

Response to PacNet #63 “The US and China: sliding from engagement to coercive diplomacy” by Joseph Bosco

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Week after week, the ranks of China Threat deniers are perceptibly thinning. In *PacNet* #63, Mike Lampton parts company (sort of) from “[s]ome in the China studies field [who] have argued against the proposition that China’s regional policy has become more assertive.” Yet, even as his rich and complex argument acknowledges a troubling “qualitative change in Chinese regional policy and broader strategic alignment,” it constructs a kind of moral equivalence between China and its neighbors, particularly Japan.

“What we face...is conflicting, assertive nationalisms... Asia’s problem is not simply China, but rather the conflicting nationalisms and insecurities of many countries in the region.” But that formulation ignores the reality of which country’s militant nationalism triggered the nationalism of others, or at least intensified and militarized it. It was Beijing’s military buildup, expansionist rhetoric, and aggressive actions that engendered the “insecurities” of other countries, not the other way around.

Even Tokyo’s “ill-advised action renaming islands in the East China Sea” was simply a reaffirmation of Japan’s existing administration of the Senkaku/Diayou Islands, not a sweeping new assertion of sovereignty over disputed or unclaimed maritime territory, as China has done, e.g., over virtually the entire South China Sea including its land features and underwater resources. Moreover, Tokyo’s assigning names to islets is hardly the same as Beijing’s deploying ships and oil rigs in the South China Sea or harassing Japanese vessels in Japan’s recognized economic exclusive zone.

In short, there is a qualitative difference between the defensive nationalism of China’s neighbors confronting the present and emerging threat it is creating, and the aggressive nationalism that China stimulates among its people by stoking memories of historic wrongs (“neuralgias...of the past.”)

Yet, Lampton goes beyond equating China’s assertiveness and other countries’ nationalism; he subordinates the danger of Chinese initiatives to the dynamics of regional responses. “[W]hile it is certainly true that assertive Chinese nationalism is a problem, the larger challenge is the interacting nationalisms driving many polities and societies in Asia to be assertive.”

Then there is his treatment of the US role. He asks whether “US policy in any way [has] given added push to

negative developments,” but does not propose a direct answer. Instead, he returns repeatedly to the nationalism of others as a critical, even decisive, concern, and warns of “clearly disastrous paths that Washington and others should eschew.” What are those perilous paths? “Washington needs to be careful that in opposing the assertive nationalism of China we are not giving free rein to others...Washington should not take actions that are to everyone’s detriment, not least the interests of our friends in the region.”

Lampton, justifiably, is concerned that US and regional responses not exacerbate the situation. “Washington needs to find ways to address the nibbling strategy of Beijing without sliding into escalation, doing great damage to the regional (and global) economy, or taking on more than the US people are willing to bear.” Since all would suffer from the economic costs of conflict, “both China and the US need this deteriorating circumstance like a hole in the head.” Assuming commensurate motivations on both sides, “that may be the most compelling strategic argument of all to change course.”

But if China’s strategic planners assume that the US will inevitably change course for all the good reasons Lampton describes, there would be little or no reason for Beijing to do so. Thus, the vocabulary change in some US quarters from engagement to deterrence and dissuasion to coercive diplomacy.

Another of Lampton’s cautions on what the US should not do in responding to China’s challenge is what he calls a “strategy of asymmetric destabilization.” That is, we should avoid the temptation to make trouble for Beijing in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan “in the misguided notion that whatever multiplies Beijing’s problems must be in our interests.” Ironically, that diversion and distraction approach is precisely what China has done to the US with its proliferation policies and its [steadfast support for North Korea](#).

But even if one were to accept Lampton’s notion that it would be unseemly and imprudent to meddle overtly and proactively in any of China’s “core interests” such as Hong Kong or Taiwan (not to mention Tibet and Xinjiang), that is not the same as weakening our commitment to democracy, even in China. Yet, Lampton comes close to suggesting that over-emphasis on human rights is as much anathema as an over-militarized US reaction in his joint call for “minimizing the siren song of martial and values discourse.”

Here, Lampton adheres to the conventional realist view that the nature of China’s governance can somehow be expediently separated from its external conduct, despite what history teaches about tyrannies generally and what Chinese leaders from Mao to Deng to Xi have demonstrated about using force against both domestic and foreign perceived enemies. It may well be that greater emphasis on human

rights and democracy in China is the surest way to avoid outright military conflict.

Response to Joseph Bosco by David M. Lampton

PacNet #63 elicited considerable commentary, both on and off line. Some was supportive and some was not. My piece had been percolating in my mind for a time – Robert Sutter’s article “Dealing with America’s China’ problem in Asia” (*PacNet* #58) energized me to put my thoughts to paper. It is interesting to me what words, phrases, and ideas various readers extract from the same article. Joseph Bosco did not join my article on most of the points I thought were central. Among points most central to my argument were:

- “The vocabulary employed to describe approaches to managing bilateral ties has changed, captured by the decreasing use of an ‘engagement’ vocabulary...[N]ow one hears voices using the vocabulary of...‘deterrence,’ and...coercive diplomacy in both societies.”

- “Beijing is attempting to peel back the maritime status quo ante in the East and South China seas, one thin layer at a time.”...“In the end, however, Washington needs to find ways to address the nibbling strategy of Beijing without sliding into escalation...” Parenthetically, there still is a lively debate over the degree to which China is “reacting” and the degree to which it is initiating. While I see a reactive component to Chinese policy and behavior, I think we have to face the fact that initiative is in the ascendance.

- In trying to figure out how we might collectively address this challenge, I called for serious research on seven questions, four of which concern why Beijing is headed in its current direction, with the latter three queries asking whether US action has in any way contributed to this, what is to be learned from our Cold War experience with the Soviet Union, and what are the “disastrous paths that Washington and others should eschew?”

As the US considers how to respond to developments, I argued that we should keep in mind the following considerations, without attaching a weighting to each.

- First, sometimes a nation’s (e.g., China’s) policies are sufficiently counterproductive that it [China in this case] comes under pressure from spontaneous and uncoordinated responses of the rest of the international system. “The PRC’s relations with its periphery have suffered a net decline over the last five years: Beijing’s ‘box score’ for bilateral relations shows overall losses...” I presume that for at least some in Beijing this might be a reason to modify policy.

- Second, I observe that “[I]t is hard to see how the PRC’s external circumstances mesh with the need for internal focus.” The implication is that this problematic external situation of deteriorating relations ought to be viewed in Beijing as a huge distraction from pressing internal needs.

- Third, I call for Americans to examine Cold War experience and to recall that allies and friends can compound US difficulties in managing relations with another big power and that managing our friends is important. It is in this context that I mentioned Japan, not “moral equivalence” as Bosco asserts. To my knowledge, the US government

continually has been urging (appropriately in my view) Japan to eschew provocative behaviors, back to the so-called “nationalization” of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in 2012. The Philippines and Vietnam also have their objectives, and their interests are not always identical to ours. If one needs further evidence, consider the difficulty that certain behaviors in Tokyo create for the US-ROK-Japan triangle. Saying that nationalism is not a problem limited to China seems to me incontrovertible.

- Fourth, it is wise to remember that trying to prevent an action that hasn’t happened yet (“deterrence”) is “easier” than trying to get a state to undo action already taken (“coercive diplomacy”). When considering what to do, one must consider “the willingness of one’s population to sustain a commitment; the material resources available to sustain that commitment..., and other global demands drawing on one’s resources – how stretched does one appear to be?” The first job of a leader is to bring resources into some semblance of balance with objectives, political and economic. A recurring problem of the Asia “rebalance” has been the widespread perception in the region and beyond that the US has its hands full elsewhere. Further, Beijing may well have an inflated assessment of its own capabilities, and an insufficient appreciation of the capabilities of others, not least the US.

- Fifth, we don’t want to compound the difficulties of friends in Hong Kong and Taiwan by seeming to use developments there to multiply Beijing’s difficulties, only to find such an effort boomeranging to the detriment of these societies. In the case of Taiwan, uncertainties and political flux notwithstanding, that society seems to be a relative island of calm, so it is far from clear who would gain from a rising temperature across the Strait.

- Finally, the bottom line is: “[I]f Beijing wants to improve relations with Washington, the easiest, quickest, and most mutually beneficial path is to improve relations with its own periphery.” I hope someone in Beijing is listening.

A central part of Bosco’s argument, found in his last paragraph, seemingly argues that only political change in China is likely to produce foreign policy change more compatible with US and regional interests and international standards. Whether true or not, one has to ask, “Is such change within US capabilities to produce, is there much recent indication that the US can predict the outcome of rapid change in authoritarian systems, and haven’t the past modest ambitions of emphasizing cooperation in US-China relations produced more globally beneficial outcomes over the last four decades than a political-strategic role of the dice may produce in the next forty?” It is this observation that brings us to something that Bosco hints at, correctly in my view: If Washington seems too risk averse, it could inadvertently encourage greater pushing and risk taking by Beijing.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.