

U.S. engagement key to handling Chinese dragon

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Last November, President Barack Obama spoke to the Australian parliament about a ``deliberate and strategic decision'' he had taken to engage more fully in Asia. When it came to this region, the President said, the US was ``all in''.

He also announced that, by 2016, 2500 US marines would be on rotation in the north of Australia. Obama's Canberra speech and other elements of this reweighting have raised concerns that the US is going down a containment path towards China, setting up the risk of new bilateral tensions in Asia.

It is certainly true one of the motivations for the US's ``pivot'' towards Asia is the rise of China. That country's economic transformation in the past three decades has been remarkable. Increasingly, China's new economic strength is mirrored in its growing military capabilities, which boost its ability to project power within Asia and the world.

China has a strong hand, yet it is unclear how it will play that hand in the future. There is a notable dualism to China's approach. On the one hand, Chinese foreign policy is neither expansionist nor extreme; in many ways China has been slow to claim the influence it deserves.

On the other hand, it is impossible to miss China's rising confidence and global ambition, even though they sit alongside strains of caution and insecurity. Sometimes, Chinese assertiveness spills over into bluster. Long-time observers are pessimistic about the direction of Chinese foreign policy.

There is an uneven quality, then, to China's international stance: usually quiet but occasionally strident; usually cautious but occasionally combative; always prickly; and never entirely predictable.

In this context, Obama's new focus on the Asia-Pacific makes sense. During his first year in office the President persistently sought to accommodate Beijing's interests. Yet Beijing failed to clasp his outstretched hand.

Obama is still seeking to develop the bilateral relationship with China, but he is doing so from a position of strength. His policy is not directed at containing China, but neither is he prepared to vacate the field. The President seeks to co-operate with China. But he also intends to renew the US's presence in Asia and maintain a balance of forces in the region at a time when there is uncertainty about China's future behaviour.

How should Australia try to manage the strategic triangle formed by Washington, Beijing and Canberra?

Hugh White has written of the dangers of US-China competition, suggesting that the region needs a concert of powers, comprising China, the US, Japan, India, Indonesia and other countries. For our part, he suggests, Australia should try to encourage the US to award China new prerogatives. We should also be more circumspect about speaking our mind to China on issues such as human rights and Tibet. I'm not persuaded by this argument.

The US alliance is a valuable national asset for Australia. It entails the promise that we would be protected from a strategic threat, unlikely though that may be; the interactions with US military forces that keep the Australian Defence Force sharp; privileged access to the fruits of US intelligence; and entree to some of Washington's inner councils -- presuming we have interesting things to say. Apart from anything else, the alliance saves us billions of dollars a year in defence we would otherwise have to make to guarantee our security.

Before downgrading such an asset, we need to be clear-headed about what we hope to achieve, and what we risk.

When it comes to national security, I agree with the injunction in the Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm. By all means, Australia should seek to influence events and power structures in Asia. But we need to be realistic about our ability to shape the power relations of a region of billions. If we cool our alliance, do we increase our ability to affect events? How likely are we to change the trajectory of the US, even if we wanted to? How easy would it be to rig up a concert of powers in Asia? And what are the downsides of cooling the alliance?

Given the uncertainty about China's future policies, it would seem strange to pre-emptively move towards Beijing.

Surely it is more sensible to balance against the risk of future Chinese recklessness by keeping the US deeply engaged in the region and strengthening, not weakening, our alliance institutions. I have never heard a Sinologist say that the one thing the Chinese respect is weakness. In my observation, unsolicited gifts to rising great powers are rarely reciprocated.

Usually they are simply pocketed. Of course we should not try to contain China, which would be utterly impossible. But neither should we back off from defending our own interests and values.

The leaders in Zhongnanhai may not have been happy with Obama's Canberra speech. But neither its message, nor the Darwin announcement, would have surprised them. Beijing knows Australia has been a US ally for 60 years.

We should not overestimate our influence, nor should we underestimate it. We have a good deal to offer China, as a mature and wealthy country and a stable source for the strategic resources it requires. It is in our interest that the relationship between Canberra and Beijing should be strong, positive and co-operative. This is also in China's interest.

Alliances are not always easy to manage -- especially alliances with the most powerful country on earth. Even like-minded countries sometimes see things differently. And less powerful allies often spend a lot of time worrying about the temper of their alliance -- that it is too close. Or too distant. To paraphrase Winston Churchill: ``The only thing worse than having allies is not having them.''

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