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## The Asia Pivot, Our Dysfunctional China Policy, Japan and the Upcoming Abe-Obama Summit

By: Stephen Harner – January 29, 2013

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Encomia to Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State are focusing on her style and diligence, not on accomplishments, which are few, let alone grand strategic initiatives, of which there were none, or at least none that lasted more than a few hopeful months.

As viewed from the White House, it seems that Clinton's greatest contribution—as described in an article by Paul Richter in the January 28 Los Angeles Times—was “insisting on no infighting between her loyalists at the State Department and Obama's team.”

“President Obama has tightly controlled foreign policy in the last four years—more so even than his recent predecessors,” writes Richter. Obama's appointment of Hillary—“a hard worker and team player”—was clearly the most inspired and successful of his first term.

Getting beyond the superficial to the substantive, that U.S. foreign policy has been rudderless, lacking (or changing) direction, and devoid of any strategic plan under President Obama has long been painfully apparent, and nowhere more so than toward East Asia, ostensibly the region identified as America's vital strategic national interest, to which we are “pivoting” our unchallengeable military power.

East Asia is a bit vague. The two countries in Asia that really count for the U.S. from either a strategic geopolitical and economic standpoint are Japan and China. Especially China. I will assert that the record of the Obama presidency and Hillary tenure at State in formulating a workable strategic plan for adjusting to new and largely benign regional developments and trends and fashioning and implementing policies to advance the strategy against either China or Japan—or more correctly in respect of both, because U.S.-China-Japan relations are one great undulating feedback loop of influences, emotions, and interests—has been one of failure, if not dangerously backsliding retrogression.

We can start with the ‘pivot’. Writing in the November/December 2012 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Boston College professor of political science and associate at the John K. Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University, Robert S. Ross, elaborates why the ‘pivot’—as a counterpoint to perceived Chinese assertiveness—is both unnecessary and counterproductive.

Ross shows that the ‘pivot’—with its emphasis on military force and strengthening of post-WWII and Cold War alliances—evidences nothing so much as a simplistic, insensible, seemingly almost inertial impulse, that can hardly be expected to produce anything but the opposite of the intended result, if the intended result is a workable longer term *modus vivendi* with China. What seems to be at work here is a Pentagon bureaucracy and military special interest-driven attempt to capture negotiating “high ground.” That the strategy prevailed suggests to me

the absence of any heavyweight East Asian strategic thinkers in Hillary's "team player" State Department or in Obama's anti-strategic, political White House.

For a longer and in many ways better critique of U.S. East Asian policy I recommend Cato Institute Policy Analysis Paper No. 717, dated January 8, 2013, entitled "China, America, and the Pivot to Asia," by Justin Logan. Logan writes about "a dangerous contradiction at the heart of America's China policy." Logan chronicles the evolution since the presidency of George Bush Sr. of the U.S. "engagement" policy toward China which, and particularly from the Clinton presidency, has been increasingly combined with an elementally contradictory policy of geopolitical/military containment. Combine the words of engagement and containment and you get "congagement." Writes Logan, "Congagement for all intents and purposes has been America's China policy since at least the end of the Cold War."

Logan's summary paragraph on "congagement" warrants quoting at length (my bracketed note and italics):

"U.S. foreign policy in Asia is plagued by three problems: First, Washington's policy centers on a contradiction: making China more powerful while seeking to make it act as though it is weak [and will remain so]. The 'containment' and 'engagement' aspects of the policy countervail one another. Second, the policy of 'reassuring' out allies forces the United States to carry a disproportionate share of the growing burden of containing China. Finally, although Washington agrees with the pessimists that China's growing military power is a problem, *no one has specified how precisely even a very militarily powerful China would directly threaten U.S. national security.*"

There is so much in Logan's paper that deserves appreciation. Just one example: pointing out that roughly 40 percent of China's oil comes by sea, and that China at present does not control the routes through which that oil passes. For alarmists about the Chinese naval buildup, the question is under what possible regional or global security system would China remain comfortable with this level of strategic and economic vulnerability. It would certainly not be a system of continued U.S.-centered regional military alliances ever more clearly aimed at containing China.

This blog is mainly about Japan and Japan's future. The presentation above is required because in myriad ways—both malevolent and benign—Japan is currently bound by its geopolitical and security relationship with the U.S., as well as by ties with China, and—most critically now—by evolving geopolitical and strategic relations between Washington and Beijing.

Prime Minister Abe will finally get his audience with President Obama in the White House on February 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup>. High on Abe's agenda will be U.S. support for Japan's territorial claims in the East China Sea and strong reassurances of immutability of the U.S.-Japan security "alliance."

He will not get the first of desires, and I wonder how long a Japanese leader will be getting the second. I believe the contradictions and elemental dysfunctionality of today's U.S. policy toward China will become undeniable and that change may very well begin during Obama's term. U.S. national interests require a new paradigm for strategic relations with China. Inevitably, this means also a new paradigm for strategic relations with Japan.