

Are the Conflicts between the U.S. and China Manageable?

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Abstract

Although President Donald Trump has built personal relationship with President Xi Jinping since the Mar-a-Lago summit in April 2017, the conflicts between the two countries remain. The U.S. is worried about if it is able to continue maintaining its status of the global power and the dominant power in Asia while China is dramatically expanding its global influence. A new U.S. National Security Strategy labels China as a “competitor” challenging American interests. There is speculation that a war between the U.S. and China is inevitable. Will both the U.S. and China be able to maintain a healthy competition to avoid a war? How will the U.S. manage the new type of relations with a rising China? This paper will address these questions and argue that although the stakes are as high as ever for the United States and China to manage their relations, the conflicts between the two countries are manageable (Bates, 2005). Both the U.S. and China do not have any choice, but to understand each other and learn how to deal with their competitors. China-U.S. relations will be gradually getting better after the Trump administration works more with China.

Keywords: *China-U.S. relations, international relations, Chinese politics, American politics, war*

1. Introduction

Forty years ago, China normalized its relations with the United States. Forty years later, the growth of China's global influence is much faster than that the U.S. expected. China's challenges to the U.S. are obvious, and the conflicts between the two countries are increasingly growing. The U.S. is concerned about if it is able to continue maintaining its status of the global power and the dominant power in Asia while China is expanding its global influence. The world now is full of conflicts. In addition to terrorist threat, the standoff between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia is flaring dangerously, the possibility of a war in the Middle East remains, the preparation of military confrontation in the Korean peninsula is escalating, and the territory disputes over the South China Sea is still intensifying. China-U.S. relations are worse than they have been since the normalization of relations.¹ Will both the U.S. and China be able to maintain the healthy competition to avoid a war by managing the conflicts? How will the U.S. manage the new type of relations with a rising China? Why does the U.S. foreign strategy toward China need to change in order to live with China? There are speculations that a war between the U.S. and China is inevitable. This paper will attempt to challenge the view point through addressing the six questions in six sections: Why does the U.S. overreact to China's rise? Will President Trump take more confrontational approach toward China? Does Xi Jinping intend to beat the U.S.? Is China strong enough to go a war against the U.S.? Will the first shot be fired in the South China Sea? Will cyber-attacks trigger a war? This paper will conclude that although the stakes are as high as ever for the

United States and China to manage their relations, the conflicts between the two countries are manageable. Both the U.S. and China do not have any choice, but to understand each other and learn how to deal with their competitors. China-U.S. relations will be gradually getting better after the Trump administration works more with China.

2. Why Does the U.S. Overreact to China's Rise?

China threat theory is a byproduct of China's rise. As early as 1998, Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro in their book, *The coming conflict with China*, argue that war between China and the United States was a distinct possibility (Bernstein and Munro, 1998). In 2005, Robert D. Kaplan contended that whether or not there will be a Sino-American war is no longer a question. The only question is how the U.S. should fight China (Kaplan, 2005). John Mearsheimer warned that: "The United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war." (Ikenberry, 2007) According to Graham Allison, a war between China and the U.S. is unavoidable unless China is willing to give up its ambitions or the U.S. can accept becoming number two in the Pacific (Allison, 2017). All these predictions reflect the symptoms of U.S.'s anxiety and overwhelming concern about China in the new era.

The U.S. used to be the uncontested global superpower and by large the dominant power in Asia, leading in almost every aspect – security, trade, and regional participation. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the landscape of global power began to change, and the region witnessed the rise of China, India, and others. The U.S. has dominated in Asia over sixty years, and now the overall American influence is in decline (Cheng, 2013). Although the U.S. dominates in security, it is only a major actor of the region in trading, economy, and regional diplomacy.

The world power structure has begun to move from unipolarity to multipolarity (Ian, 2011: 13-28). Power transitions usually come with international conflicts. The rising power wants to gain more authority in the global system and the declining power is afraid of loss of its dominant position. The rise of a new power inevitably challenges the power balance of the international system. Fareed Zakaria believes that “when a new power rises, it inevitably disturbs the balance of power.” (Zakaria, 2007) In this sense, China’s rise has an immediate impact on every aspect of the U.S.

The “China threat” theory has spread throughout the West. Some believes China is a threat to the existing balance-of-power (Callahan, 2005: 701-714). In the world history, declining power has made three different choices in response to a rising power. First, declining power simply ignores a rising power. China ignored the European powers and Japan when they were emerging, leading to their defeat in the Opium Wars by Britain and the Sino-Japanese wars by Japan. Second, declining power contains a rising power. Spain and France tried to contain England in the eighteenth century, leading to a long series of bloodied wars. Third, declining power accepts a rising power. Britain was able to accept the United States’ growing global leadership role in the nineteenth century, which allowed Britain to maintain its legacy and prosperity (Foot, 2006: 77-94). Denny Roy suggests that qualitative changes in Chinese foreign policy should be expected if China grows from a medium-size power to a superpower (Roy, 1996: 758-771). While China is on the rise, what is the best choice for the U.S. to deal with China? Obviously, it is blind to ignore China’s rise. The containment policy is extremely expensive and dangerous for the U.S. (Etzioni, 2013). However, a growing number of U.S. policymakers and scholars believe that the U.S. engagement policy has failed to prevent China from threatening other countries and call for the U.S. to “actively shape

China's strategic choices by enhancing U.S. military capabilities and strengthening alliances to counterbalance against its growing strength." (Eisenman, 2016)

In the first decade of this century, the central goal of the U.S. foreign policy was to closely work with the international community to win the war on terrorism. Since U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq, the emphasis of the U.S. foreign policy has been shifted to Asia – the so-called "pivot to Asia"/Asian rebalance strategy. According to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to implement the policy, the U.S. should take six key lines of action: strengthening bilateral security alliances, deepening working relationships with emerging powers, including with China, engaging with regional multilateral institutions, expanding trade and investment, forging a broad-based military presence, and advancing democracy and human rights.

In 2014, the United States implemented the "pivot to Asia" of a new level. There are five basic evidences indicating that the U.S. foreign policy has focused on the region. First, United States Defense Reports highlight U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy. Second, the U.S. has deployed the most advanced weapon systems to enhance the U.S. military power in the frontier military bases and planned to deploy about 60% naval and air force in the Asia-Pacific by 2020. U.S. Army continues to strengthen its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region and increase military troops from 60,000 to 100,000 people. Third, the U.S. tries to scatter military forces in the region to avoid concentrating in the frontier military base, preventing the concentration of forces from suffering a heavy blow. Fourth, the U.S. helps its allies to enhance military effectiveness by establishing multilateral defense relations and military networks of collaboration. Fifth, the U.S. frequently organizes joint military exercises with its allies and partners in the region to maintain the U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Many American scholars

believe that the policy is a detailed military plan against China (Billington, 2013). James Holmes says that: “Yes, it is about China. It has to be.” (Holmes, 2012) If the U.S. continues to develop this policy, it would not help but to damage China-U.S. relations. But U.S. policymakers have not had clear idea how to understand and deal with China (Callahan, 2005: 701-714).

By contrast, China’s rise is guided by the slogan of “China Dream”. The conception of China dream is vague because it can be read from two opposite perspectives. Some see “China dream” as aiming to develop a harmonious world by adopting a strategy of less confrontation with the current world order, while the others view it as seeking more international power by re-writing the rules of the global community. The two perspectives are contradictory. The former is based on the accurate assessment of China’s domestic situation in a global context; and the latter is highly driven by Chinese nationalism mixed with victim mentality, which derives from the theory of China having suffered a century of humiliation. However, the Chinese official media interprets the China Dream in five aspects: developing win-win strategy, updating new framework of ASEAN Free Trade Area, maintaining non-interference policy, protecting the core national interests, and establishing a new model of great power relations with the U.S. It is worth noting that the principle of non-interference does not fit in the category of a world superpower, showing that China is lack of interest in seeking the status of world superpower. The five principles only reflect a hybrid of realism – protecting China’s core interest, including national integrity, territorial sovereignty, and the sole leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Chinese government has made it clear that the sole leadership of the CPC is the key to China’s core interest. This means that although Xi’s China Dream conflicts with Trump’s goal of “making America great again”, the top priority of

China's foreign policy is to serve its domestic politics instead of challenging the United States. Xi Jinping recently points out that there are thousand reasons for improving China-U.S. relations but there is not a single reason for ruining China-U.S. relations.

3. Will Donald Trump Take More Confrontational Approach toward China?

U.S. foreign policy is significantly influenced by American domestic politics, so U.S. foreign policy toward China has changed from time to time. In the past three decades, the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy toward China can be characterized as “cyclical ups and downs”. U.S. presidential candidates have always started to run presidential campaign centered on repudiating the previous regime's China policy. New administration usually tries to implement their new foreign policy strategy by essentially changing the course of his predecessor's policy. As a result, the new administration “creates new uncertainties for the U.S.-China relationship, damaging the U.S. interests, the new administration, after a period of dancing around always ends up making policy adjustments” (Zhao, 2012: 369-389).

George H.W. Bush had a good relationship with Beijing. Even after the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989, Bush wrote a letter to Deng Xiaoping assuring him that ties between China and the United States would not be harmed by “differences between friends”. (Osius, 2011: 125-135) During Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, Clinton criticized the Bush administration's deferential reaction to China's human rights violation. After becoming president, Clinton remained true to his words and took “tough on China” strategy that vastly differed from the Bush regime. Clinton aggressively repudiated his predecessor's stance on China, pushing his foreign policy to the opposite spectrum. During his

first year, the Clinton administration pressed down hard on China by issuing an executive order that revoked China's "most favoured nation" (MFN) status until certain human rights improvements were met. In reality, the Clinton administration was unable to make any progress with China's human rights stance. Instead, Clinton's hard policy on China proved to have a more detrimental effect on the U.S. than China because the U.S. missed out on billions of dollars in business contracts in China's emerging markets. Consequently, Clinton softened his voice and began to adopt a more moderate stance toward China by signing a joint statement with China to build a strategic partnership toward the twenty-first century. Practically, he divorced human rights issue from doing business with China.

When the George W. Bush Administration came into power in 2001, he intended to establish the United States as the more dominant power over China, suggesting that the Clinton administration made too many concessions to China. Adhering to a more hard-line approach, Bush outlined in an election campaign speech that "China should be seen as a competitor, not a partner and treated without ill will but without illusions." (Yu, 2009: 81-97) Bush's rhetoric helped him get elected. Subsequently, tensions rose to a boiling level between the two countries on April 1 in 2001 when a mid-air collision occurred between a Chinese jetfighter and a U.S. intelligence aircraft over the South China Sea. The September 11 terrorist attacks shifted U.S. interests from fighting communism to fighting terrorism. George W. Bush's foreign policy was much more emphasized on U.S. security. In response to the September 11 attack, the Bush administration created the Office of Homeland Security to ensure that the U.S. was protected from terrorist threats. Accordingly, a huge portion of the U.S. government budget went towards homeland security. The Bush Administration retreated from the strong rhetoric used in pre-election campaigns stating that China was

neither partner nor enemy because “U.S.-China relations are too complicated and too comprehensive to simply summarize in one word.” (Yu, 2009: 81-97) Then, he moved to a political stance to further engage with China while hedging against the possible threat of China’s rise. Bush was the first post-Cold War president to employ the hedging strategy, meaning that he was cooperative with China on a wide range of global challenges while criticizing China’s involvement with troublesome states. Within the framework of counter-terrorism, China and the U.S. were able to reach a wide consensus which laid down a solid foundation for the two countries to work together on many issues.

The Obama Administration countered Bush’s policy on China with a slogan of “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive”, signaling that they are reluctant to challenge China on issues of fundamental disagreement. Barack Obama established the line “more cooperation on more issues more often” which resonated with his campaign based on “change”. (Zhao, 2012: 369-389) However, like Bush, American domestic issues forced the Obama Administration to change its course. Many perceive Obama’s leniency as a sign of weakness (Ross, 2012). In addition, due to the fact that China is the largest foreign holder of U.S. debt, China expected the U.S. to make more concessions to their needs. Having found itself facing mismatched interests with China, the Obama Administration adjusted its policy. Instead of focusing on being “not Bush”, Obama has shifted its focus to re-energizing its relationship with its Asian allies – “pivot to Asia.”

During the president campaign in 2016, Donald Trump pointed out that Obama’s foreign policy toward China was too weak and soft. He publicly accused China of being America’s biggest abuser and stealing U.S. intellectual property and vowed that he will label China as currency manipulator and impose a 45% tariff on imports from China. After he was elected, he even made telephone conversation with Taiwan president

Tsai Ing-wen, shocking the Chinese people and the government. It seemed that Trump would put the entire basis of the China-U.S. relations in play and completely reverse Obama's foreign policy toward China. However, in 100 days after Trump sworn into the White House, he has backed away from the campaign promise saying that his administration will not label China a currency manipulator. During the Mar-a-Lago summit, Trump said he will have great relationship with Xi and believed that lots of very potentially bad problems will be going away. Obviously, the Trump administration's foreign policy toward China is returning to conventional pattern faster than previous administrations because Trump does not have any better choice, but to work with China to accomplish his work agenda, such as North Korea nuclear issue and economic development.

Clearly, the post-Cold War policy concerning China-U.S. relations has swung from one extreme to another. The history of the five U.S. administrations shows that the relationship between China and the U.S. is stable in the long term although each new president brings into office trumped-up rhetoric that lies at the completely opposite spectrum of the previous regime. The opposite rhetoric may have worked in getting the candidates elected into office, but it is too radically different to be accepted as policy. It is important to note that a reversion to a central approach is beneficial to all the five regimes. Both Bush and Obama have successfully utilized a hedge approach which helps the U.S. demonstrate the ability to defend its interests and work with its allies in the region without attempting to escalate the conflicts between the two countries. There is no doubt that the Trump administration is following the same pattern of U.S. foreign policy development no matter what he said during his election campaign. China-U.S. relations will be gradually getting better as time goes by.

4. Does Xi Jinping Intend To Beat the U.S.?

Xi Jinping has demonstrated himself as a foreign policy maker through giving speeches on China's foreign policy, traveling extensively in Asia, Europe, Africa and the U.S., hosting various international forums in Beijing, and attending Davos World Economic Forum in 2017. Many believe that Xi's foreign policy has shown greater proactivity and confidence since he became president in 2012. To understand the direction of China's foreign policy, two questions cannot be avoided: what is Xi's vision of the future of China-U.S. relations? Does his vision lead to a war against the U.S.?

First, Xi has tried to develop a new model of great power relations with the U.S. After China became the second largest world economy in 2010, it began to develop big power diplomacy. When Xi was a vice-president, he visited the U.S. in February 2012 and proposed the need to establish a new type of great power relations. In May 2012 President Hu Jintao officially proposed the new type of great power relations in the fourth U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Hu pointed out that "cooperation between China and the United States will bring enormous opportunities to the two countries and the whole world. China and the United States should be firmly committed to advancing the cooperative partnership and build a new type of relationship that is reassuring to both our peoples and people across the world." (Hu, 2012) In November 2012, in the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the new type of relations was adopted in the political report resolution.

Under Xi's administration, China has accelerated the expansion of international power by economic aid, military expansion, and exporting Chinese culture to fulfill the "China Dream". According to Xi, China must establish "big country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics".² In the meantime, China must be nice to its neighbors in Asia, but it should

adopt an active foreign policy to promote China's rejuvenation onto the global stage.³ In June 2013, during the Obama-Xi meeting at Sunnylands, Xi proposed the new concept directly to Obama and discussed the peaceful development promises. Xi's initiative has three action codes: China and the United States should strive for no confrontation, mutual respect for core interests, and win-win cooperation (Lai, 2015). Two months after Trump became president, Xi made a special trip to the U.S., showing that he was sincere and anxious in maintaining the stable relations with the U.S.

The U.S. officials have displayed diplomatic courtesy for Chinese interest in cooperating with the United States. In March 2017, the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told Xi Jinping in Beijing that "the U.S. side is ready to develop relations with China based on the principle of no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation" (Beech, 2017). U.S. scholars and politicians criticized him for repeating Chinese government platitudes and propaganda. Even Chinese foreign policy experts were surprised by his comments. Practically, the U.S. is not interested in the new type of great-power relations because the U.S. is more concerned about concrete issues of the relations instead of abstract principle. Although the meaning of this new concept remains unclear, Xi's proposal attempts to defuse tense relations, decrease strategic distrust between the two major powers, express the need for each country to respect the other's political and social systems, and at least bring short-term relief to the tense relationship. Bergsten states that: "At a minimum, creating a G-2 would limit the risk of bilateral disputes escalating and disrupting the U.S.-Chinese relationship and the broader global economy." (Bergsten, 2008: 57-69) The U.S. recognizes that the two countries have "reached broad agreement on China-U.S. relations, major international, and regional issues of shared interest, as well as on global issues."⁴ Both countries have also reached reciprocal

agreement to issue 10-year, multiple-entry visas for respective business travelers and tourists, and 5-year multiple-entry visas for students.

Second, Xi does not have a specific plan of how to fight the U.S. Workable foreign policy must be guided by diplomacy of ideas. Under the Mao Zedong regime, the Chinese government implemented the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence based on the reality that China was isolated by Western societies. In the post-Mao era, Deng Xiaoping incorporated the two basic principles into China's foreign policy: "*tao guang yang hui, you suo zuo wei*" (韜光養晦，有所作為) – keep a low profile and bide its time while getting something accomplished. Deng's diplomacy worked because the top priority of the CPC was to improve the living standard of the Chinese people. Hu Jintao introduced the concept of "harmonious world" as the principle of foreign policy to pursue better relations with neighboring countries, the so-called "Good Neighbor Policy", in Chinese "*mulin youhao zhengce*" (睦鄰友好政策). This idea helped Hu maintain peaceful relations with its neighbors and the U.S.

China remains an "autistic" nation and has always been bad at diplomatic strategy (Monk, 2012). China's foreign strategy for decades was minimal and practiced international nonintervention, lacking interest in world affairs, because the Chinese government was more concerned with domestic affairs, such as increasing its economy and quality of life for its people. In recent years, Chinese leaders have realized that China requires a more activist global strategy to fulfill its domestic needs (Economy, 2010: 145-152). Therefore, Beijing has launched the "go-out" strategy to fit the global norms. Xi has sought to elevate China by expanding trade and investment, creating new international institutions, and strengthening the military. The "One Belt One Road" is China's ambitious project, attempting to transform its development model, develop multiple trade relations, establish a new international trade

framework, and enhance its diplomatic power in the international community.

However, China has received strong setbacks while exercising its international ambitions. China failed to respond effectively to the crises in Libya and Syria (Economy, 2014), and experienced strong oppositions to its military expansion in the South China Sea. China lost its dominant position in pursuing a non-nuclear North Korea instead of being passively agreed to sign the sanctions resolution on North Korea proposed by the U.S. This is one of reasons for South Korea and the U.S. to reach an agreement in July 2016 that the U.S. will deploy an advanced missile defense system (THAAD) with the U.S. military stationed in South Korea to counter North Korea's missile threat, despite strong protests from China.⁵ The implementation of the agreement could harm China's national security from China's perspective. China is also having troubles with the "One Belt One Road" initiative and has a hard time to convince its counterparts to accept the "win-win strategy". The recent China and India military stand-off in Doklam in Sikkim is partially triggered by the "One Belt One Road". Apparently, neither "money diplomacy" nor "military diplomacy" works very well.

In democratic societies, independent think tanks and public opinions play important roles in decision-making process of foreign policy. In China, public opinion has little impact on foreign policy. There are about 500 think tanks in China, just next the U.S. in terms of the number. In a very real sense, due to the highly centralized political system, all China's think tanks are not independent, but affiliated with the government/Party or part of government/Party organs. According Chinese official report, 90% of research projects in social sciences and humanities funded by the government last year were about annotation of Xi's ideas. Because China does not have clear ideas of diplomacy, the Chinese saying of "crossing the river by feeling the stones" (*mozhe*

shitou guohe / 摸著石頭過河) can be used to describe the characteristics of China's current foreign policy implementation. China's next diplomatic move towards the U.S. and its neighbors will be largely affected by China's domestic politics and the attitudes of the international community towards China.

5. Is China Strong Enough To Go to a War against the U.S?

While China is on the rise, China's development has created serious domestic problems which prevent China from going to a war with the U.S. First of all, China's economic growth began to decelerate in 2011 and continued to fall in the subsequent years. China's growth rate was 6.8% in 2015 and 6.7% in 2016 based on official statistics, but the actual growth rate was about two percentage points lower than the official number (Gan, 2015). The growth rates of the Chinese economy is on the slowest in 25 years; China aims to lay off about six million workers from zombie enterprises over the next two to three years as part of efforts to curb industrial overcapacity; stock market is still in serious troubles after it crashed last year; and the bubble of housing market is ticking especially in big cities. In the post-Mar era, the legitimacy of the CPC has largely relied on its economic performance, and Deng, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao administrations significantly benefited from the steadily economic growth, but Xi's administration has done a poor job on economy, so fueled the dissatisfactions of the Chinese people and intensified social conflicts. Under this circumstance, the CPC is required to focus on domestic issues and put less effort into international issues.

Second, China's total military expenditure is six times less than that of the U.S. but the size of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is five times as that of the U.S. troops. The PLA has made great progress in modernizing its weapons. At the parade of the 90th anniversary of the

People's Liberation Army, China has displayed the country's latest military devices including its J-20 stealth fighter jet and DF-31AG advanced long-range missiles.⁶ Obviously Chinese military weapons still lag behind the U.S. The quality of military personnel plays critical roles in modern war. China has not been involved in military war since the war with Vietnam in the 1970s. Chinese military troops not only lack the experience of modern wars and also lack integrated military exercises. In addition, war-weariness is pervasive among Chinese military due to the consequences of the One-Child Policy. The psychological quality of the Chinese military does not favor a war with the U.S.

China's corruption in the armed forces is so pervasive that it has been shrinking China's influence in the global community. By 2015, sixteen senior military officers were under investigation for accusations of corruption. These officers are at the corps level or above. Two of them are former vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong. Military corruption deadly threatens China's security and degrades China's military capability in protecting its nation and contributes to the faith crisis of military troops. The government also fears Western societies releasing top secret information of Chinese leaders' scandals which could damage the CPC's legitimacy, e.g., Chinese corrupt officials' bank information is held in Western societies, so the CPC always tries to manage Chinese nationalism at home and military standoff abroad.

Third, the CPC is in a crisis of legitimacy. Xi's anticorruption campaign, on the one hand, helps him centralize power; on the other hand, it hurts a lot of people including officials, businessmen, and technocrats. He has realized his opposition is surrounding him and needs more power to fulfill his goals of governance. Ostensibly, Xi occupies more than ten top posts in the country's most powerful leadership bodies and it seems he has more power than Deng Xiaoping. Chinese media has

already called him “core” leader and the highest commander of the PLA. Actually, he does not have real power other than bearing more responsibilities. Although personality cult is growing around him, Xi’s policy and governance style are actually promoting opposition forces to be united together against him. When Xi is devoted to battle factions within the CPC, he might feel helpless in dealing with international issues by intensifying the confrontation with other countries.

In addition, Xi’s military reform is still in the implementation phase; it takes time to practice for a real war. Xi’s left-wing political ideology is also worsening his reputation and restricting his capability in handling foreign affairs. He is not a liberalist but a typical leftist. Ample evidences suggest that Xi is a 21st-century Mao (Bandow, 2015). He attacks liberal voices, censors the Internet, prohibits common citizens and party members from commenting on the central party, rejects the notion of constitutionalism, denounces universal value system, justifies his governance by using Mao’s slogans, and continues to reject reforming the Chinese political system. The consequences of all these actions have greatly decreased his capability in handling international issues. If China went to a war against the United States, it could cause great internal turmoil and even risk its regime collapse. In this sense, Susan Shirk calls China “fragile superpower” (Shirk, 2006), and David Shambaugh defines China as a “partial power” (Shambaugh, 2013).

6. Will the First Shot Be Fired in the South China Sea?

According to Pew poll, large majorities of citizens in nations throughout Asia believe China’s territorial disputes with its neighbors will lead to war (Allison, 2014). Is this a real alarm? The South China Sea is the maritime heart of Southeast Asia making up two thirds the size of the combined land territory of all the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) states. It is home to key channels of global commerce, which has led China and the United States to a standoff in the South China Sea. While the U.S. believes that the issues of the South China Sea are an important part of the “pivot to Asia”, China asserts that it has the sovereign right to protect Chinese territory and claims the largest portion of territory defined by the “nine-dash line”. The Republic of China (ROC) created the line which first appeared officially on the ROC map in 1947. The ROC stated that the line was created to portray China’s historic water limit that was under the jurisdiction of the ROC. The nine-dash line stretches hundreds of miles south and east from China’s most southerly province of Hainan, taking up approximately eighty percent of the South China Sea.

China has long felt vulnerable from the sea since the First Opium War (1839-1842), so the post-Mao China seeks to reduce that vulnerability by extending a ring of maritime control around China’s periphery and exploring natural resources in order to solidify its leadership in the region (Dutton, 2014: 7-18). Almost the entire energy-rich South China Sea China has claimed and it “has been transforming reefs into artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago and building airfields and other facilities on some of them.”⁷ Xi Administration has accelerated building military facilities on its artificial islands in the South China Sea. Some believe China’s action of placing missile launchers and landing of a military jet on a man-made island in the disputed waters of the South China Sea have escalated the conflicts in the region.⁸

However, the South China Sea is a vital interest to the United States, and it symbolizes the United States’ commitment to its Asia-Pacific alliance partners (McDevitt, 2013: 175-187). The U.S. is “worried that China may be gearing up to launch dredging operations around Scarborough Shoal just 125 miles off the Philippine coast, a highly

provocative move that could send tensions soaring between Beijing and America's allies in Manila. Also, there are signs that Chinese vessels may be surveying the area for another land reclamation project.” (McLeary, Rawnsley, and Luce, 2016) There are two main reasons for the United States' interest in the region. The U.S. believes every country has private waters right extending 12 nautical miles of the coast, but all countries have the right to enjoy freedom of navigation in international water (Fravel, 2012: 2). The U.S. is also interested in the region economically because of a great amount of trade that passes through the waters each year. According to Fravel: “More than 5 trillion dollars worth of trade passes through these waters each year, including more than 1 trillion with the United States.” (*ibid.*) In order to maintain maritime power, the U.S. “must have ready access to bases and the resources necessary for sustainment.” (Dutton, 2014: 7-18)

The U.S. has made it very clear that “no state may arbitrarily seek to lay claim to swathes of the ocean – and reefs do not exert any justification for territorial claims, even if one builds an artificial island atop of it.” (Cheng, 2015) At the East Asia Summit, President Obama reaffirmed the U.S. national interest in the freedom of navigation, unimpeded lawful commerce, peace and stability, and respect for international law in the South China Sea.⁹ In November 21, 2015, Obama announced that the United States would continue to assert its freedom of navigation rights in the sea. The U.S. did this by sending navy and B-52 bombers near some of the islands. Although China warns that a minor incident could spark war in the South China Sea if the United States did not stop its provocative act in the disputed waterway,¹⁰ the U.S. asserts that: “We do operations like that all the time around the world. That will continue for us.”¹¹

Will the tension between the U.S. and China over the South China Sea be escalated to higher level? John McCain criticizes Obama's policy

toward the South China Sea as too “risk averse”, and suggests that “America needs more than symbolic gestures in the South China Sea” (McCain, 2016). In April 2016, Adm. Harry Harris, the U.S. military’s top commander in the Pacific suggested a more confrontational approach to counter and reverse China’s strategy in the South China Sea, and proposed a muscular U.S. response to China’s island-building that may include launching aircraft and conducting military operations within 12 miles of these man-made islands, as part of an effort to stop what he has called the “Great Wall of Sand”. Rex Tillerson warns that China must stop the island-building and should not be allowed access to islands it has built in the contested South China Sea. The Trump administration has resumed the freedom of navigation operation by sending destroyer to the South China Sea. This indicates that Washington challenges Beijing’s ambitions in the South China Sea and will not remain passive while Beijing is expanding its maritime reach (Valencia, 2017).

The conflicts between the U.S. and China over the South China Sea are still manageable. First, the South China Sea is not a flashpoint. According to Brendan Taylor, a flashpoint is a geographic area that has the ongoing potential to erupt into a sudden and violent conflict. A flashpoint consists of three elements: exhibiting a political dimension, its proximity in relation to other countries, and if they threaten to involve more powerful forces in the international community. The South China Sea does not entirely fulfill all these elements because its strategic geographic location works against it. The South China Sea is less proximate, and it does not engage the vital interest of Asia’s great powers. The South China Sea dispute concentrates greatly only on the ASEAN states involved and the conflict prioritizes the relationship between the United States and China along with Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan (Taylor, 2014: 99-111). U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN Nina Hachigian has urged all parties to exercise

self-restraint on activities that could complicate or escalate the disputes.¹² Although the U.N. Permanent Court of Arbitration's verdict is in favor of the Philippines, China and Philippine has reached an agreement that they will not make provocative statements. This agreement could potentially deescalate the tension between China and the other claimants of South China Sea and reduce the possibility of escalating the tension between the U.S. and China as well. After the ruling by the international tribunal U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice's trip to China clearly indicates that the mutual interests between China and the U.S. are more important than the conflicts between the two nations.

Second, the core of U.S. policy over the South China Sea is not to create conflicts but to maintain stability in the region. The original policies of the U.S. for the South China Sea were made in the 1990s and have been modified recently. The U.S. policy persistently opposes the use of force to resolve competing claims; insists on maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea to avoid destabilizing action, maintaining freedom of navigation to promote prosperity of the entire Asia-Pacific region, respect of international laws and principles; and takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea.¹³ According to international laws, the United States just cannot throw up a blockade of U.S. navy to stop China. If the United States was to take this measure, it could be looked upon as a bully.

Third, the Trump administration will unlikely continue to play the escalation "playbook" even under domestic political pressure. The recent U.S. freedom of navigation challenged not only China, but also 12 others on navigation rights, including India, Indonesia, Iran, Libya, Malaysia, the Maldives, Oman, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Alexander, 2016).¹⁴ The urgent task of U.S. foreign policy is not about South China Sea, but

about North Korea's nuclear threat. The U.S. needs China's help to solve the rising nuclear tension with North Korea. Moreover, the U.S. and China have a lot of common issues to work together. The conflict between the U.S. and China will continue but in a greater extent it will be verbal rather than practical. The U.S. would prefer not to rock the South China Sea boat (Larter, 2016).

7. Will Cyber-Attacks Trigger a War?

In the information age, on a larger scale, countries are able to remotely hurt each other by hacking into it and securing valuable information including military documents. Cyber-attacks from foreign countries are able to inflict computer virus that can disrupt and freeze networks from traffic, electricity, financial information, and mass media (Chansoria, 2012: 105-127). Cyber-attackers can launch coordinated offensive against their enemies and pose serious threats to national security. Adam Segal points out that "cyber-attacks would be used in a military conflict. Theoretically, it would allow them to concentrate resources in one place and create specialized forces, and might make it easier to plan joint operations." (Hayward, 2015) In this sense, cyber-attacks will become a key component of military action, and possibly play a large part in the next major conflict between China and the United States.

Some believe that the Chinese government is highly engaged in cyber-activity – "asymmetric warfare". Allegedly, in order to win wars in the future, China places an emphasis on strengthening and utilizing information-warfare as a means to fight enemies (Chansoria, 2012: 105-127). China's cyber-attacks attempt to obtain valuable government files on the U.S. current military strategies and future plans. The U.S. has suffered from thousands of accounts of cyber-warfare from China and the issue has been growing steadily (Segal, 2013: 38-45). Cyber-attacks

may heighten tensions between China and the United States, but they are unlikely to trigger a war between China and the U.S. First of all, it is important to understand that there is no legal definition as to when a cyber-attack warrants the right to declare a war. Since the legal definitions of cyber-attacks and how a country should defend itself are not clearly laid out, it is hard to determine what a country should do to protect itself. The U.S. legally cannot declare war on a country that is stealing solely information.

Secondly, it is difficult to identify where a cyber-attack comes from. White House Officials have acknowledged that the government is unable to accurately identify who an attacker is in cyberspace. If enough forensic resources are used for a specific incident, it can be possible to identify where the attack was originated (Taylor, 2014: 99-111). The U.S. is able to locate a certain region where the attacks come from, but the U.S. cannot declare war against China based on the fact that the U.S. are receiving cyber-attacks from a certain province or city within China (Segal, 2013: 38-45). This means that the U.S. is unable to directly prove that the Chinese government supports these attacks against the U.S. because the attacks could be conspired by the government or they could be from third parties. Due to the fact that the Chinese government repeatedly states that cyber-warfare is illegal in China and that they do not condone cyber-attacks against the United States, it is hard to blame the Chinese government for the attacks and initiate a war on China.

Third, the CPC is mainly interested in using cyber-technology to consolidate its control over the Chinese cyberspace and eliminate its opposition. Ethan Gutmann observes that: “According to Google, the Gmail break-ins were not aimed at individuals with military or business connections, but at Chinese journalists and Western human rights activists.” (Gutmann, 2010: 70-79) This suggests that China largely exercises its cyber-muscles to consolidate its control over online

activities in its own territory and silence opposition that challenges its authority instead of using cyber-strength to launch large-scale cyber-attacks against the U.S.

Fourth, small-scale cyber-attacks happen for years, but no major conflicts between China and the U.S. have arisen. John Hayward believes that “Cyber Pearl Harbor has already happened, and all that remains is to conduct a damage assessment.” (Hayward , 2015) In 2014, after the U.S. charged five Chinese army officers with hacking into private-sector American companies, China still denied the charges and warned that the case would harm U.S.-China relations. The U.S. would most likely put sanctions on China as a punishment for stealing intellectual property through cyber-attacks, if confrontation was needed due to cyber-attacks. However, it is going to be difficult to find meaningful sanctions to impose.¹⁵ American experts would worry that sanctions imposed on China would further intensify the strain on the two countries’ relations. Practically, the U.S. should invest more in and increase cyber-security in order to allow itself to be protected.

8. Conclusions: The U.S. and China Do Not Have Any Choice, but To Work Together

The above analysis shows that conflicts between China and the United States are real, but is not imminent. Without a doubt, a lot of destabilizing factors lie between the two countries. According to Yan Xuetong, “there are more mutually unfavorable interests than mutually favorable ones between China and the United States.” (Yan, 2010: 263-292) However, it is a misconception that the importance of China-U.S. relations is based on the two nations’ common interests. In fact, mutual unfavorable interests make contribution to stable relationship. Yan argues that “instability is an important characteristic of the China-US

relationship and embodies that superficial nature of the friendship between China and the United States.” (*ibid.*)

When the countries get closer to an armed confrontation, one of the most important questions that cannot be avoided is: who most likely strikes first during the military confrontation between the two countries (Friedberg, 2014). It seems that both China and the U.S. have numerous reasons to strike first which obviously is attributable to a security dilemma and intensified military competition between the two countries. Although this military competition could grow significantly in the near future, there are a number of available measures that could help to manage some of its worst aspects (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014: 52-91). One of the most important measures is to adopt a less confrontational approach and “turn their conceptualized model of a zero-sum game into a win-win strategy in order to enhance bilateral interactions” (Zhang and Zheng, 2012: 623-636). Bruce Jones believes that: “If the United States would cooperate with China, they would reciprocate.” (Jones, 2014: 156)

There are three conditions that can lead to win-win cooperation between the two countries. First, the United States needs to realize that China will surpass the U.S. sooner or later in order to develop a better model of great power relations. Lee Kuan Yew believed that “Americans have to eventually share their preeminent position with China. The U.S. cannot stop China’s rise. It just has to live with a bigger China.” (Allison, Blackwill and Wyne , 2012) Yet, the U.S. still treats China as inferior, which has created the dilemma the U.S. is facing today. Second, a healthy competition would be the most important for sustaining a stable relationship. Henry Kissinger wrote, “The inevitable tendency to impinge on each other should not be equated with a conscious drive to contain or dominate, so long as both can maintain the distinction and calibrate their actions accordingly.” (Kissinger, 2012) Third, both

countries should engage one another properly rather than isolate each other. At present, both countries are just playing each other like a game of chess and creating levels of mistrust (Sutter , 2009: 189-216). Strategic trust must be based on mutual respect. Only a deep understanding of differences and early action to bring great powers together will likely enable the United States and China to avoid a war (Rosecrance and Miller, 2014). It is not necessary for the U.S. to agree with every aspect of China, but the U.S. should learn to listen to and how to live with China. Meanwhile, the Chinese government must “improve the transparency of its military affairs, so as to reduce uncertainty and lessen the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation.” (Kissinger , 2012)

The cooperation includes various aspects but military and economic cooperation are essential. In November of 2014 Xi Jinping proposed again “a new type of military relations” when he met then U.S. President Barack Obama.¹⁶ China hoped to open high-level talks between the two countries to avoid any conflict between the two.¹⁷ Defense departments of the two countries have signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on establishing a mutual reporting mechanism on major military operations and a code of safe conduct on naval and air military encounter between the two sides. The MOU will help the two countries smoothly communicate, deepen exchanges, mutual trust and cooperation, and conduct more joint trainings and drills. The current military cooperation is still not enough to stop incidents over China’s nearshore waters. Recently, a Chinese fighter jet intercepted a U.S. Navy Poseidon sub-hunter over the South China Sea. This was not the first incident involving U.S. and Chinese military aircraft and vessels nor is it likely to be the last.

Northeast Asia is home to three of the world’s 11 largest economies. The U.S. influence in Northeast Asia has decreased while China is

sharing this economic power with the U.S (Christensen, 2006: 81-126) Economy might be the daily currency of power. This means that China has leverage over the U.S. which can be applied to other issues. Some scholars have conceptualized a “bipolar” structure in Asia: in economy, regional countries increasingly depend on China or at least seek cooperation with China; in security, many still rely upon the U.S. to provide protections. China is playing a leadership role already in the region. China is the new indispensable nation. More robust economic integration between the two countries will serve U.S. geopolitical interests and minimize the possibility of conflicts between the two countries (Tellis, 2013: 109-124).

Finally, the U.S. should promote China’s democratization while deepening military and economic cooperation. It is wise to induce China to become more democratic and respect the human rights, encourage China to become a responsible country, and promote China’s democratization. There are some cases of democracies using armed conflicts to settle territorial disputes. Pakistan-India, Ecuador-Peru, Thailand-Cambodia are examples. Some argue that new democracies are even more prone to war as their leaders may appeal to nationalism to win elections. However, the empirical evidence is in favor of the proposition that democratic states have not initiated and are not likely to initiate interstate wars against each other, are about 99% less likely to become involved in wars than autocratic states and are 100% less likely to become involved in wars with each other. History concludes that “no wars have been fought between independent nations with elective governments between 1789 and 1941.” (Ray, 1998: 27-46)

Notes

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