

Keeping the Near Seas Peaceful: American and Allied Mission, Asia-Pacific Interest

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By any measure, China's economy and defense budget are second in size only to those of the United States. China is already a world-class military power—albeit with a regional, *not* global, focus.

China is achieving rapid but uneven military maritime and aerospace development, pursuing proximate military-technological priorities with disproportionate success. Particularly since the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis and 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing, China has progressed rapidly in aerospace and maritime development, greatly facilitating its military modernization. The weapons and systems that China is developing and deploying mirror its geostrategic priorities. Here, distance matters greatly: after domestic stability and border control, Beijing worries most about its immediate periphery, where its unresolved disputes with neighbors and outstanding claims lie primarily in the maritime direction.

Accordingly, while it would vastly prefer pressuring concessions to waging war, China is already capable of threatening potential opponents' military forces should they intervene in crises concerning island and maritime

**The ideas expressed here are the author's alone. They do not represent the policies or estimates for the U.S. Navy or any other organization of the U.S. government.*

claims disputes in the Yellow, East, and South China Seas (“Near Seas”) and the water space and airspace around them. Unfortunately, China is coupling these capabilities with rhetoric and even some actions suggesting intention to bully its neighbors for both internal and external gain. This threatens to destabilize a region haunted by history whose seven decades of peaceful economic rise have been underwritten by a robust U.S. military presence in cooperation with allies and partners.

Here the United States remains indispensable: no other nation has the capacity, willingness, and lack of territorial claims necessary to play the still-vital role of what Jonathan Pollack aptly terms “holding the ring.”¹ In the contested Near Seas and the airspace above them, therefore, the U.S. and its regional allies and partners should focus on preventing China—or any other party—from using force, or the threat of force, to undermine existing norms and peace by altering the status quo.

In the East China Sea (ECS), for example, this takes the form of continuing to make it clear that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are covered under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty based on Tokyo’s administration of them. The reality is that claims disputes are widespread in maritime East Asia, and military and paramilitary means simply cannot be used to address them productively in today’s globalized, more-enlightened world. It is inaccurate to single Japan out in this regard: its island disputes with South Korea and Russia are not acknowledged by their respective governments. China, for its part, does not acknowledge Vietnam’s contestation of claims in the Paracel Islands, and has twice used force against Vietnam in that regard. What would be ideal for long-term peace would be to bring disputes before binding international arbitration, as the legal scholar Jerome Cohen has long advocated.² The U.S. and Canada resolved their Gulf of Maine dispute successfully in precisely this manner.³ Currently, however, manifold factors, including deep mutual distrust, appear to leave Near Seas disputes unsuited to such resolution. In the meantime, then, preventing China—or any other entity—from using any form of force to alter the status quo remains vital. This may well be challenging: Beijing,

Washington, and Tokyo have likely entered their most difficult period of “competitive coexistence.”⁴ But it is essential for the region’s stability and prosperity that peace be thus preserved.

Far from its mainland, by contrast, China remains ill-prepared to protect its own forces from robust attack. Near-term progress does not transfer well in space or time. Fortunately for Beijing, the non-traditional security focus of its distant operations makes conflict unlikely; remedying its vulnerabilities would be difficult and expensive. Moreover, beyond the Near Seas, Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington share collective security interests in addition to their overwhelming economic interconnection. They can best cooperate by progressing from easier to harder activities with geographic focus gradually shifting over time from further from the Near Seas to closer to the Near Seas.

Beijing’s ‘Water Droplet’ Priorities Hierarchy

Tremendous uncertainties persist concerning China’s military development and national trajectory. Even aspects with substantial information available are often conflated misleadingly. It is therefore essential to consider larger dynamics and observe China’s military through the lens of distance. The most common source of error in foreign and even some Chinese analyses of Chinese military development is the conflation of two factors: scope and intensity. Close to home, China’s military capabilities are rapidly reaching very high levels. However, China is making much slower progress, from a much lower baseline, farther away.

Chinese military focus and deployments resemble a droplet generated by dropping a stone into water. These ripples of capability, as represented in part by its weapons systems’ radiating range rings, resemble ever-diminishing ripples. From the origins of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its People’s Liberation Army (PLA), their security efforts can be mapped to this image. At the apex, a sphere is suspended. This represents the utmost prioritization of CCP leadership authority and continuity.

Supporting the sphere is a tall, pointy cone that broadens progressively toward its base. This represents the party-state structure used to govern the People's Republic, which has grown extremely extensive. An indentation defines the cone's edge. This corresponds to China's once hotly-contested land borders with fourteen neighbors, all of which have been settled save those with India and Bhutan. The edge of the cone corresponding to China's maritime periphery in the Near Seas is the focus of Beijing's current security efforts. Beyond that are the ripples radiating from the water droplet's cone. It remains much harder for China to combat major militaries beyond the Near Seas. There it suffers the same Achilles' heel that it is targeting systematically in opponents close to home.

China's Third Plenum Challenge

On November 9-12, 2013, at the Third Plenum of the 18th CPC (Communist Party of China) Central Committee, China's leadership unveiled the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform."⁵ In parallel to the Third Plenums in 1993 and 2003, the 2013 meeting offers a broad outline for long-term reforms. The goal is to shift to fiscally and environmentally sustainable growth. "Decisive results" are desired from reforms by 2020, in time for CCP's 100th anniversary in 2021. A key question looms: can Xi Jinping's strong leadership ensure impact for these 2013 reforms on a par with those of 1993 or even 1978? Given the challenging, time-consuming nature of implementation, it will take several years to judge the actual outcome. But already the prospects for rapid, comprehensive implementation appear limited.

It seems unlikely that China's leadership's goal of rebalancing to a domestic consumption-based economy sufficient to support a new growth model can be achieved. A true transition from government investment and manufacturing toward an innovative service economy would appear to require deep reforms that vested interests are likely to obstruct and leaders are likely to view as being too politically risky. The heart of the problem

is that China's leaders are beset with strategic ambivalence: they know what they need to do from an economic standpoint, but cannot do it fully because this would undermine their authority. Beijing cultivates notions of a "Chinese dream," but cannot afford to allow individuals to define it for themselves—particularly in the public square. Faced with this dilemma, short-term stability to preserve existing power structures will likely prevail. Even the dynamic Xi-led leadership is likely to muddle through some of the most difficult areas, leaving insufficient progress before a variety of "S-curved" slowdown factors—aging, disease, pollution, resource limitations, rent seeking behavior, growing welfare expectations—become increasingly limiting, particularly towards the end of the decade.⁶

East China Sea ADIZ: Forum for Chinese Grievances

Meanwhile, it is all too tempting for China's leadership to externalize internal problems by straining the sensitive Sino-Japanese relationship, particularly at its geographic friction point: disputed islands and maritime claims in the ECS. Most recently, Beijing's abrupt, abrasive, ambiguous rollout of an ECS Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) appears designed precisely to gain claims-relevant advantages in defiance of international legal norms and stability, pressure Japan, and undermine the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Recent Chinese writings emphasize opposition to double standards and suggest disingenuously that Beijing is being opposed just because it announced an ADIZ *per se*. In a recent commentary, for instance, *Xinhua* writer Wu Liming claims: "China's announcement to establish an Air Defense Identification Zone in East China Sea has drawn criticism from the United States and Japan, yet their blame is wrong. Their logic is simple: they can do it while China can not, which could be described with a Chinese saying, 'the magistrates are free to burn down houses while the common people are forbidden even to light lamps.'" ⁷ In fact, however, there is considerable concern among foreign observers about *how* China has (and *how* it has not) gone about the announcement and explanation of its ADIZ.⁸

China's ADIZ is not being opposed wholesale through a condescending double standard, but rather because of important specifics in its implementation—a critical distinction that Beijing has ignored. Thus far, Beijing has defined its new ADIZ in a categorical manner that ignores the complexities and risks involved. Most problematic is the apparent demand that all aircraft (even those not en route to China) identify themselves and obey direction, or face unspecified consequences. This is particularly problematic because China's ADIZ overlaps so extensively with Japan's ADIZ, and even to some extent with South Korea's ADIZ. It appears to be part of a larger problem: in recent years, Beijing has entered into international organizations and agreements to reap their benefits, while insisting that it retains the right to reinterpret or even attempt to alter them over time to suit its parochial interests.

Holding the Ring—This Decade's Challenge

It is to be hoped that Beijing will choose to exercise restraint and allay concerns by its neighbors and other users of the international airspace in question by offering specific clarifications and reassurances. Otherwise, suspicions will grow that the “new type of major country relations” Beijing promotes is merely intended to signal that others should yield to a rising China's principled positions.⁹ Such a unilateral, negative approach is deeply destabilizing, and must be opposed.

Long-term trends favor American power and increasingly question the further growth and external focus of Chinese power. Chinese headwinds in the form of economic slowdown, internal challenges, and shifting societal priorities may ultimately moderate Beijing's external demands and shift resources and rhetoric from today's power-centric, bullying approach. This could finally enable the mutual understanding and reciprocity—or “two-way streets”—required for more peaceful, productive relations among Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington.

Until such a time, however, Beijing will likely be tempted to continue to externalize dissent and instability into the Near Seas, particularly the ECS and the airspace above it. Things may well get worse before they get better in this volatile, dangerous period. It is therefore essential for the United States to continue to “hold the ring” to ensure that human actions—intentional or inadvertent—do not ignite a “ring of fire” that would seriously harm all concerned. Washington and Tokyo must redouble their efforts to communicate effectively with Beijing and cooperate in areas of mutual interest, while maintaining the capability, credibility, and determination to ensure the bottom-line requirement for Asia-Pacific peace and stability: *that no one can use force, or even the threat of force, to change the status quo.*

Chapter Endnotes

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Promoting Understanding and Cooperation in U.S.-Asia Relations since 1983

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, Washington, D.C.

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Published in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014934370

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Preface

China's declaration in November 2013 of an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone was met with concern and questions not only by its neighbors South Korea and Japan, but also by their ally the United States and all countries that use the air space covered by that zone.

Beijing's decision to declare this zone was the latest salvo in a confrontation over the Senkaku Islands and the wider East China Sea area. The tensions between Chinese and Japanese entities in the air and sea are arguably reaching a crisis point.

U.S. policymakers and observers, seeing how difficult it will be for Tokyo and Beijing to reach a compromise that would reduce tensions in this region, have become increasingly concerned about the possibility of confrontation between those two nations and the potential for U.S. forces to become involved.

Given this increasingly tense situation, the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation organized a February and March 2014 program to examine maritime and territorial disputes in East Asian waters and their wider implications. This program brought together leading experts from government, the military, academia and nongovernmental organizations from Japan, China and United States for private and public discussions in Washington and Tokyo.

In mid-February, program participants met in Washington for a series of spirited private discussions with senior U.S. government and military personnel. This was followed by a public symposium that promoted broader public dialogue on this matter by allowing participants to exchange

views with approximately eighty representatives of the policy, business, diplomatic, and media communities.

To further inform the discussions and advance dialogue on these issues, the Mansfield Foundation asked participants to prepare short essays examining aspects of the East China Sea maritime disputes. Drafts of these essays formed the basis for the first round of private discussions, after which authors made revisions incorporating insights from both the public and private discussions. The final versions that make up this publication are the result of those discussions and subsequent revisions.

Readers of this publication will find diverse views from leading observers of East China Sea and wider regional maritime and territorial policy matters from Japan, China and the United States. We appreciate the support of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which allowed the Mansfield Foundation to examine this critical and timely issue from a range of perspectives. It is the hope of the Mansfield Foundation that a study of this volume will lead to greater understanding of the issues and insights on possible avenues to resolve, or at the very least to peacefully manage, conflicts in the East China Sea.

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February 2014

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation is a 501(c)3 organization that promotes understanding and cooperation in U.S.-Asia relations. The Foundation was established in 1983 to honor Mike Mansfield (1903–2001), a revered public servant, statesman and diplomat who played a pivotal role in many of the key domestic and international issues of the 20th century as U.S. congressman from Montana, Senate majority leader and finally as U.S. ambassador to Japan. Maureen and Mike Mansfield's values, ideals and vision for U.S.-Asia relations continue through the Foundation's exchanges, dialogues, research and educational programs, which create networks among U.S. and Asian leaders, explore the underlying issues influencing public policies, and increase awareness about the nations and peoples of Asia. The Foundation has offices in Washington, D.C.; Tokyo, Japan; and Missoula, Montana.

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