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New Challenges to Asia-Pacific Security and Stability
‘Sleepwalking to Great-Power Confrontation in East Asia?’
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ABSTRACT: My paper is titled **Sleepwalking to Great-Power Confrontation in East Asia?** I begin with the heading ‘From tacit allies to likely adversaries?’ The question marks at the end of these headings indicate fluidity and should hopefully provoke serious discussions.

I suggest that a focus on the trees of individual incidents, in the South- and East China Seas, over currency exchange rates, or Intellectual Property- and Human Rights, for instance, could obscure the forest of transitional fluidity at the strategic systemic and sub-systemic levels. Regional and external powers active in dynamic East Asia are experiencing unprecedented volatility and changes in relative capacity to pursue respective economic, diplomatic and security objectives. This is most acutely, but not exclusively, seen in Sino-US interactions.

The visible symptoms of this process are tensions and uncertainty, to counteract which great powers are hedging their bets – with force restructuring, muscular signalling, rolling out new operational doctrines, and a coalescing of coalitions and blocs. I’d also suggest that these traditional responses to a novel conjunction of semi-symbiotic economic interdependence and strategic competition are fraught with the danger of badly eroding and disrupting, if not of bringing down, the sub-systemic house.

The most immediate symptoms of this challenge is seen in developments across Southeast Asia, among ASEAN-member states and China, Japan, India and the USA. Tacit and not-so-tacit alliances and coalitions are being forged or deepened with the potential of dramatic escalation from relatively minor flashpoints. The joint rolling-out of the AirSea Battle operational concept by the Chief of the US Air Staff and the Chief of Naval Operations in May, specifically targeting Chinese armed forces, is a clear indication of fears, anxieties and aspirations generating fungible and actionable decisions which could build into a dialectic spiral leading to a military confrontation.

The prevention of such an outcome will not be automatic, and will require active and concerted engagement of all the involved parties. The recently concluded ADMM-Plus gathering in Hanoi was a helpful but insufficient basis for that.

The critical question, then, is: are the makers of great-power policy capable of grasping this systemic challenge, and are they able to mobilize constituencies supportive of non-disruptive responses? Have they got the sophistication necessary for developing and pursuing complex, subtle and ultimately mutually advantageous policy goals demanding a new type of relationship in this interdependent, non-zero sum era?

Recent assertions, especially the insistence on the maintenance of “American leadership” and the clearly competitive Chinese “core interests” and US “national interests” in the South China Sea, underscore tensions. However, there is apparently a recognition that no country, however strong, can alone resolve complex global concerns, that cooperation is an imperative. Question - Is there room for compromise essential for collaboration?

History offers some hope. Starting in the late 1960s and developed through the 1970s and 1980s, the shared perception of a substantial threat from the Soviet adversary encouraged both China and the USA to independently fashion a pragmatic and mutually supportive approach eventually tantamount to a tacit alliance.

The present threat of systemic disruption caused by the pursuit of purely national goals is an even greater challenge facing China, the USA and the rest of Asia-Pacific region. There could not be a stronger argument for a win-win approach to redefining interests and power as a tool with which to pursue these. I posit that without moral authority underpinning the application of force as a political instrument, coercive strategies or strategic coercion would not generate sustainable outcomes. A resort to 19th and 20th century stratagems in a globalised, and deeply interdependent 21st-century world, is likely to be ruinous for all parties. It is in this context that I suggest we view the recent developments in East Asia’s maritime reaches. This is the essence of my argument. TKS

From ‘tacit allies’ to ‘likely adversaries’?¹ Sino-US security relations have seen many ups and-downs since June 1989 when their covert alliance against the USSR² collapsed.

¹ Not all scholars agree that Sino-US competition will lead to adversarial relations. Prof. Joseph Nye of the John. F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, wrote, ‘I am less alarmist about a new Cold War with China. Some in the military on both sides always do worst

As superpower bipolarity, hitherto the global security architecture's defining feature, ended, America emerged as a hegemonic 'hyper-power.' With China rising in stature in both its own eyes and those of others, systemic friction triggered tension. The PLA's 1996 missile-tests near Taiwan, the USAF's 1999 'bombing' of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the J8-EP3 collision in 2001 threatened efforts to stabilize post-Cold War relations. As China built its comprehensive national power, some in America's national security elite identified the PLA as the most likely challenger to America's systemic domination. The past decade saw symbiotic economic interdependence confounding sharpening adversarial mindsets.³

2010 has been particularly fraught. In January, US sales of arms worth \$6.4bn⁴ to Taiwan triggered a cut-off in military exchanges; President Obama's hosting of the Dalai Lama at the White House deepened Chinese anger. On 11 January, the third anniversary of its 2007 ASAT test, Beijing conducted a missile-intercept drill. Reports that a second ASAT test had been cloaked under cover of missile-interception soon appeared.⁵ Washington's response was strategic *and* tactical. With fears of escalation flowing from the sinking of the *ROKS Cheonan* in March, reportedly by a North Korean submarine, Washington launched a diplomatic campaign, boosted regional alliances, and mounted a series of naval-air drills with Seoul while China urged restraint, criticizing America's military maneuvers. South China Sea disputes between China and its neighbors, especially Sino-Vietnamese contention, and US efforts to deepen military ties to ASEAN-members, inserted strategic fluidity into the dynamic.⁶

case assessment and need an enemy to keep their budget and mission, but I do not think that is the dominant strand of thought in either country. I worry more about Chinese who believe in US decline and think they should push harder, and Americans who overreact out of fear, but I think this is also not the dominant trend.' Joseph Nye, personal communication, 22 August 2010.

² See S. Mahmud Ali, *US-China Cold War Collaboration, 1971-1989*, New York, Routledge, 2005.

³ See S. Mahmud Ali, *US-China Relations in the "Asia-Pacific" Century*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

⁴ Charles Keyes, *US announces \$6.4 billion arms deal with Taiwan*, Washington, CNN, 30 January 2010.

⁵ Tom Mahnken, 'China's satellite killer,' *Foreign Policy*, 22 March 2010; 'US report claims China shoots down its own satellite,' *People's Daily*, 19 July 2010; 'SPACE: Chinese Anti-Satellite (ASAT) Capabilities and ABM Capability,' *Global Security*, published at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/space/world/china/asat.htm> accessed on 17 August 2010. For details of the 11 January 2010 ABM test, see 'China's successful anti-missile test,' *Strategic Comments*, Volume 16, Comment 6, London, IISS, February 2010.

⁶ Anxieties over ASEAN's future in a polarised milieu are shared within the region. An eminent observer of China's history, culture and society, Prof. Wang Gungwu, Chairman, East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore, wrote, 'I cannot predict what will happen in ASEAN. The leaders are committed to act together because they all understand how weak they would be if they did not. But it is not clear how united they can be if they had to choose between

On 27 May 2010, Admiral Gary Roughead, America's Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), and General Norton Schwartz, US Air Force (USAF) Chief of Staff, jointly rolled out 'AirSea Battle,'⁷ a new operational concept, designed to deter and, if deterrence failed, defeat in combat, People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces in the western Pacific. Comparable in scale and ambition to a generic predecessor, 'AirLand Battle,' adopted by US/NATO forces to deter or defeat any Soviet invasion of Western Europe,⁸ the new doctrine was the outcome of a process initiated by General Schwartz and Admiral Roughead in September 2009 when, instructed by Secretary of Defence Robert Gates to implement operational integration, they signed a classified memorandum to that end.⁹

AirSea Battle aimed at countering the PLA's growing anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities against the US Pacific Command (PACOM) in likely battle-spaces close to China's shores, restoring PACOM's operational freedom.¹⁰ For America's military, in early 21st century, China had replaced the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s.

The concept emerged from the DOD's own think-tank, the Office of Net Assessment (ONA).¹¹ When senior US commanders like Admiral Jay Johnson, CNO, noted threats to US dominance from changes in the security environment, including action taken by 'peer-rivals' and 'near-peer competitors,' principally China, pressure built for innovative approaches to securing America's pre-eminence.¹² Admiral Johnson declared,

China and India/United States (with Japan/Australia?). In fact, if they had to make a choice, the situation would be extremely grave in the region, so let us hope that can be indefinitely avoided.' Wang Gungwu, personal communication, 15 June 2009.

⁷ Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced the launch in his speech at the US Air Force Academy 2010 Graduation Ceremony in Colorado Springs on 26 May 2010.

⁸ The US Army described the 'AirLand Battle' concept and its implementation mechanisms in Headquarters Department of Army, *Field Manual 100-5, Operations*, Washington, Department of Defense, 20 August 1982. For a short history of 'AirLand Battle,' see John Romjue, 'The Evolution of the AirLand Battle Concept,' *Air University Review*, May-June 1984. The author, a resident research associate at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), London, in 1981, and other RUSI personnel, received briefings on it from senior NATO commanders over the year.

⁹ 'Time for Air-Sea Battle Concept,' *Defense News*, 9 November 2009; Christopher Cavas and Vago Muradian, 'New program could redefine AF-Navy joint ops,' *Air Force Times*, 16 November 2009.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Established in the early 1970s as an intellectual response to the US military's experience in Vietnam, the ONA has provided the Department of Defense with 'over-the-horizon scanning' services. It has been headed since its inception by one of America's foremost strategic visionaries, Andrew Marshall.

¹² See S. Mahmud Ali, *US-China Relations in the "Asia-Pacific" Century*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.

I anticipate that the next century will see...(our) foes striving to target concentrations of troops and materiel ashore and attack our forces at sea and in the air. This is more than a sea-denial threat or a Navy problem. It is an area-denial threat whose defeat or negation will become the single most crucial element in projecting and sustaining US military power where it is needed.¹³

Command-level concerns and back-room work at the ONA converged on the challenges posed by China's military 'rise.' The invasion of Iraq slowed the pace somewhat as counter-insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan consumed blood, treasure and intellect. The Obama Administration's decision to end combat operations in Iraq, and start an Afghan drawdown in 2011, boosted post-COIN strategizing. Since the 1996 'Taiwan Strait crisis,' China had loomed large in US calculations of near-to-medium-term threats. The frequent appearance of *shashoujian* (assassin's mace) in Chinese military discourse hinted at weapons and methods capable of deterring a superior adversary like America by threatening its forces at the onset of a conflict.¹⁴ Washington had to counter this threat.

After Gates approved the ONA's proposals, a small group of USAF-USN officers consulted America's operational commanders, establishing the parameters the two services had to meet to realize the radical concept. The synergies in joint application of aerial and naval force would generate 'not only those capabilities able to be integrated to give us better fighting power, better endurance, better mobility, (but) we're also trying to identify gaps in capabilities, see where the Air Force or Navy capabilities can fill those gaps such that we are optimized as a joint force.'¹⁵ General Carrol Chandler, Commander, Pacific Air Forces and, since August 2009, Vice Chief of Staff, USAF, supervised AirSea Battle's development. As it grew, DOD engaged the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), a think-tank closely linked to the military establishment, to put flesh on the concept's bones.

¹³ Admiral Jay Johnson, 'Anytime, Anywhere: A Navy for the 21st Century,' *Proceedings*, November 1997, p.49.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael Chase, Derek Eaton, Kevin Pollpeter, *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2007; Roger Cliff, *Advances Underway in China's Defense Industries*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2006.

¹⁵ Rear Admiral Robert Thomas, Director, US Navy Strategy and Policy Division, quoted in Christopher Cavas and Vago Muradian, 'New program could redefine AF-Navy joint ops,' *Air Force Times*, 16 November 2009.

CSBA analysts, with ONA and DOD experience, concluded that unless China (and Iran) ‘divert from their current course of action,’ or America offset their military buildups, it was ‘practically certain that the costs incurred by the US military to maintain access to two areas of vital interest (western Pacific and the Persian Gulf) will rise sharply, perhaps to prohibitive levels, and perhaps much sooner than many expect. Given the apparent Chinese (and Iranian) intent to create ‘no-go zones’ in proximate maritime areas, the US faced a strategic choice: ‘to risk a loss of military access to areas vital to its security or to explore options for preserving access.’¹⁶ Securing access to assert military dominance was AirSea Battle’s brief.

CSBA reported how potent A2/AD capabilities in the hands of America’s adversaries would impose increasing risks and costs on US power-projection operations. The Western Pacific Theater of Operations (WPTO) was ‘the most stressing potential case’ where the ‘AirSea battle concept must address high-end military operations’ to maintain a ‘stable military balance.’ This it did by conjoining the USAF and the US Navy ‘to execute highly integrated operations across the range of A2/AD contingencies.’¹⁷

- East Asia and the Western Pacific are an area of enduring vital US interest including longstanding security commitments. The biggest threat came from the PLA’s advanced A2/AD network/capabilities challenging regional stability and security. Unless America acted now, the WPTO military balance would become unfavorable and unstable within a decade.¹⁸
- The PLA’s precepts manifested the challenge: ‘We should not mechanically follow the US theory’; ‘we should not try to meet a new challenge by running after others’; ‘we should try to create our own superiority’; ‘combine Western technology with eastern wisdom. This is our trump card for winning a 21st century war’; ‘the other side may be strong, but they are not strong in all things...and our side may be weak, but we are not weak in all things.’¹⁹

¹⁶ Andrew Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* Washington, CSBA, 19 February 2010, pp.vii-viii. Krepinevich first noted the A2/AD threat to US dominance in *The Military Revolution*, an unpublished draft written for the ONA in July 1992. *Ibid.*, fn.10, p.9.

¹⁷ CSBA, *CSBA Releases New Report*, Washington, 18 May 2010.

¹⁸ Jan van Tol, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew Krepinevich, Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle – Why AirSea Battle?*, Washington, CSBA, 18 May 2010.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *The People’s Liberation Army*. USBA analysts also noted Sun Zi’s dicta from his *The Art of War*, ‘Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent’s fate. To win over 100 victories in 100 battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.’

- The PLA's *Shashoujian* – powerful secret weapons and methods employed suddenly to defeat a stronger enemy – caused particular concern. China's focus on ASAT arms, space-based Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition (RSTA), electro-magnetic weapons, cyber-warfare, electronic warfare (EW), over-the-horizon (OTH) radars, ballistic- and cruise missiles, integrated air-defense systems, advanced combat jets, UAVs, submarines and sea mines posed a serious threat.²⁰
- Combining short-, medium-, intermediate- and long-range ballistic missiles with combat aircraft and cruise missiles, the PLA pushed US military immunity away from China's shores. Forward-deployed American forces were increasingly vulnerable to PLA preemption, eroding US ability to reassure allies, deter adversaries, and defeat enemies. America must establish an 'offsetting strategy.'²¹
- This, AirSea Battle, would preserve a stable military balance and maintain crisis stability by demonstrating America's ability to effectively intervene, increasing confidence that China could not realize its goals through aggression or coercion.²²
- WPTO geography demanded an integrated air-and-maritime approach. America operated several large, almost undefended bases, either close to China and difficult to defend, or far away and less useful militarily. Vast distances placed a premium on range and endurance.²³
- Washington must reassure all regional allies who must be defended from the sea. Success would depend on Japan's active role as an ally. US inability – actual or perceived – to defend its allies could lead to Chinese coercion or aggression.²⁴
- The PLA would first disrupt US military networks by destroying/jamming satellites and with concerted cyber/EW attacks. It would fire precision-guided missiles at US/allied air bases, aircraft carriers and logistics hubs. With US carriers restrained, the PLA would gain air superiority and naval freedom of maneuver, and achieve its goals.²⁵
- With air, surface and undersea attacks against US forces, the PLA would destroy their sanctuaries and logistics depots, preventing rapid deployment to forward bases and bridgeheads. By initiating hostilities, China would rob American choice of time and place. With attacks against bases and aircraft carriers, the PLA would

²⁰ Ibid., *Shashoujian- The Assassin's Mace*.

²¹ Ibid., *The Growing Range of PLA Systems; Eroding Crisis Stability*.

²² Ibid., *Intent*.

²³ Ibid., *Geophysical Factors*.

²⁴ Ibid., *Geostrategic factors*.

²⁵ Ibid., *A Possible Preemptive A2/AD Attack*.

- erode US ability to sustain large numbers of sorties. It would damage/destroy America's complex battle networks with ASAT, cyber- and EW attacks.²⁶
- America would wage AirSea Battle in two stages: first, withstand PLA attacks, limiting damage to US/allied forces; execute a blinding campaign against PLA battle and ISR networks; execute a missile suppression campaign; seize the initiative in the air, sea, space, and cyber domains. Next, launch and exploit the initiative in all warfighting domains; conduct "distant blockade" operations; sustain operational logistics; ramp-up industrial production.²⁷
 - The USAF would restore naval freedom of maneuver with strikes on mobile missile launchers, and degrading PLA maritime ISR; US sub- and surface combatants would attack PLA surveillance and air-defenses to enable USAF penetrating strikes; USAF bombers with maritime strike weapons/mines would support USN strike, intercept, and blockade operations; Naval BMD would defend USAF forward bases; USAF tankers would refuel naval aircraft; carrier-borne aircraft would suppress the PLAAF, aiding USAF air-refueling tasks.²⁸

As the Obama Administration approached its half-way mark, the contours of the future Asia-Pacific security architecture remained fluid, but some patterns became discernible:

Sino-US bipolarity: America and China identified each other as the source of the most serious threats to respective national security interests. Beijing had noted America's numerical and technological superiority which apparently constrained China's strategic autonomy, identified vulnerabilities in that superior force, and devised weapons and methods to exploit these to secure 'victory of the weak.' And now, with its AirSea Battle concept reshaping the application of force against China, America had 'restored' its dominance. Would this dialectic process secure stability via Chinese acquiescence, or would it trigger instability as the PLA sought to bypass the effects of AirSea Battle? That uncertainty aside, that a new trans-Pacific bipolarity had emerged as the defining feature of the early 21st century security landscape, was clear.

America the persistent: As President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates repeatedly asserted, America was a 'resident Pacific power' determined to remain so. Washington would work with key regional players and

²⁶ Ibid., *The US "Way of War" and PLA Counters*.

²⁷ Ibid., *Substance of an ASB Concept*.

²⁸ Ibid., *Air Force – Navy Synergies Across Lines of Operations*.

redefine the theater's security configurations while maintaining its leadership role. Clinton's assertion at the July 2010 ARF in Hanoi that maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea was in 'the US national interest' directly challenged Beijing's assertion that its South China Sea claims were of comparable 'core' national interests as Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan. America clearly wished to secure its pre-eminence into the indefinite future. US statements, budgetary allocations, aid disbursements, alliance-building efforts, and force deployments underscored this desire.²⁹ Washington's efforts to set out the framework with Japan, India, Australia and ASEAN allies for the evolution of the regional security architecture were aimed at securing this pre-eminence in perpetuity.

US endeavors to maintain its dominance were not limited to the military realm, but only most apparent there. The combination of security and defense collaboration and economic and commercial integration generated second-order effects of hemming China in with a network of strategic alliances and economic partnerships over the medium-to-long term. Beijing did not ignore this emerging encirclement taking shape around China.

China resurgent: With criticism of China ranging from its treatment of Tibetan and Uighur autonomists through its handling of foreign trade and investment, to a robust assertion of national territorial and other interests, Beijing sounded angrily defensive while insisting its position was righteous. Following the May 2010 Sino-US Security and Economic Dialogue in Beijing, during which it announced that it considered the South China Sea as important a core interest as Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan, China faced up to US efforts to constrain its strategic autonomy. Beijing warned its neighbours:

The US will not put regional interests first. This is something that Southeast Asian countries have to bear in mind. Regional stability will be difficult to maintain if

²⁹ See, for instance, Judith Mchale, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, *Remarks at the East-West Center's 50th Anniversary Celebration*, Washington, Department of State. McHale explained, 'Our future and, I believe, our identity are bound up as never before with the Asia-Pacific region. The region is home to almost one-third of the world's population and a rising share of global gross domestic product. US trade with Asia is increasing faster than any other region (sic) of the world, and four Asian economies are among our top twelve trading partners. It has become the engine of global innovation and growth, as well as cultural creativity... this region of progress and promise is also beset by difficult challenges, including unresolved cross-border tensions, unbalanced growth, and environmental degradation. Any of these, unchecked, could lead to instability, conflict, and damage on a global scale. In the 21st century, as Asia-Pacific goes, so, too, will the world.'

the countries concerned allow themselves to be controlled by the strategic guidance of the US.³⁰

China said its proposal for ‘shelving disagreement and joint development’ was ‘the only option’ for its neighbours.³¹ Whether Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia - ASEAN member-states with the most extensive maritime-territorial disputes with China - agreed remained unclear. Beijing felt constrained to point out both the risks it saw in US involvement in regional territorial disputes, and the irony in Washington urging all actors in the South China Sea to abide by the 1982 UNCLOS when America itself had not signed it.³²

A dialogue of the deaf

At a defense ministers’ conclave in Singapore in June 2010, Robert Gates explained the long-established pattern of US arms sales to Taiwan which, in January 2010, had triggered a suspension of Sino-US military contacts. Gates thought Chinese reaction made ‘little sense’ because

- US arms sales to Taiwan had ‘been a reality for decades’ spanning multiple Administrations.
- America had demonstrated publicly it did not support Taiwanese independence. ‘Nothing – I repeat, nothing – has changed in that stance.’
- China’s rapid military build-up was largely focused on Taiwan; US arms sales were an instrument ‘of maintaining peace and stability in cross-strait relations’ and regionally.³³

Gates suggested China should urgently renew military contacts with America so as to ‘reduce miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation. There is a real cost to the absence of military-to-military relations.’ He offered to ‘work towards’ building ties which would be ‘positive in tone, cooperative in nature, and comprehensive in scope.’³⁴ Gates’s supplementary messages were – America would defend its own interests and those of its allies, with force if necessary; it was developing and deploying ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems across the region; it was helping its allies and partners in

³⁰ ‘American shadow over South China Sea,’ *Global Times*, Editorial, 26 July 2010.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See, for instance, Wu Liming, Chen Yong, ‘US involvement will only complicate South China sea issue,’ *China Daily*, 28 July 2010; and Chen Hu, (Editor-in-chief, *World Military Magazine*, Beijing), ‘Is it to “grope for fish” by stirring “muddy” South China Sea?’ *People’s Daily*, 28 July 2010.

³³ Robert Gates, *Strengthening Security Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific*, Address at the 9th IISS Asia Security Summit, Singapore, 5 June 2010.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

boosting their own military capabilities; and, America was reviewing, consolidating and strengthening its forward-deployed forces across the Asia-Pacific region.³⁵

General Ma Xiaotan, PLA Deputy Chief of General Staff, speaking on Beijing's behalf, noted the threats to security emanating from America itself: 'A cold-war mentality still exists, as is often shown by efforts to strengthen military alliances via new technologies, the threat to use force in international relations, and interference in other countries' internal affairs. Regional hotspot issues come up over and over again. We believe that in the face of the complicated security situation, nations concerned should remain calm and exercise restraint and avoid escalation of tension, so as to jointly maintain regional peace and stability.'³⁶ Ma underscored Beijing's strategic priorities – safeguarding China's security and development, including completion of national reunification, maintaining territorial integrity and countering foreign-aided separatism; maintaining a peaceful environment beneficial to all by securing peaceful resolution of regional problems; building a harmonious regional community by strengthening 'strategic mutual trust' and promoting multilateral defense and security cooperation; fostering a sense of integrated, common and cooperative security, and building comprehensive, equal, trusting and mutually beneficial partnerships. Reiterating Beijing's defensive military stance, Ma stressed China's abhorrence of hegemonism, and pledged China would never adopt it.

Ma identified three obstacles to building Sino-US military relations: 'the first is the sale of arms to Taiwan, the second is the intense spy and patrol behaviours (sic) of US planes and ships in South China Sea and East China Sea, and the third is the "2000 National Defense Authorization Act," adopted by the US Congress in 2000, as well as the "DeLay Amendment," adopted a year later. So, we feel that, if anyone has been setting up barriers to cooperation, it is certainly not us.'³⁷ The fact that Ma saw the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Exposition in Shanghai as opportunities 'for the world to better

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ General Ma Xiaotian, *New Dimensions of Security*, Address at the 9th IISS Asia Security Summit, Singapore, 5 June 2010. In addressing widely expressed concerns, Ma noted, 'At present, some people still view China's development with suspicion, worrying that China will seek expansion and hegemony when it becomes strong, like some Western countries did. To some extent, their worries are understandable. In modern times, hegemonism and power politics have inflicted too much suffering on people around the world. We should never forget the historical lessons.' Ibid.

³⁷ General Ma Xiaotian in the IISS, *The 9th IISS Asian Security Summit: New Dimensions of Security – Q&A*, Singapore, 5 June 2010. General Ma elaborated on the 'three communiqués,' especially the 17th August 1982 one dealing specifically with the US position on selling arms to Taiwan. Criticising US refusal to honor its commitment to gradually reduce its arms sales to Taiwan and eventually resolve the issue, Ma said, 'We do not wish to see our behaviour force the US to change its ways, because we know that we do not have the ability to do so, much less the desire. But then, once the US has done this, what should our response be? What kind of attitude should we adopt? I think other people cannot compel us to do things either.'

understand China³⁸ suggested Chinese unease at being misunderstood. Beijing also refused to receive Gates who wished to revive high-level military contacts.³⁹

Signs of misunderstanding had appeared in the wake of the sinking of the *ROKS Cheonan* in March 2010. China's refusal to endorse an international investigation's conclusion that a North Korean submarine had sunk the *Cheonan* with a torpedo, and failure to condemn this act, damaged Sino-US amity. The fact that President Hu Jintao received Kim Jong-il in Beijing after the incident without any public recrimination did not help matters. China joined fellow UN Security Council members in endorsing a 'presidential statement' condemning the sinking and expressing grave concern without naming North Korea, but urged restraint and opposed retribution.⁴⁰ In the month after Washington announced joint naval exercises with South Korea in the East Sea and the Yellow Sea starting in July 2010, Beijing issued five protests – a record. China insisted that any deployment of US aircraft carriers to the Yellow Sea would deeply hurt relations. Beijing's critique of Exercise Invincible Spirit hinted at strategic insecurity:

- Would America 'allow China to stage military exercises near its western and eastern coasts? If the United States does not wish to be treated in a specific way, it should not forcefully sell the way to others.'
- 'The ultimate level of strategic thinking is to subdue the enemy without fighting. Preventing crisis is the best way to resolve and overcome the crisis. China's current tough stance is part of preventive diplomacy.'
- 'The drill area selected by the United States and South Korea is only 500 kms away from Beijing. China will be aware of the security pressure from military exercises conducted by any country in an area that is so close to China's heartland.'⁴¹

³⁸ General Ma Xiaotian, *New Dimensions of Security*, Address at the 9th IISS Asia Security Summit, Singapore, 5 June 2010.

³⁹ Admiral Michael Mullen revealed this in an address at the Asia Society's annual awards dinner in Washington shortly after the IISS Asia Security Summit ended in Singapore. See Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael Carden, *Mullen Cites Importance of Asian Partners, Stability in Pacific Region*, Washington, AFPS, 10 June 2010. However, not all high-level contacts were broken. In March, Obama sent Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and the NSC Senior Director for Asian Affairs Jeff Bader to Beijing to repair relations. Bader returned in September with Deputy National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon and Lawrence Summer, Director of the US National Economic Council. They could not resolve all the differences, but at least ensured lines of communications between the two governments remained open. Wu Jiao, 'High-level talks target Sino-US ties,' *China Daily*, 4 September 2010.

⁴⁰ Kim Jong-il visited China again in August 2010. At the end of the month, Beijing despatched Wu Dawei, China's special envoy for the Korean Peninsula, to Washington, where he met Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg, US special envoy for the DPRK Stephen Bosworth, Assistant Secretary of State for the Asia-Pacific Kurt Campbell, and the NSC's Asian Affairs Director Bader. Beijing insisted it was time to resume the Six-Party talks and now, Kim Jong-il was 'on board!' See, *China, US pledge to advance six-party talks*, Washington, Xinhua, 4 September 2010; Chico Harlan, 'China pushes new talks with North Korea, but others are sceptical,' *The Washington Post*, 31 August 2010.

⁴¹ Major General Luo Yuan, Deputy Secretary General, PLA Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), in 'Why China opposes US-South Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea,' *People's Daily*, 16 July 2010. General Luo specifically condemned plans to deploy the *USS George Washington* to

- The UNSC's presidential statement urging calm and restraint was aimed at safeguarding security on the Korean Peninsula. 'On the other hand, the joint military exercise by the United States and South Korea on the Yellow Sea has created a new crisis.'
- Without resolving existing challenges to restoring and improving Sino-US military-to-military relations first, America was imposing yet another obstacle.⁴²

Blind man's buff

Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, meeting Clinton in Hanoi at the July 2010 ARF, stressed the anger the deployment of a US aircraft carrier to the Yellow Sea would cause. If America avoided 'these difficulties,' the two powers could 'enhance communication and coordination on major international and regional issues,' respect each other's core interests and concerns, and 'advance bilateral ties in a positive, cooperative and comprehensive manner.'⁴³ Yang did not make a zero-sum proposition, but the implication was clear. Without acknowledging Beijing's concerns, Washington initially suspended the *USS George Washington's* deployment to the Yellow Sea,⁴⁴ but eventually ordered the carrier to the area, after drills in the Sea of Japan.⁴⁵

America's naval exercises and nuclear-cooperation accord with Vietnam, revival of military collaboration with Indonesia - including *Kopassus* Special Forces, Indonesia's formal challenge at the UN of China's South China Sea claims, increasing involvement of US allies in exercises like RIMPAC-10, and a zero-sum discourse brewing over the South China Sea underscored flashpoints developing escalatory potential. An adversarial status quo vs. revisionist dialectic - China countering US pressure, America displaying resolve, China taking countermeasures - characterized this era of strategic fluidity as the world sleepwalked towards great-power confrontation in East Asia.

Transitional fluidity generates systemic friction, but military tensions reflect political disputes. Given power-asymmetries, if the system-manager prevents adaptation accommodating rising powers and focuses on constraining them, confrontation could escalate to conflict. Incalculable despoliation could consume the region's achievements

the area, 'The aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* dispatched to the Yellow Sea has a combat radius of 600kms and its aircraft has (sic) a combat radius as long as 1,000kms. Therefore, the military exercise in the area has posed a direct security threat to China's heartland and the Bohai Rim Economic Circle.' Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Yang Jiechi cited in *Chinese FM meets with Hillary Clinton on bilateral ties*, Hanoi, Xinhua, 23 July 2010.

⁴⁴ 'US not to send aircraft carrier to Yellow Sea, a diplomatic compromise?' *People's Daily*, 15 July 2010; *US not to send aircraft carrier to Yellow Sea*, Washington, Yonhap, 13 July 2010.

⁴⁵ In early August, after the end of ROK-US Exercise *Invincible Spirit* in the Sea of Japan in which the *USS George Washington* took part and, during the ROK's own anti-submarine drills in the Yellow Sea in which it did not, DOD Spokesman Geoff Morrell announced that South Korea and the USA were 'in the process of starting' fresh exercises in both the seas, lasting several months. Lt. Colonel Mark Ballesteros, another DOD spokesman, told the Chinese news agency, Xinhua, that the *USS George Washington* would be deployed to the Yellow Sea. *US aircraft carrier to participate in war games with ROK: Pentagon*, Washington, Xinhua, 7 August 2010.

in a flash. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are instructive. How America and China respond to each other's decisions will shape the Asia-Pacific security architecture. Others can largely watch and pray.