POLICYBRIEF

DEALING WITH A RISING CHINA

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SUMMARY

Washington and Beijing both consider good bilateral relations to be vital, but their growing strategic rivalry has the potential to evolve into mutual antagonism. Top leaders on both sides see building a new type of U.S.-China relationship as necessary to avoid a drift toward confrontation. Yet the competition of capabilities now under way between the Chinese and U.S. military forces in the Pacific does not conform to the strategic goal, articulated by both sides, of striking a stable and mutually acceptable balance between cooperation and competition. Active measures are needed by leaders in both capitals to resolve this discrepancy between policy and action.

THE POLICY CONTEXT: SUSTAINABLE U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH EAST ASIA

The United States and China are both in the process of selecting the leaders who will guide their respective countries for the next few years. These leaders will face a host of daunting domestic and foreign issues that will demand their attention. None is more important than the task of finding ways to block the current drift of U.S.-China relations toward strategic rivalry. If both countries do not properly address this drift, it will become more difficult, perhaps dangerously so, to preserve the climate of peace and prosperity that has fostered China's rise and made East Asia such a dramatic success story.

The U.S. strategy of rebalancing in East Asia, as reflected in increased U.S. attention to the region, particularly Southeast Asia, is part of a coherent U.S. policy approach. The policy does not seek to contain China but hopes to restore the region's confidence that the United States, despite its budget difficulties, is committed to maintaining a robust regional presence. With the conspicuous exception of China, this approach has been broadly welcomed in East Asia, although not without underlying concerns.

China's more assertive behavior following the 2008 financial crisis increased neighboring countries' desire for the United States to continue to play a balancing role. However, these same countries worry that the United States may go too far in provoking China by trumpeting U.S. determination to pivot back into East Asia and to reassert a leadership role. In addition, America's closest friends and allies in the region share the concern that the United States, distracted by its

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domestic difficulties, will lack the staying power to remain fully engaged in East Asia.

This ambivalence underscores the fact that the credibility of U.S. policy in East Asia rests to a significant degree on the perception in Asian capitals of how effectively Washington is managing its relations with Beijing. East Asians want the United States sufficiently engaged to deter China from using its growing military capabilities in inappropriate ways. At the same time, they do not want the United States to rely excessively on the military component of its regional presence, which could have an undesired polarizing effect. Above all, these countries fear that unconstrained U.S.-China competition could make China a more dangerous neighbor and increase pressures on them to choose between China and the United States, a choice they do not want to make.

These considerations underline the importance of using measured rhetoric in defining U.S. regional policy. In contrast to the Cold War era, countries in East Asia are seeking a sustainable U.S. political, economic, and military presence in the region. They do not want a robust affirmation of U.S. leadership, which would highlight regional rivalry between China and the United States. Washington also should show respect for the concept of centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and not appear to challenge the leading role played by the ASEAN countries in creating a new regional architecture over the past decade and a half.

THE POLICY CHALLENGE: CREATING A NEW TYPE OF BILATERAL GREAT POWER RELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA

The U.S. rebalancing strategy does not address the principal challenge in managing U.S. relations with a rapidly rising China: how to deal with the destructive dynamic created when a rising power contests the positions of an established power. The governments of both China and the United States are aware of the lessons from history on this question and are determined not to let history repeat itself.

On a number of public occasions in 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has spoken of the need to find a new answer to the ancient question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet. As she put it, "The United States is attempting to work with a rising power to foster its rise as an active contributor to global security, stability, and prosperity while also sustaining and securing American leadership in a changing world." She added that "We are trying to do this without entering into unhealthy competition, rivalry, or conflict." In her view, China and the United States "are, together, building a model in which we strike a stable and mutually acceptable balance between cooperation and competition." This new circumstance, in her words, requires "adjustments in our thinking and in our actions on both sides of the Pacific."[1]

The United States is not the only country that is talking in this fashion. China's top foreign policy official, State Councilor Dai Bingguo, has spoken in very similar terms. He has emphasized the imperative of building a new type of China-U.S. relationship so that the two countries can break what he called the "iron-clad law" of history that dooms established powers and rising powers to "go to war, hot or cold alike." He has also acknowledged that this new type of relationship should balance competition and cooperation. In his words, it "is impossible for China and the United States not to

have any competition. But such competition should be healthy and galvanizing to each other. It should be understood in the context of cooperation."

Both countries, in short, have defined a common goal of creating a new type of relationship that strikes a balance between cooperation and competition. If they fail in this endeavor, they will be hard put to steer clear of the dangerous precedents of the past.

THE STRATEGIC PROBLEM

This need to strike a balance between cooperation and competition is the heart of the strategic problem. Both Washington and Beijing consider good bilateral relations to be vital. But their growing strategic rivalry has the potential to evolve into mutual antagonism. A stronger China will undoubtedly see itself as again becoming the central player in East Asia. The United States, for its part, has long been a Pacific power with formal alliances and strategic ties throughout the region. As successive U.S. presidents have made clear—including, most recently, President Barack Obama during his November 2011 visit to the region—the United States intends to remain actively engaged in East Asia.

The question for the leaders of both countries is whether they can find a solution to this conundrum that lies at the heart of the bilateral ties between Washington and Beijing. This solution will be the key to building the new type of U.S.-China relationship that top leaders on both sides see as necessary to avoid a drift toward confrontation.

Where do we stand in this process? The answer is that both China and the United States have a discrepancy between their respective defense responses and declared strategic goal of preventing a drift toward confrontation in the U.S.-China relationship. This condition undermines the coherence of the overall strategy.

The Chinese approach is based on developing what the Chinese call *counterintervention capabilities,* which are aimed at sharply increasing the risks for U.S. forces operating in a hostile environment in areas adjacent to Chinese territory. The U.S. term for this emerging People's Liberation Army capability is *anti-access/area denial*.

The U.S. Defense Department is responding with a concept jointly developed by the U.S. Air Force and Navy called *Air Sea Battle*. Because the concept is based on attacking capabilities on the China mainland, it is essentially a formula that could quickly escalate to all-out war. Even if conflict on this scale is unlikely and preventable, this action-reaction process holds the potential for what one writer has called a "military capabilities competition" of unlimited duration. Such a competition not only has serious budgetary implications but also is certain to increase mutual mistrust between Washington and Beijing. In other words, Chinese and U.S. actions and their declared strategic goals do not yet conform with each other.

A complicating factor is that despite the commitment of leaders in Washington and Beijing to the goal of developing a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive bilateral relationship, public opinion in both countries is divided on the question of whether the other is a friend or a potential adversary. Meanwhile, both countries' military establishments are busy preparing for worst-case scenarios.

Failure to address this problem forthrightly will make it more difficult to manage. Clearly, active

measures are needed by leaders in Washington and Beijing to address the trust deficit between the two countries that contributes to the drift toward confrontation. Giving high priority to this strategic challenge will make other bilateral problems easier to manage. This challenge will be the critical test of leaders in both countries.

ENDNOTES

1 The quotations are from Clinton's remarks at the U.S. Institute of Peace China Conference, held in Washington, D.C., on March 7, 2012. For a full text of her remarks, see http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/03/185402.htm.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Four policy actions are advisable:

- Give priority to sustaining a robust and comprehensive U.S. regional presence in which the vital military component is not the dominant feature.
- Lay policy stress on sustainable engagement in the region rather than on reasserting U.S. leadership, which Asians fear will sharpen U.S.-China rivalry and detract from ASEAN centrality in developing regional institutions.
- Address forthrightly with China's leaders the measures both sides must take, especially in the military sphere, to reverse the destructive dynamic created when a rising power challenges the positions of an established power.
- Exercise leadership in fostering U.S. public opinion that supports the declared policy goal of developing a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive bilateral relationship with China.

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