

## **US wakes in fright as Asian bedfellow goes to hog the blanket**

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The Age

17 April 2012

P. 11

Suddenly, in the past few weeks, Americans have started to ask themselves where their relations with China are heading. For the first time, voices as serious as Hillary Clinton's are questioning the assumption that Washington will always remain the dominant partner with Beijing. They are starting to debate what kind of relationship they might have instead. Their conclusion will be vital to our future as well as theirs.

Just a few months ago, Americans across the political spectrum simply assumed that the US would remain paramount in Asia indefinitely. Democrats and Republicans — who can agree on almost nothing else — all believed that there was no reason for the US to change its role in Asia to accommodate China. The Chinese simply had to choose whether to accept the US as their leader, or face it as an adversary.

The clearest official statement of this muscular confidence came last November here in Australia, when President Barack Obama addressed Parliament. His message to Beijing — and to the rest of us — was stark. The US will use all instruments in its power to maintain its leadership in Asia against any Chinese challenge, and was already building up its military position for the contest. There was not a hint of negotiation or compromise with Beijing.

These were brave words, but they raised an awkward question. What if China didn't knuckle under, but went quietly on building its power and expanding its influence? In the months since November this question has at last started to be asked.

And now the reality of China's power and ambition is sinking in. The size of its economy and its central role in the global system — and in America's own prosperity. The expansion of its military forces — especially at sea. Its determination to resume its historic role as a great power. All these make China a formidable adversary, indeed.

Several studies in recent weeks have underlined the risks that China will push back against America's reassertion of leadership, leading to escalating rivalry and risk of conflict.

Late last month, Brookings produced a sombre assessment by two noted scholars — one American and one Chinese. The Chinese side of this analysis — from leading policy analyst Wang Jisi — made it clear that China saw itself as the eventual winner of a zero-sum struggle for influence in Asia. Not much sign of backdown there.

The same week the respected Congressional Research Service published an analysis of Obama's Asia policy, highlighting serious risks and costs to a policy that the US administration seemed not to have clearly thought through.

Even more strikingly, the latest issue of Foreign Affairs carries an essay by Henry Kissinger with the telling title, *The Future of US-China relations: Conflict is a Choice, Not a Necessity*. Kissinger is of course not just the doyen of the US strategic and foreign policy establishment. He is the architect of America's historic opening to China in 1972, which paved the way for the US to get out of Vietnam, and made the US the uncontested leader of Asia, at the same time as setting the stage for China's rise.

He draws a specific analogy with the risks the US faces today and the disaster of 1914, leaving readers in no doubt about the scale of catastrophe into which the US could stumble if it gets China wrong. "A major war between developed nuclear countries must bring casualties and upheavals impossible to relate to calculable objectives," he warns. To avoid that the two countries and their leaders must co-operate to construct a new regional order in which they both play major roles. That will require negotiation and compromise on both sides. "If not, escalating strategic tension is inevitable."

Most tellingly of all, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a little noticed but significant speech in Washington last month on the future of US-China relations.

Clinton called for a new "Nixon to China" moment — a new negotiation between Washington and Beijing about their roles and relationship in Asia. She said that this would mean "a very different kind of relationship than the one we had". It would "require adjustments in our thinking and our actions, on both sides of the Pacific".

And here is the heart of the speech: "We are, together, building a model in which we strike a stable and mutually acceptable balance between co-operation and competition. This is uncharted territory. And we have to get it right, because so much depends on it.

"Interdependence means that one of us cannot succeed unless the other does as well. We need to write a future that looks entirely different from the past."

The difference between this language and Obama's Canberra speech just six months ago could not be more stark, or more important. And tellingly, Clinton did not mention Obama's speech once in her remarks. In the highly choreographed world of Washington speech-making, that is very significant. Either the administration as a whole is moving away from what Obama said, or Clinton herself is.

And that gives Australia a great opportunity. Until now our leaders have been reluctant to talk seriously to Washington about all this. Now that they have started their own debate, our leaders may pluck up the courage to join in. No one can say its not our business — after all Obama delivered his big China speech in our Parliament.

And no one can doubt we have a view. Of course we'd like the US to remain dominant in Asia, but as China grows that's just not going to be. Instead the US must choose one of three alternatives. It will either have to negotiate an accommodation with China, take it on as a strategic adversary, or turn its back on Asia and leave it to China. It is obvious which would be best for Australia.

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