles to crew changes and repatriation of seafarers, which raised serious concerns for the safety and well-being of seafarers, and the longer-term development of the shipping industry. Vessels operated by overworked and mentally exhausted seafarers increased the risk of accidents at sea. As conditions for crew changes around the world improve slowly, it is important to bear in mind that our ability to ensure the oceans remain open, safe, and secure is critical to the region's continued growth and prosperity.

Japan Amid the US-China Competition: “Smart Power” Foreign Policy

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The intensification of the US-China competition since 2016 poses Japan a strategic dilemma. While it strongly supports the maintenance of the status quo order defined by US hegemony and liberal internationalism, Japan is also concerned about the relative weakening of the US influence and power in East Asia/Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China's emergence as a peer competitor to the US. To manage this dilemma, Japan is pursuing a smart power foreign policy.

The intensification of US-China competition since 2016 is the most important structural factor shaping regional and global affairs. This refers to the twin factors of America's relative decline in power and influence and China political, economic, and strategic resurgence as a peer competitor to the US. The bilateral competition has caused severe global and regional uncertainty, raised the possibility of a return of the Cold War, and augmented the probability of a war/conflict between the US and China.

With the intensification of the US-China strategic competition, Japan is faced with a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, it supports the maintenance of the status quo order defined by US hegemony and liberal internationalism. Not only has the US-led order brought peace, stability, and prosperity to Japan, it also served as a deterrent to Chinese revisionism and assertiveness in East Asia. On the other hand, Japan is also concerned about the relative weakening of American influence and power in East Asia/Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China's emergence as a peer competitor to the US. For Japan, this regional power transition coupled with Beijing's assertive foreign policy is a clear threat to its national interests and security. It threatens the resilience of America's security guarantee over Japan and increases the likelihood of the emergence of a Chinese-led order in East Asia.

“SMART POWER”

Many experts explained that Japan is pursuing either balancing, engagement, or hedging strategies to manage the strategic dilemma. In reality, Japan's foreign policy strategy has displayed a combination of these strategies best captured by the “smart power” framework: the combined use of hard and soft power tools.

To achieve preferred foreign policy outcomes, states rely on a combined use of a variety of tools, such as economic, diplomatic, development, legal, cultural, military, and others. How these tools are combined depends on the context or in the words of Joseph Nye “contextual intelligence”, that is, the ability of strategic planners to align tactics with objectives. With the multi-dimensional challenge from the US-China competition, it is arguable that states are better served by the diversified national strategy that combines hard and soft power tools for a more integrated and efficient practice of foreign policy.

According to Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index, Japan is a “quintessential smart power” due to its high level of influence in regional affairs despite possessing limited resources. It is important to note that Japan's foreign policy is not only shaped by external strategic considerations, but also by the domestic anti-militarist framework that has imposed a range of social and legal constraints to limit the role of its military both at home and overseas. This context has led Tokyo to not only rely on its military to achieve its foreign policy interests, but also a range of other soft power tools. Smart power allows Japan to pursue a foreign policy that incorporates the deterrence, attractiveness, and persuasion elements.

BALANCING, MULTILATERALISM, AND CHINA

Japan's exercise of a smart power-based foreign policy is defined by three strategies – balancing, multilateralism, and maintaining stable Sino-Japanese relations.

Balancing measures refer to the strengthening of deterrence against China's assertive attempts to revise the status quo order. At home, supported by an increasing defence budget since 2012, Japan has pursued military modernisation so that it remains a credible force in the face of China's rapid military modernisation.

Externally, Japan has reaffirmed and upgraded the US-Japan alliance to not only defend Japan's national security, but also to strengthen American engagement and presence in East Asia/Indo-Pacific with the bilateral

security alliance being the anchor for regional security. The alliance has benefitted from the growing interoperability between the two militaries, as well as the widening of the roles of the Self-Defense Force within the alliance through regional defence, global defence, and collective self-defence missions.

Outside of the US-Japan alliance, Japan has diversified its security partnerships with a variety of states such as with Australia, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Philippines, and many others. Security cooperation between Japan and these states has come through military and non-military means leading to stronger common positions on security challenges and the preservation of the US-led order based on a rules-based order.

Japan's smart power strategy is also to reinforce the multilateral order. This involves doubling down on efforts to strengthen ASEAN-led multilateralism and non-ASEAN-led multilateralism. Japan has been proactive in implementing a series of initiatives and policies to strengthen open regionalism as the defining feature of ASEAN-led multilateralism, and showing unreserved support for both ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN's normative framework. While these efforts have had the effect of counter-balancing China, the non-military initiatives have also strengthened the multilateral order and regional integration.

Based on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, Japan has shown leadership in terms of promoting amongst states: a rule-based order for air and sea; economic prosperity through free trade and strengthened connectivity; and peace and stability through the provision of security assistance such as capacity building. A multilateral manifestation of this vision is the Quad – a collective made up of the US, Japan, India, and Australia. Since 2019, the four countries have shown commitment to building practical cooperation in a variety of areas, such as addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, meeting the infrastructure needs of the Indo-Pacific, combating cyber threat, and protection of the maritime rules-based order.

Finally, Japan's smart power-based foreign policy prioritises the maintaining of stable political and economic relations with China despite the bilateral challenges caused by historical controversies and maritime dispute over East China Sea. This is in recognition of its geographic proximity to China, its economic reliance on China for economic prosperity, and the importance of maintaining political relations with the rising regional hegemon. Despite his characterisation of being a nationalist, Shinzo Abe was committed to engaging in meaningful dialogue with President Xi Jinping which culminated in a bilateral summit in October 2018. The stability in the bilateral relationship led to the implementation of the Maritime-and-Aerial Communication Mechanism (MACM) in 2018 to avert a military clash at sea and Japan's reversal of its opposition towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Japan's cooperation in the BRI was strengthened when the Japan-led Asian Development Bank and China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank signed an MOU in 2016 to engage in co-financing of projects.

CONCLUSION

The smart power approach allows Japan to circumvent the strategic dilemma in the following ways. While it preserves the US-led order, Japan has also stepped in when America's leadership was absent. While it deters China's assertive foreign policy strategy and initiatives, this approach also maintains a stable political and economic relations with the resurgent hegemon. Such a balanced approach has the potential to boost Japan's leadership that could be critical in managing the US-China competition and providing regional states with a "third way" that prevents them from choosing between the US and China.

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