

By invitation; US must stay engaged in Asia

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Straits Times
7 November 2012

As China's economic power grows, American military power is looming larger in calculations about Asia's strategic future.

Many people in both the United States and Asia assume that while China's gross domestic product will soon overtake America's, the sheer scale and power of the US military will continue to provide Washington with decisively superior strategic weight in the region.

They believe this will ensure that the US is able to retain primacy in Asia and effectively deter Beijing from any serious challenge to the US-led regional order.

It is easy to see why people think that. If we compare the size of the two countries' defence budgets, or the lists of their forces, it is abundantly clear that: America spends much more; its forces are much more capable than China's today; and they will remain so for decades to come, especially at sea and in the air, where America's strengths lie.

China's military edge now

But there is more to the balance of military power than a simple comparison of budgets or lists of ships and aircraft.

Strategic outcomes are not determined by how much each country spends or what it has but by what it can and cannot do with armed force, where and when it counts.

And when we look at what the US and China can each do today with armed force in East Asia's Western Pacific littoral, it is clear that the balance of military advantage has already moved quite sharply in China's favour, and will continue to do so for some time to come.

To see why this is so, we need to focus less on military capabilities and more on the actual operations which they are supposed to undertake. For as long as any of us can remember, the military foundation of America's strategic primacy in Asia has been its capacity to project armed force by sea.

It has never been a dominant land power in Asia, as the Korean War and Vietnam War both show, but since the Battle of Midway in 1942, America has always enjoyed an unchallengeable capacity to project power at sea and from the sea. That is why America's mighty aircraft carriers and marine forces are so central to its strategic footprint here.

But this kind of maritime power projection is possible only if these forces can be protected from attack while they are at sea.

This means maintaining what naval strategists call sea control. For decades, America's maritime power-projection capability in Asia has been supported by its exercise of unquestioned sea control throughout the Western Pacific. It has been able to ensure that its aircraft carriers and marine forces could be kept safe from attack by regional forces.

China's decisive advantages

All this has now changed. Over the past 15 years, China has focused its air and naval developments specifically on capabilities to attack US power-projection forces at sea in the Western Pacific, and it appears to have been rather successful.

Back in 1996, during a major crisis over Taiwan, America sailed two aircraft carriers into the trouble zone close to China, confident that the People's Liberation Army could not sink them. Now, they would not take that sort of risk.

This is what naval strategists call sea denial. China today has acquired a substantial capacity for sea denial against the US in the Western Pacific. That means it has already gone a long way to undermine the military foundations of America's strategic primacy in Asia, by eroding the sea control on which America's military posture in Asia is based.

How has China done this, with a smaller defence budget and less advanced technology? The answer is simply that the contest is very uneven, because China enjoys four decisive advantages over the US in this competition.

First of all, China has the advantage of focus: America is a global power with major commitments all over the world, while China has been able to devote almost all its efforts to this single task.

Second, China has the advantage of location: the maritime competition with America plays out in China's front yard, close to its home bases, while America must project and sustain forces from widely scattered bases an ocean away from home.

Third, China's operational task is much easier, because sea denial is much simpler than sea control. The reason is very simple: The effort required to sink a ship is much smaller than the effort required to defend it, and modern technology amplifies this advantage. So it is much easier for China to sink a US carrier than it is for the US to stop it and, hence, much easier for China to achieve sea denial than for America to maintain sea control.

Finally, China has a bigger stake in what happens on its doorstep than America does. The issues between them over their respective roles in Asia and the future of the Asian order are very important to America, but they are even more important for China.

Indeed, they are central to China's image of itself as a great power. So China will be willing to pay more and to risk more to win in Asia than America will. This makes a real difference when push comes to shove.

Can the US push back?

These inherent advantages mean that China would have been able to erode US sea control in the Western Pacific even if the US defence budget had not been cut so savagely, and merely increasing the defence budget again will not restore America's position.

Nonetheless, the Pentagon is determined to push back, and has developed a bold new operational concept to restore US sea control. It is called the AirSea Battle, and it proposes that before sending carriers or marines within range of China, it will first mount a major campaign of strikes against the bases of China's sea-denial forces.

There are three problems with this concept. First, it may well not work, or at least not work quickly. China is not Iraq, and the AirSea Battle would not unfold like Operation Desert Storm.

Targeting China's bases would take months, not days or even weeks, and meet potentially serious opposition.

Second, it would be sure to escalate. China would not sit back and watch American forces destroy its navy and air force, so the US would face a major war with China on a scale far greater than anything the world has seen for decades, and with a real risk of a nuclear exchange, including attacks on the US itself.

This means the threshold for Washington to launch the AirSea Battle would be very high. Indeed, it is not clear what US interest in Asia would rationally justify it.

Third, even if it worked, the AirSea Battle would not win the war. By regaining sea control, America would be able to send the carriers and the marines, but what would they be able to do to force China to do America's bidding? Regaining sea control might be necessary for America to win a war, but it is not sufficient.

What it all means for Asia

So what does all this mean for Asia? Does it mean that China has, or will soon achieve, military preponderance and replaced America as the dominant power? Not at all.

China has been able to erode American sea control, but it is a long way from being able to achieve sea control itself, even within the waters of the so-called "First Island Chain" closest to China. Just as China can easily deprive America of sea control, America can do the same to China.

That means China will not be able to project power by sea in the face of US opposition for a very long time, if ever.

And that is why it is so important that the US stay engaged in Asia, to help prevent China from establishing a dominant military position. If it does so, we can envisage a future in which neither Beijing nor Washington will be able to project power by sea, because each will be able to achieve sea denial against the other.

If that happens, neither will be able to dominate Asia, so if they want to live in peace, they will need to find a way to share power together. That is the great diplomatic challenge of our age.

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