The Asia-Pacific: More Stable than Anyone Thinks

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Political pundits routinely identify the Asia-Pacific region as a potential flashpoint for a future war between the great powers. Yes, China is rising, Japan is rearming, and the United States has announced a "pivot" to Asia. But the real risk of a great power war in the Asia-Pacific is very low. When conflict scenarios are analyzed one by one, it becomes clear that no country in the region has an interest in upsetting the status quo - least of all China.

This year in Japan, the number one political issue is remilitarization. Will Japan rewrite its constitution to end its post-war legal commitment to pacifism? Will the country rewrite its textbooks to downplay its record of war crimes during World War II? Will the Japanese government continue to boost defense spending?

In the Koreas (both North and South), conflict is never far from anyone's mind. The latest exchange of gunfire occurred on October 19, 2014 and border incidents are a constant feature of life on the peninsula. There are also continuing fears over North Korea's nuclear program, with North Korea directly threatening to use nuclear weapons against the United States.

Taiwan's democratic political balance pivots on the one central issue that overrides all others: the perceived threat from mainland China. Farther south, the Philippines and Vietnam are involved in something approaching maritime guerrilla warfare in order to resist Chinese expansion in the South China Sea. They are reportedly considering a formal alliance directed against China.

No shortage of long-festering disputes can be added to this list: the disagreement between Japan and Russia over the Kurile Islands, the legacy of North Korea's historical abductions of Japanese citizens, differing interpretations of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong, and many others.

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The Asia-Pacific region is riddled with conflicts, cold, warm, and hot. It doesn't help that the countries of the region are armed to the teeth. Five of the world's top 10 military powers are concentrated in Northeast Asia, according to a 2015 online ranking – though not a scientific analysis, it is nonetheless indicative. All of them are actively expanding their military capabilities.

Examined against this backdrop, the probability of a major war breaking out in the Asia-Pacific region is... very low. The region is not on the brink of catastrophe. The Asia-Pacific balance of power is in fact much more stable than anyone thinks because it is not a balance of power at all. It is a one-sided, overwhelming preponderance of force - and not in China's favor.

The China threat

A rising China balanced against the established status quo Asia-Pacific powers would perhaps constitute a balance of power. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and (farther afield) Indonesia, Australia, and India are not joined in any kind of anti-China alliance but all of them are in effect aligned in balancing against the rise of China.
But when the global military power of the United States is thrown into the balance, the result is no contest. All of the major countries off China's shores are either formal or informal US allies. They buy US military equipment, incorporate US military doctrines, and rely on a promise (explicit or implicit, depending on the country) of US military support.

If they can rely on US support during a crisis, the sovereignty of America's Asia-Pacific allies is absolutely secure. This fact naturally prompts the question of whether or not they can in fact rely on US support in a crisis. Politicians and pundits throughout the Asia-Pacific region are obsessed with this question. But it is the wrong question.

It is the wrong question because there will not be a crisis in this century that threatens the sovereignty of any Asia-Pacific power. There will be disputes over illegal fishing, uninhabited reefs, and underwater mineral rights, but China is not going to invade Taiwan -- let alone Japan -- over these kinds of disputes. China does not have the capacity and will never have the motive to mount a full-scale invasion of any of its maritime neighbors.

No country has staged a major amphibious assault since the US landings at Incheon in 1950. It is doubtful that even the United States has the capacity to launch an amphibious assault against a large country (as opposed to a small island state). China certainly does not. And unless the nature of military technology changes dramatically, it never will. Mobile missiles will easily defeat lumbering landing craft for the foreseeable future.

The Asian allies question is like the NATO nuclear umbrella question. It will always remain hypothetical. It is not just unanswered. It is unanswerable.

Sophisticated defense analysts recognize this. Thus, most contemporary policy punditry on a potential Asia-Pacific conflict focuses on what has come to be called an "anti-access / area-denial" (A2/AD) scenario. The supposed threat is that China would use a combination of land-based missiles, new island bases, and an expanded PLA Navy to deny American and allied forces access to the South China Sea.

This sounds quite ominous in the abstract but quite silly in the specifics. China closing the South China Sea would be like Russia closing the Bosporus and the Baltic. It would be similar to cutting off your nose to spite your face. Pundits like to point out that billions of dollars of world trade pass through the South China Sea every year. They usually don't mention that most of this traffic is going either to or from China.

The American Interest

Sure, two-thirds of the oil bound for Taiwan, Korea, and Japan passes through the South China Sea, which sounds alarming indeed. But 80% of the oil bound for China passes through the South China Sea. What's more, oil bound for Taiwan, Korea, and Japan can always be diverted out of harm's way for the modest price of a few extra sea miles. There is no alternative route for seaborne oil bound for China.

The scenarios through which China might threaten its neighbors are either technically impossible (invasion) or downright stupid (sea closure). The question of whether or not the United States will defend its Asian allies is meaningless because the United States will never be called on to defend its Asian allies.

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The real question

The real question is whether or not the United States will push its advantages in the Asia-Pacific region in ways that are intolerable to China. For now the answer seems to be no. President Obama's famous "pivot to Asia" consists mainly of trade negotiations and the rationalization of existing US force deployments. The United States and its allies will step up monitoring China's military forces as those forces grow but will not start a war to prevent their growth.

The real question is whether or not the United States will push its advantages in the Asia-Pacific region in ways that are intolerable to China. They don't have to. As China expands its military capabilities it will drive more and more of its neighbors into the American camp. This is the essence of what I have called the American empire: American power is all-pervasive throughout the world because other countries voluntarily accede to it. The United States leads the "in" club, and (almost) everyone wants in. The insecurities generated by China's rise only serve to cement this tendency.

The longing to be accepted by the United States is not just a matter of national policy but is a characteristic of the entire political class in East Asia. Major newspapers in the region dwell on every word spoken by US officials and routinely cover the pronouncements and prognostications of US think tanks. Their readers desperately want to know what America thinks of them. And who can blame them?

It is true that not everyone wants to be a part of the American empire. In every country in the Asia-Pacific region a large proportion of the population objects to American domination. The Philippines forced the closure of American military bases there in 1992. Japanese pacifists have long called for Japan to follow suit. Even in Australia a former conservative prime minister has argued vehemently for a break with the United States.

All to no avail. Policy independence is a wonderful idea in principle. In practice it is only attractive when there are no serious repercussions for choosing the "wrong" policy. When the Philippines ordered the closure of American military bases in 1992, it had little impact other than a temporary reduction in income. In 2015 the stakes are much higher. Obviously, the Filipino elite prefers to partner with imperial America to counter an expanding China.

The net result is that China's military expansion is automatically self-defeating. China can never hope to control the region, and China's leaders must know this. China's military build-up is probably best understood as an effort to deny the United States and its allies the capacity to control China, an anti-A2/AD effort. Only from that standpoint does it make any sense. It is fundamentally defensive in nature.

No one supports a Chinese challenge to American power in the region, not even Russia.

The United States and its allies are so confident in the self-evident appropriateness of their behavior that they too easily forget that many countries are wary of American power. American opinion leaders do not think about the threatening possibility that the United States might someday deny China access to world markets. Chinese opinion leaders do. Excluded from participation in the American empire, China must worry about exclusion from the world-economy as a whole.

China, Russia, and the world-economy

The question of who controls the sea lanes of the Asia-Pacific region is metaphysical at best. No one with the power to close the sea lanes of the Asia-Pacific has any interest in closing them. Thus the
sea lanes of the Asia-Pacific will remain open for the foreseeable future. But whoever controls the sea lanes of the Asia-Pacific, the United States and its allies control the world-economy as a whole.

The question of economic advantage is much more relevant than questions of war and peace. The United States government is strongly committed to the creation of an Asia-Pacific regional trading bloc, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP is much more than a free trade agreement. It also includes highly controversial provisions on the protection of intellectual property and the subjugation of national laws to transnational tribunals.

Notably absent from negotiations over the TPP are two major Asia-Pacific powers: China and Russia. The TPP will later be presented to China and Russia as a fait accompli with basic rules already set by the United States and its allies. The same trick was played against China and Russia in the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). As with the WTO, the idea is to make membership in the TPP indispensable and only then to invite China and Russia to join.

China is using its economic leverage to promote an alternative to the TPP that it calls the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP). It has had little success. As the host of the November 2014 APEC summit, China was able to push through an agreement to conduct a two-year study of the potential for an FTAAP, in effect delaying any formal negotiations until 2017 at the earliest. Even this minor opening faced strenuous US opposition.

American dominance of the Asia-Pacific region leaves China only two avenues for diplomatic manoeuvring on anything like an equal footing. It can look south to the relatively poor countries of Southeast and South Asia or north to resource-rich Russia. While Chinese entrepreneurs engage in small-scale investment in Southeast Asia, the Chinese government is

In the midst of the European crisis and the damage of western economic sanctions, Russia needs all the friends it can get. And yet even though Russia is clearly not a party to the American empire it is nonetheless wary of deeper relations with China. The Russian capital outflows that sparked the 2014 Ruble crisis were more likely to go to Switzerland than to China. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation notwithstanding, Russia is at best a fellow-traveller to China, not an ally.

That point underscores the fundamental stability of the American order in the Asia-Pacific region. No one supports a Chinese challenge to American power in the region, not even Russia. One might add: not even the Chinese elites themselves, many of whom are in the process of seeking American passports for themselves and their families in an effort to escape the environmental and political risks of actually living in China. In this environment the best China can hope for is to maintain some degree of policy autonomy within its near seas. It is struggling to do even that.

The Obama administration's pivot to Asia is widely perceived as an overdue response to expanding Chinese power. It is widely perceived as the ineffectual posturing of a declining superpower. It is widely perceived through a fog of fear. All of these perceptions are wrong. The Asia-Pacific region is a sturdy bastion of American influence and power. The United States doesn't have to pivot to Asia. It has been there all along.