CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my No. 7 – 23 November 2017

OWNING UP TO SUPERPOWER COMPETITION WITH CHINA

To improve U.S.-China relations, acknowledge that Washington and Beijing are engaged in superpower competition

By
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The Trump administration has threatened to cut off trade with China, among other countries, in response to North Korea's latest test of a hydrogen bomb. US-China trade amounted to nearly 3 percent of the United States' GDP in 2016, and such a move would no doubt hurt the U.S. economy and perhaps further erode Trump's domestic approval. The fact that it was suggested points to the deterioration of the U.S.-China relationship.

To improve bilateral relations, the Trump administration should acknowledge that the United States and China are engaged in superpower competition. This would go a long way toward providing clarity and resolve, upon which to craft a sensible China strategy.

The Obama administration dithered and hedged when it came to the U.S.-China relationship. The Obama team was hesitant to call out Beijing for transgressions in the South China Sea for fear that this would jeopardize Beijing's cooperation on a host of international diplomatic initiatives, ranging from the Paris climate accord to economic sanctions on Iran. As a result, the United States forfeited leverage in key areas of the bilateral relationship.

Trump took a much more strident position on the campaign trail, vowing to declare China a currency manipulator on his first day in office. In nomination hearings, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested employing a naval blockade to deny China access to its man-made islands and assets in the South China Sea. Following his election, Trump took a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen and openly questioned why the U.S. was beholden a decades-long understanding on the "one China" policy. Trump has repeatedly linked China's

cooperation on resolving the North Korea crisis to issues of trade in an attempt to affect the Communist Party's behavior in the international trading order – to no avail.

The rhetoric emanating from this White House has sowed confusion and misunderstanding among allies and adversaries alike, and bilateral relations with China have been put on ice. It is urgent that the Trump administration provide clarity to the state of play. Following a careful strategic review of current policies, the Trump White House should announce that we are engaged in an era of superpower competition with China.

This does not amount to a declaration of conflict or an admission that we are "destined for war," as some hold. What it would mean is accepting some friction in the relationship as the balance of power shifts. Doing so would also allow for the responsible management of tensions and play to the position of strength that Washington currently enjoys in the power balance.

The Case for Clarity

Honesty regarding strategic competition will have several benefits. Firstly, China respects the language and mentality of real politick. Acknowledging superpower competition will at once recognize China's great power status and also provide for the realization that we recognize China as a peer competitor, which it is. It should also allay Beijing's paranoia of a U.S. containment strategy aimed at China.

Second, owning up to such competition will allow the American government to sell a sensible policy at home and to convince Americans that (and why) Asia matters. The Asia-Pacific is home to more than half of the world's population and will be responsible for nearly two-thirds of global economic growth next year. Therefore, the region will be critical to sustained U.S. prosperity and jobs for decades to come.

A third reason to own up to superpower competition is that it will fillip the United States to lay out clear and realistic policy goals to adapt to this new balance of power. The moment of clarity will also afford the U.S. an opportunity to rejigger a muddled Asia policy in the form of the Obama administration's Pivot, or Rebalance. The Trump administration is grasping for something new, albeit mostly following a status quo policy of continuity, rather than change.

So, what are the goals of the United States' Asia policy? And what objectives should be at the forefront of a successful strategy that acknowledges superpower competition with China?

The first two goals pertain to hard power and international security. At the top of the list should be the primary objective of maintaining peace and stability in the Pacific. Firstly, that means to prevent the emergence of a hegemon in Asia. This has been the primary goal of U.S. foreign policy in the Pacific since the end of World War II (and arguably since presidency of Theodore Roosevelt). Second, the United States must continue to defend its regional

allies (Japan, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines) and their territorial sovereignty.

Next, the United States should strive (insofar as it is able) to uphold the principles of freedom of navigation and commerce, and enshrine the peaceful settlement of disputes. These two objectives are intertwined and relate less to hard security interests than to principles of international law. Nevertheless, hard power will have a vital role in shaping the ability of the United States to project its preference for these principles, and to compel other nations to submit to international legal norms and adhere to the liberal international order.

Already, Beijing has defied the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague on the Philippines' case regarding the South China Sea, brought against China in 2013. Likely, the Chinese leadership doubts Washington's willingness or ability to risk military power to compel it to honour the ruling. In one sense, this is a purely hard power calculation: China called the United States' bluff. Though the U.S. Navy still outweighs and outnumbers the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), Beijing knows that Washington is reluctant or unable to devote the necessary resources to project sufficient power in Asia to compel China to abandon its claims in the South China Sea. In another sense, though, the failure of the PCA to restrain China's expansionism outright signals the fragility and ultimate relativity of international law, and the inability of soft power, in the court of public opinion, to dissuade a rising power.

Which leads us to the fifth goal of U.S. Asia strategy, which should be to bolster multilateral institutions, primarily the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Maintaining ASEAN centrality will induce Beijing to engage with regional partners, and smaller and middle powers, on issues of shared interests. One fraught example of this is the ongoing negotiations between China and ASEAN of the framework on the Code of Conduct for parties in the South China Sea. While China has managed to pressure and outmuscle small countries of ASEAN, with the carrots of economic investment and the sticks of its naval might and Coast Guard forces, it is at least pretending to play ball on the diplomatic front.

ASEAN centrality, as well as multilateral fora such as the East Asia Summit, will be important instruments of statecraft to shape Chinese regional behavior. External players, many of whom are allied with the United States, such as Japan and Australia, or partners such as India, will also exercise a powerful constraining influence on China.

Responsible Competition

Beijing may bristle at what it perceives as a U.S. containment strategy aimed at impinging upon its rise. Therefore, it will be important to own up to the era of 21st century superpower competition. Rather than escalate US-China tensions or trigger a security dilemma, acknowledging the reality of the situation represents an important opportunity for honest dialogue and proactive engagement.

Tom Wright lays out in his book All Measures Short of War, "The answer to a "security dilemma" is transparency, reassurance, and restraint, so it will be clear to all that neither state seeks to threaten the status quo." Wright argues for "responsible competition," which he defines as "a strategy of liberal internationalism for a more geopolitically competitive world."

At present, the United States and China are already engaged in competition. But the bilateral relationship has the potential to deteriorate, as external crises such as tensions on the Korean peninsula threaten to destabilize the relationship. Furthermore, China is distrustful of U.S. motives in its neighborhood and has long disliked being encircled by American allies Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. In recent years, it has had some success in turning the latter two to its favor with heavy economic inducements, particularly as the domestic politics of each have cast a pall over their treaty relations with the United States. As China's power continues to rise, the United States may find itself on the back foot. Rather than ratchet up tensions by trying to contain China, the Trump administration should own up to the fact that the United States and China are engaged in superpower competition. This will provide much-needed clarity to the current situation, assuaging misperceptions on both sides, and allow for the formation of more sagacious policy based on realistic understanding of each sides' motives.

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