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Session I: National Security – Concepts and Threat Perceptions

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U.S. National Security Perspectives on Asia: Interests and Challenges

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Abstract: In this short discussion paper, I pose and answer three questions. First, what are U.S. global national security interests? I define four. Second, what are U.S. interests in the Asian region? I also see four. Third, how do U.S. global and Asian regional interests interact with one another? I find three. Fourth, what policy guidelines should be applied to the Asian region? I offer two.

Four Global National Security Interests

As I see it, the United States has four key global national security interests.[1] They are: (1) prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons to more states and especially to non-state terrorist groups; (2) maintenance of peace and a balance of power amongst the Eurasian great powers such that none of them can establish both maritime and continental hegemony at either end of Eurasia; (3) maintenance of an open international order, which is supported, in part by freedom of the seas and global access to assured supplies of oil, especially from the Persian Gulf; and (4) severe reduction in, if not the outright eradication of, terrorists with the ambition and the ability to attack the United States and its allies.[2] The first goal is supported, in part, by the U.S. extended deterrent role; the second, in part, by the U.S. peacetime reassurance and deterrence role in Europe and East Asia; the third, largely by the global maritime dominance of the U.S. navy; and the fourth, in part, by U.S. and allied intelligence, special operations, and airpower.

The rationales for these global interests should be clear. First, the greatest threat to the United States homeland comes, not from a conventional attack and not from a state-launched nuclear attack, but from a terrorist group that somehow acquired a nuclear weapon. States -- rogue, aggressive, bad, or otherwise -- are generally deterrable; non-state actors, much less so, if at all. States have return addresses; non-state actors mostly do not, ISIS being the notable exception. States do not willingly commit suicide; terrorist actors, although not the group in question as a whole, frequently do so. The link between nuclear weapons spread to more states, on the one

[1] This section draws from Robert J. Art, A Grand Strategy for America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), chapter 2; and Robert J. Art, "Selective Engagement in the Era of Austerity," in Kristen Lord and Richard Fontaine, eds., America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, 2012), pp. 15-27.

[2] Not all analysts agree with this list. For example, see Barry R. Posen, Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), chap. 2.

hand, and the danger that terrorist groups could get their hands on them, on the other, lies, not in governmental leaders willingly giving such weapons to those groups, but rather in the opportunities for theft by, or unauthorized transfers to, such groups. All other things being equal, therefore, the more states that acquire such weapons, the greater the chances of theft and transfer.

One effective way, although not the only effective way, to reduce the risk of theft or transfer, is to keep the number of nuclear weapons states (and the size of their respective arsenals) as low as possible. Another effective way is to keep fissile materials (plutonium and high enriched uranium) out of the hands of terrorists. The latter is best done through tight national control over nuclear stockpiles and fissile materials, supplemented by strong international oversight and safeguards. The former – limiting the number of national nuclear arsenals -- is partly achieved through the U.S. extension of its nuclear umbrella over would-be proliferators. Hence, U.S. military alliances and assurances, and the extended nuclear deterrent pledge that accompanies them, is a crucial anti-proliferation instrument.

Similarly, the maintenance of peace and a balance of power amongst the Eurasian great powers benefits the United States because it has always been to America's interest to keep its western and eastern Eurasian flanks divided – that is, not under the control of any hegemon. Great power Eurasian wars, the presumed path to hegemony, have inevitably dragged the United States in. Moreover, any Eurasian hegemon could more easily project military power to the Western Hemisphere, something not in the U.S. interest. Finally, any eastern or western Eurasian hegemon could set adverse political and economic terms for U.S. interaction with the states under the hegemon's influence. However, if peace obtains, security competitions can be muted, and if the balance of power in Eurasia is maintained, then the risks of being dragged into a Eurasian great power war are reduced, and so, too, is the ability of any Eurasian great power to project military forces in the Western Hemisphere or to set adverse political and economic terms of U.S. engagement with the states of Eurasia.

Making peace as deep as possible among the Eurasian great powers, and preserving the balance of power among them, benefits the United States in the ways outline above. A forward-based U.S. military deployment in Europe and East Asia, by providing reassurance to allies and deterrence to possible adversaries, significantly enhances the maintenance of peace and the preservation of the Eurasian great power balance. This presence alone is not sufficient to produce the peaceful Eurasian balance, but it is clearly a helpful ingredient.

Maintenance of an open international economic order is also in the U.S. interest because it makes the United States richer; makes other states richer than they would otherwise be, thereby becoming better customers for U.S. goods and services; and

provides a functional substitute to war for becoming wealthier. International trade, which has flourished in a relatively open international economic order, has been an engine of growth for the developing countries, including China. Economic development, in turn, is a sure-fire way to increase the size of the middle class, and that has been a powerful factor in moving countries politically away from authoritarian to more democratically inclined rule. Generating middle classes through economic growth is an indirect, but nonetheless effective way to spread democracy, and has clearly been more successful than military interventions to forcibly democratize countries, with Japan and Germany being the two exceptions that prove the rule.

Freedom of the seas and access to stable supplies of oil have been two of the essential prerequisites to an open international order. About ninety percent of global trade moves by water, which would not happen as easily and certainly at much greater cost, were there not freedom – and safety – of maritime passage. Similarly, until the world weans itself from dependence on oil for transportation, access to stable supplies of oil will be crucial. The U.S. may be moving closer to energy independence because of plentiful oil and natural gas supplies opened up by hydraulic fracturing (fracking), but the rest of the world is not there yet. U.S. economic trading partners depend on access to stable and reasonably-priced supplies of oil, and when those partners do well economically, so, too, does the United States. Hence, the U.S. has a significant interest in secure access to reasonably priced oil for its allies and other global trading partners. Since World War II, it has been U.S. naval predominance that has supplied the commons good of safe passage on the high seas and assured egress of Persian Gulf oil out of the Strait of Hormuz.

Finally, the United States has an interest in reducing to tolerable levels, if not outright elimination of, terrorists groups with global ambition and capability. Terrorist attacks on the U.S. or allied homelands will not produce existential threats, but they will cause death and destruction and need to be avoided. The method of invasion and forcible occupation of states, both those willingly supporting such groups, and those unable to control fully groups that operate within and from their territory, has not proven especially effective in dealing with the terrorist threat. The formula of drone strikes and special operations raids, combined with host country support and intelligence and local police forces, is a better method because it is less costly to the United States and more politically sustainable both in the United States and host countries. Sometimes exceptions need to be made, ISIS being a case in point, where more extensive U.S. military action is necessary, but these should be the exceptions not the rule. Where more extensive military action is required, moreover, the United States should rely as much as possible on host states and their neighbors. Most

governments, after all, do not support terrorists, because the latter usually want to overthrow the former.

Four Asian Security Interests

U.S. security interests in the Asian region flow directly from its global interests. First is the containment of Chinese military power; second, the prevention of nuclear weapons acquisition by South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and any other regional state; third, the preservation and expansion of an open trading system in the Asian region; and fourth, the preservation of free passage through the waters of the Malacca straits and the South China and East China seas.

China is the continental (land) hegemon in East Asia, but it is not the maritime hegemon. The United States is and must remain so. The United States cannot exercise the degree of political influence it now holds in the Asia region, particularly in maritime East and Southeast Asia and in the littoral states, with its economic power alone. Military power, specifically, U.S. maritime power (air and naval forces), is the hard core upon which the U.S. wields political influence in the region.

In my lexicon, however, U.S. maritime hegemony in East Asia does *not* mean that the United States has or should have the ability to operate its maritime forces with impunity within the waters from China's coast up to the first island chain during wartime (because it cannot now and in the foreseeable future do so), nor does it mean the United States can or should with impunity conduct withering preventive strikes against the Chinese mainland from these waters (because of the escalatory dangers involved). Instead, by U.S. maritime hegemony in East and Southeast Asia, I mean that U.S. maritime forces can, in the event of war, prevail over any other fleet on the high seas in the western Pacific on the eastern side of the first island chain. Geography favors the United States in this regard because of the choke points through which the Chinese navy must flow to operate in the western Pacific. Today, and for a long time to come, the United States can track and kill any surface ship or submarine that moves through those choke points. Retaining maritime hegemony on the eastern side of the first island chain enables the United States to protect the states in the first island chain from Chinese conquest and intimidation, although not from some considerable destruction.

Furthermore, the containment of Chinese military power does *not* mean any of the following: the lack of diplomatic, economic, and political engagement with China; the thwarting of legitimate Chinese interests in the region; the absence of military-to-military ties and cooperation; a preventive war to cut China down; or, in general, a U.S. China cold war. Containing Chinese military power means maintaining U.S.

maritime supremacy in the sense used above – the ability to prevail on the high seas and the concomitant ability to protect the island states in the first island chain and selected littoral states from conquest and political-military intimidation. It means reassuring our allies in East Asia that they have protection from such actions by deterring China from undertaking them. China is the preeminent land power in East Asia and the possessor of an increasingly power navy. Its great power will inevitably give it special sway in all regional matters. What the U.S. must aim for in containing Chinese military power is to make certain that the inevitable disputes that arise in the region will be settled peacefully through negotiations, not by force. In sum, containment need not mean the total absence of cooperation between the United States and China, but rather that China cannot act militarily with impunity in the region to impose its will

The other three interests are more straightforward and require less discussion. The goal of preventing nuclear weapons spread to more Asian states derives from the U.S. global position against nuclear spread. As the leader of the non-proliferation regime, the United States cannot be in the business of willingly allowing some states to acquire national nuclear forces while preventing others from doing so. A deliberate policy of selective nuclear proliferation, if adopted by the United States, would significantly weaken if not totally undermine the non-proliferation regime. The reason is clear: there is an international norm against the spread of nuclear weapons. In this case, the norm underwrites and legitimizes the international effort to stop nuclear weapons spread. To take the position that some states can have them while others cannot is to destroy the legitimacy of the universality of the norm and thereby to undercut the regime that the norm supports. Moreover, a Japan that has gone nuclear is a Japan that no longer puts its trust in the U.S. alliance and in the credibility of its extended deterrence guarantee, raising concerns in other regions about U.S. reliability. After all, if the country that is in probably the tightest alliance with the United States doubts the reliability of its ally, what are other states going to conclude about their alliance with the United States? Because of its adverse NPT and alliance effects, a Japan gone nuclear means big trouble for the United States.

Preservation of the relatively open international economic order in the region benefits both the states in the region and the United States. China may now be the largest trading partner for most of the states in East and Southeast Asia, but American trade with that region is considerable and remains important both to the U.S. economy and to the states in the region, especially since most of them run quite favorable trade balances with the United States. [3] Moreover, imports and exports have become more important to the U.S. economy. Before 1945, imports and exports as a percentage of

[3] All economic data come from the World Bank, the IMF, the OECD, and the U.S. Census Bureau.

the U.S. economy ran about 8-10%. By the 1980s, that percentage had risen to 20-22%. In 2013, imports and exports of both goods and services constituted 30% of the U.S. economy. Today, the United States is truly a trading nation. While it continues to invest more in Europe than in Asia by a significant margin, it trades more with the latter than the former.[4] In 2014, U.S. imports from, and exports to, the EU28 constituted, respectively, 17.8% and 17% of total U.S. imports and exports. By contrast, imports from, and exports to East and Southeast Asia constituted, respectively, 36% and 22% of total U.S. imports and exports.[5]

Finally, freedom of the seas and safe passage in the region is essential to trade and to the open regional international economic order. As argued earlier, trade is an engine of growth and under the right conditions can be an effective promoter of more democratic forms of governance. Both to help trade promotion and to prevent the states of the region from being subjected to either trade disruptions or naval intimidation by China, the United States needs to help maintain safe passage and freedom of the seas in the region.

Three Global-Regional Interactions

Of the five Asian great powers – Russia, Japan, India, China, and the United States -- only the United States has a global political, economic, and military reach. It maintains alliances in four regions of the world and is committed to defend between 36-40 countries, depending on how one views several U.S. security commitments. Economically, it is still the world's largest economy measured by nominal dollars if no longer by purchasing power parity, and it certainly has the most dynamic and innovative economy of the world's largest economies. Militarily, it is the sole superpower, meaning that it can operate far from home simultaneously in two or more regional theaters. No other great power comes close to matching the United States simultaneously on all three dimensions.

The fact that the United States is Asia's only global power is important to note because of the interaction effects between U.S. global and Asian interests. Unless carefully managed, what the United States does in the Asian theater can have adverse consequences on its other regional positions. Similarly, what it does in those other regions can have adverse effects on its Asian position. The United States is the only

[4] In 2013, the United States invested about four times as much in the EU 28 as it did in East and Southeast Asia.

[5] Including India raises the U.S. import and export figures for Asia by 1% and 1.3%, respectively. In 2014, imports and exports to Canada and Mexico combined were, respectively, 27. 3% and 34%.

Asian great power that faces these interaction effects, which complicates its policymaking towards the Asian theater because it cannot consider *only Asia* when formulating its Asian policies.

I can think of three important ways that its actions in Asia interact with its global position, but I am certain there are other important ones that I have not thought of. One has already been discussed: the effects of Japan's going nuclear on the credibility of the American extended deterrent nuclear guarantee, because what Japan does in Asia is likely to affect not just Asia, but also the global non-proliferation regime. Another interaction effect is the drain that Asia imposes on the U.S. global military posture: the more military resources the United States channels to Asia, the fewer it has for the European and Persian Gulf theaters. In this sense, it is largely irrelevant whether China at some point surpasses the United States in nominal GDP. What is relevant is that as long as China's economy continues to grow, even if only at high single digit rates, and as long as China channels ever more resources into its military forces, the more military resources the United States will have to divert to Asia. More for Asia means less elsewhere. Similarly, if the United States cannot prevent nuclear spread outside of Asia, or if it finds it cannot reallocate non-Asian military assets to Asia, then its other regional interests are likely to adversely affect its Asian interests.

These two interaction effects are straightforward. The third – the interdependence of commitments conundrum -- is a bit more complicated. During the Cold War, the United States operated on the principle that its alliance commitments were interdependent upon, not independent of, one another. It always worried that a perceived lack of resolve in one area would adversely affect allied and adversary perceptions of its resolve in other areas. The phrase "peace is indivisible" captures the U.S. reigning philosophy of the Cold War, or as Lyndon Johnson once put it (to paraphrase): "if we don't stand firm in Vietnam, then we will have to fight a bigger war, later on, closer to home." Commitments were seen as interdependent, which meant that the United States took actions to defend these commitments not only for their inherent worth, but also for their symbolic worth. In this sense U.S. regional commitments were tightly linked with one another, not only within a region, but across regions. This caused the United States to do some stupid things during the Cold War.

Unfortunately, as I see it, this mind set about the interdependence of commitments has not disappeared, along with the Cold War, at this particular juncture, and the reason why should be perfectly clear. In spite of its leaders' rhetoric about staying the course, and despite their protestations to the contrary, U.S. staying power and will power, as well as future U.S. military capabilities, are being questioned. Those abroad who depend on the United States for their security are looking carefully at what it

does not just in their region, but also in other regions where the United States has heavy security commitments. At a time of perceived relative decline, and at a time when the United States is retrenching to a degree, security dependents are naturally acutely sensitive to U.S. global actions so as to glean information about the future direction of U.S. reliability. When decline and retrenchment seem to be the order of the day, commitments do tend to become interdependent to a degree in the minds of security dependents. More to the point, U.S. decision makers *themselves* may also approach a regional problem with this other-regional concern in mind. They may well worry that a regional actor, either a security dependent or an ally or both, might read too much into the actions that the United States takes in a region other than their own. So, even if other actors do not actually believe U.S. commitments are interdependent, to the extent that U.S. decision makers worry that others might believe that they are, then, for all practical purposes, they are interdependent.

Two Policy Guidelines

Finally, although they are, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of what I was asked to do, I offer two brief but I think important policy guidelines for U.S. actions in the Asian theater. The first concerns U.S. dealings with China; the second, U.S. dealings with allies.

The first policy guideline is this: the United States needs to combine assurances with containment, and to do so, the United States cannot allow its China hardliners to hijack its China policy. In *Arms and Influence,* Schelling argued that assurances must be combined with coercion.[6] Deterrence is a form of coercion. It says: "do not alter the status quo; otherwise I will have to take drastic action." China needs to understand what America's red lines are, but it also needs to understand that the United States is also prepared to compromise where possible and that it will not take advantage of Chinese willingness to cooperate or Chinese concessions. In particular, China needs to understand that concessions will not lead to demands for more concessions. Without such assurances, the coercer's demand for concessions only strengthens the determination of the target not to concede anything out of fear that it will get on the slippery slope of never-ending concessions. For this reason, Schelling argued that coercion is more likely to work if combined with assurances.

The need for U.S. assurance is especially important today given the current state of U.S.-China relations. These two states are becoming locked into a potentially precarious cycle in their relationship. China's leadership is anxious about its hold on

[6] Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 74.

power and its legitimacy in the eyes of its people, and, consequently, is acutely sensitive to any actions by the United States or others that would make the elite look soft on defending China's national interests. China's populace takes great pride in China's accomplishments and its swift rise and, if anything, is even more assertive than the leadership in claiming the rights that China's newfound power gives it. As a consequence, China's leaders appear no longer willing to pursue a policy of accommodation and "lying low." Peaceful rise appears out; an assertive nationalism appears in.

For its part, the United States is likely to be increasingly sensitive to any Chinese challenge to its position in Asia, out of a fear that one challenge left unmet will cause its entire position to begin to unravel. The United States will be at the ready to respond to any challenges to its East Asian maritime position, to its alliances and security relationships, and to its perceived staying power. In the face of growing Chinese military power, U.S. preoccupation with its credibility will make it quick, perhaps too quick, to respond firmly to Chinese challenges that are perceived to threaten its regional interests.

If this picture correctly captures the current state of U.S.-China relations, then the United States and China are at the beginning stages of a new situation whereby each will be concerned not just with their real and concrete national interests, but also with the symbolic value of the steps that each takes in responding to the other.[7] China's growing nationalism will make it pricklier to deal with; its preoccupation with credibility will make the United States less willing to give way. Chinese nationalism and American credibility concerns could feed upon one another in dangerous ways, unless checked. On the U.S. side, dampening down this dangerous spiral has to involve at the least reining in America's China hardliners. I must stress again that this does not mean foregoing U.S. red lines in the region; it does mean resisting a wholesale assault on the cooperative aspects of U.S.-China relations, of which there are a considerable number.

The second guideline is this: the United States needs to find the right balance between assurance and restraint in its relations with allies. It needs to make certain that its allies believe that the United States will take care of them, on the one hand, but, on the other, not make them in the process believe that the U.S. security guarantee is a hunting license to see how far they can press China. Great powers cannot allow themselves to be jerked around by their security dependents.[8] Allies

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[7] I first sketched out this picture in 2010. See Robert J. Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul," Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 125, No. 3 (Fall 2010), pp. 390-91.

[8] In fact, the United States has been rather adept at preventing this from happening, not with every ally and not all the time (Israel is a notable exception), but a good part of the time. See Michael

have shared interests, but their interests never completely converge. Alliance leaders, therefore, have to worry about how to assure allies but without encouraging or enabling them to pursue their national interests as they see fit. Striking the balance between assurance and restraint is not easy. Too much assurance and the restraining bonds are loosened; too much restraint and the assurances of support are weakened. The need to strike this delicate balance will be with the United States in East Asia at least until the territorial disputes in the East and South China seas are settled. Unless the balance between assurance and restraint is deftly struck, the United States can either get itself into a war it does not want, or see the hollowing out of an alliance with an important ally.

Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts," International Security, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 7-49.