

Washington's Clumsy China Containment Policy

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Ted Galen Carpenter | November 30, 2011

Although U.S. officials have insisted for years that they do not regard China's rise to great-power status as a threatening development, Washington's statements and actions increasingly belie those assurances. Any doubt on that point disappeared following President Obama's November 17 speech in Canberra, Australia. In his address to the Australian parliament, Obama boldly asserted that "the United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay." Observers in Australia and throughout the region interpreted that comment as sending a message to China that the United States was not about to quietly relinquish its hegemony in East Asia and let the PRC become the leading power.

The Canberra speech was not the only measure that suggested that Washington was adopting a harder line toward Beijing on security issues. Just hours before his address to parliament, Obama announced that the United States would send military aircraft and as many as 2,500 Marines to northern Australia over the next few years to develop a training hub to assist allies and protect American interests throughout the region.

The next day, while attending an East Asian economic summit in Bali, the president went out of his way to emphasize the importance of the U.S. defense alliance with the Philippines and pledged to strengthen that relationship. His comment followed a blunt statement from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton regarding the ongoing dispute between China and several of its neighbors (including the Philippines) over territorial claims in the South China Sea. "Any nation with a claim has a right to exert it," Clinton stated during a visit to Manila on November 16, "but they do not have a right to pursue it through intimidation or coercion." She [added](#) that "the United States will always be in the corner of the Philippines and we will stand and fight with you." Although the latter remark could

be interpreted merely as a restatement of the rationale for the six-decade-old mutual-defense treaty, given the secretary's comments about the South China Sea dispute Beijing could certainly view her statement as a specific warning regarding that issue.

Those moves, along with previous efforts to strengthen cooperative military ties with other traditional allies such as South Korea and Japan and one-time U.S. adversaries such as Vietnam, have all the earmarks of a rather unsubtle containment policy directed against China. It is a foolish strategy that will complicate and perhaps permanently damage the crucial U.S.-China relationship. Perhaps even worse, it is a containment strategy that is long on symbolism and short on substance, thereby managing to be simultaneously provocative and ineffectual.

Take the U.S. decision to send 2,500 Marines to Australia. It is hard to imagine a scenario in which such a small deployment would be militarily useful. If there is a security contingency somewhere in East Asia, it is likely to be decided by air and naval power, not a meager force of Marines. Yet, while militarily useless, such a deployment conveys a hostile message to Beijing, thereby managing to antagonize the Chinese.

A similar conclusion is warranted with regard to the Obama administration's transparent effort to revitalize the nearly moribund alliance with the Philippines. That chronically misgoverned, third-rate military power would hardly make a good security partner in any crisis. Yet by siding with a country that is deeply embroiled with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea, the United States once again appears to be going out of its way to antagonize Beijing.

That would be an ill-advised approach under the best of circumstances. But to embrace a containment policy—especially one that is primarily bluster and symbolism—when Washington badly needs China to continue funding the seemingly endless flow of U.S. Treasury debt verges on being dim-witted. It's never a good idea to anger one's banker. And one can assume that Beijing is watching U.S. actions, not just the pro-forma assurances that the United States wants good relations and does not regard China as a threat. Those assurances ring increasingly hollow, and one can assume that Chinese leaders will react accordingly. That does not bode well for the future of the U.S.-China relationship.