

America's Pivot: One Big Contradiction

By: Justin Logan – January 25, 2013

"If Washington isn't comfortable with a more powerful China...making China wealthier by trading with it doesn't make much sense."

Particularly among Asia scholars, there is broad support in Washington for a pivot to Asia in general, and U.S. China policy in particular. Unfortunately, there are two central flaws in U.S. Asia policy that promise big problems for America down the road.

The first problem is that Washington cannot figure out what it wants from China. Washington supports engaging China economically, and even takes credit for China's economic growth. According to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "China has prospered as part of the open and rules-based system that the United States helped to build and works to sustain."

At the same time, Washington is ringing China with an array of bilateral alliances and partnerships, all of which are more or less anti-China. It is not paranoid for Chinese to view this as a policy of military containment. When pressed on the containment question, U.S. policy officials offer absurd responses like that from Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in June of last year. According to Panetta, the pivot "is not about containment of China." Rather, Panetta stated, it is about the challenge of humanitarian assistance and needs; the challenge of dealing with weapons of mass destruction that are proliferating throughout the world; and dealing with narco-trafficking, and dealing with piracy; and dealing with issues that relate to trade and how do we improve trade and how do we improve lines of communication.

Would any American accept such a Chinese rationale for deploying 60 percent of PLAN assets to the Western Hemisphere? Dealing with humanitarian assistance and needs, stifling nuclear proliferation, suppressing narco-traffickers, and dispatching pirates do not require more than half the U.S. Navy. Even Richard Armitage, former deputy secretary of state, knows this is nonsense: "When the administration says it's not about China, it's *all* about China. China knows this." If the success of America's Asia policy relies on Chinese elites believing our official rationale, the policy is in trouble.

But the more basic problem is that economic engagement is working at cross purposes with military containment. If Washington isn't comfortable with a more powerful China demanding a greater say over Asian security issues, making China wealthier by trading with it doesn't make much sense. By the same token, if Washington supports the robust trading relationship that helps narrow the relative power gap between the two countries, why contain it, especially considering that the trading makes the containing costlier?

When I have raised these concerns with U.S. policy officials, they brush off the reasoning as crude and simplistic, but they have little response beyond that. A normal formulation is that

America welcomes a “strong, responsible, and prosperous” China that plays a “constructive role” in world politics. “Responsible” and “constructive” go undefined in these responses, however, negating much of their value. Would a responsible China demand control over its sea lines of communication? Would it be constructive for China to continually escalate its demands on Taiwan for reunification?

Or to put it differently, does Washington wish to grade China on these matters the way it would grade itself? Was the Iraq war responsible? Are America’s dozens of formal treaty allies constructive? If so, would Chinese alliances with say, Cuba and Venezuela also be constructive? Double standards and fuzzy thinking are at the center of the pivot.

The second major problem with the pivot is that instead of playing the role of offshore balancer, monitoring the balance in Asia and ensuring that no power militarily dominates the region, Washington insists on making China’s rise primarily about U.S.-China competition.

In part, this is a consequence of Washington’s hub-and-spokes system of alliances in Asia. As Georgetown’s Victor Cha, who worked on Asia policy in the National Security Council of George W. Bush, points out, the hub-and-spokes system of alliances in Asia was designed on the basis of what he calls a “powerplay” rationale, in which the United States created a number of asymmetric, bilateral alliances in order, in each case, to “exert maximum control over [its] smaller ally’s actions.” Further, Cha writes, Washington sought to “amplify U.S. control and minimize any collusion among its alliance partners.”

Whatever the logic of infantilizing America’s Asian clients during the Cold War, that logic falls short today. Put bluntly, Asian states have a lot more at stake in China’s growing power. Western analysts like Ian Bremmer and David Gordon argue that the U.S. needs Japan as its “best ally” in Asia, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe thinks that “the U.S. needs Japan as much as Japan needs the U.S.”

This is exactly wrong. Japan needs the United States far more than Washington needs Tokyo. Without America, Japan would have to scramble to increase its defense spending and strengthen its posture dramatically, possibly including developing nuclear weapons, or else risk putting its sovereignty in even greater jeopardy than it is today. Without Japan, American sovereignty would not be in danger. Although Japan is a friendly state, an important trading partner, and like-minded about China, it has far more at stake when it comes to China’s rise, and ought to be reminded of this more often.

When it comes to free riding on U.S. military exertions, Tokyo is hardly the worst offender. This year, after a decade of cuts, Tokyo has proposed increasing defense spending by close to 2 percent. Although one percent of Japan’s GDP is not akin to America’s 4 percent of GDP in absolute terms, \$53 billion is a fair amount to be spending on defense, particularly given Japan’s appropriate concentration on the Maritime Self-Defense Force. Still this figure is dwarfed by China’s budget both in absolute terms—the best estimates are that China’s budget is between \$150-160 billion per annum, depending on currency estimates—and as a percentage of GDP.

One can hardly fault Japan for spending less than China on defense overall, but the fact that it spends less as a percent of GDP should frustrate Americans—who, after all, are bound by treaty to defend Japan.

If Washington were to create some distance between itself and its allies and partners in the region, they would likely spend more on their own defense and collaborate with each other more, independently from the United States. In a recent paper published by the Cato Institute, I deal with the three most common objections to this reasoning: that existing allies cannot balance against China effectively on their own; that they could do so but would refuse to; and finally that if they could and did balance on their own, this would have worse consequences than keeping Washington as the Asian balancer of first resort.

In time, however, U.S. policymakers are going to be forced to rethink the contradiction at the core of its Asia policy. As China continues to narrow the relative balance of power, it will become more and more difficult for Washington to constrain China's behavior. If states in the region bank on the next 60 years looking like the last 60, the region and the world could be headed for trouble.