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The Perils of Containing China

By Evan Resnick

Synopsis

The Obama Administration's policy of "rebalancing" to the Asia-Pacific appears to be a nascent attempt to contain China. It would behoove US policymakers to recognise a key distinction between Washington's current proto-containment of China and its successful containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Commentary

OBAMA ADMINISTRATION officials have emphatically denied that the much-discussed US policy of "rebalancing" towards the Asia-Pacific represents an attempt to contain China. Sceptics may be forgiven, however, for taking these denials with the proverbial grain of salt.

The military, diplomatic, and economic components of the rebalance—which the administration previously dubbed the "pivot"—collectively make little sense other than as a nascent effort to thwart China's geopolitical expansion.

Laying the foundations for containment

Militarily, the US has deployed Marines to Australia, dispatched Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore, and engaged in intensified defence cooperation with its formal allies of Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, as well as with other states in the region such as New Zealand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India. Additionally, the Department of Defence has pledged to recalibrate its distribution of naval capabilities between the Atlantic and Pacific theatres by the year 2020, from a 50-50 split to a 60-40 split favouring the latter. These initiatives, in turn, followed on the heels of the administration's early 2010 announcement of a US\$6.4 billion sale of advanced weaponry to Taiwan.

The US has complemented these military moves with a more assertive diplomatic posture in Southeast Asia. The most high-profile initiative in this regard has been its constructive engagement of the reformist Thein Sein regime in Myanmar, which was exemplified by President Obama's highly symbolic visit to that country (as well as Cambodia) in the immediate wake of his November 2012 reelection. The administration has also adopted a more intrusive position regarding the ongoing maritime dispute regarding the South China Sea, striking a posture that directly contravenes China's expansive claims.

Finally, even the economic pillar of the rebalance, the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership, a regional free-trade zone consisting of 12 potential partner states, appears designed to exclude China. The TPP framework is

restricted to countries capable of meeting high US standards in such areas as intellectual property rights, labour, and environmental standards, in which China lags far behind the other prospective members.

Why containment succeeded during the Cold War

If the rebalance actually represents an incipient attempt to contain China, it would be instructive for US policymakers to carefully examine the last time that the United States sought to contain a rising peer competitor. The US containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War succeeded in large part because the US sought above all to deter the Soviet Union from expanding into territories that Moscow was not highly motivated to conquer, namely Western Europe and Japan, but that Washington was highly motivated to defend.

America's defence commitments did not extend, however, to the countries of Eastern Europe, that lay closer to the Soviet border. Having suffered a series of devastating invasions at the hands of Western powers, the Kremlin was desperate to establish hegemony over those states, which would collectively become known as the East Bloc. Consequently, during the waning months of World War II and the early years of the postwar era, US leaders reluctantly granted the Soviets a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, as the alternative would have almost certainly resulted in a third world war.

As the Cold War unfolded, notwithstanding occasionally provocative rhetoric about "rollback" and limited efforts to cultivate relations with the peripheral East Bloc states of Yugoslavia and Romania, successive US administrations acquiesced to the de facto partition of Europe. Although this decision bore the heavy moral burden of consigning millions of innocent East Europeans behind the Iron Curtain of repressive communist rule, it played an indispensable role in both keeping the Cold War cold and catalysing the eventual self-destruction of the Soviet Union.

Why this time is different, so far

By contrast, the US has almost completely denied China a sphere of influence in East Asia. To date, with the exception of Tibet, Washington has refused to cede Beijing a free hand even with respect to territories that Chinese leaders view as falling under Chinese sovereignty, such as Taiwan and the South China Sea island chains. Further, in recent years the US has assiduously courted key states immediately adjacent to China such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and India. Remarkably, China's only formal ally in the Asia-Pacific is North Korea, whose erratic behaviour and economic dysfunction make it more of a strategic liability than an asset to Beijing.

The continued pursuit of this policy by the US significantly raises the odds of a military clash with China on terms that do not favour Washington. International political history has repeatedly demonstrated that as states amass power, their quest for security compels them, at minimum, to seek enhanced control over their immediate neighbourhoods. As China continues its steep upward trajectory in wealth and military capabilities, however, its insecurities will remain acute if it continues to be hemmed in on almost all sides by a constellation of US allies, friends, and strategic commitments.

Meanwhile, whereas during the Cold War the US reinforced its deterrent credibility by extending its security umbrella only to countries that it was highly resolved to protect and that its adversary was minimally resolved to attack, in the present context the situation would be reversed. Local territorial disputes between China and its immediate neighbours are of negligible salience to Washington but are of the highest possible salience to Beijing.

The continued conjunction of an increasingly powerful China with an ever more tightly-drawn US defence perimeter surrounding it poses a serious risk to peace and stability in East Asia. The Cold War case study imparts that the effective long-term containment of a rising adversary may paradoxically necessitate some accommodation of that state's most urgent security concerns. For US policymakers the challenge lies in ascertaining the precise line that differentiates the prudent assuaging of an increasingly powerful yet still highly insecure China from the imprudent appeasement of China that maintains Sino-US peace at the expense of core American security interests in East Asia.

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