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Loosening the US-China Straitjacket
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Said the spider to the fly, 'Will You Walk into My Parlour?'. In his recent PacNet on Australia's positioning betwixt and between the US and China, Brad Glosserman steps into Hugh White's sitting room and is duly impressed. But Glosserman concludes that Australia's agreement with the United States to host marines in Darwin shows that the Gillard government has not followed White's main principle of design. For that to be so, Australia would be doing all it could to encourage the sharing of power between Washington and Beijing-- and that is not happening.

Disputes may continue about the wisdom of Australia's decision, the success of Obama's visit, and the acuity of White's criticisms. But one thing is clear: this debate assumes that for Canberra and other Asia-Pacific capitals, good strategic policy consists of finding the right option in the growing contest between China and the US. Taken to its extreme, this logic is both hazardous and deceptive.

Most experts on Asia-Pacific security agree that the Sino-US competition should not lead to a new Cold War. Unlike the US and the Soviet Union, China and the US are economically interdependent. Their military competition, while increasingly noticeable, pales in significance alongside the arms races of the Cold War. And Asia is not neatly divided by ideology, let alone by a wall.

So far, so good. But those same analysts also tell us that Asia's security depends most of all on the quality of the US-China relationship. This judgment makes sense; the United States is the prevailing power and China is its main challenger. But when this argument becomes our sole focus, we find ourselves in a straitjacket that restricts our options. This is precisely what is happening as the region, having become increasingly aware of China's rise, is now digesting the Obama administration's message that the United States is back in Asia.

Whether the US and China share or contest power in Asia will have a major bearing on the region's security environment. But the regional order will also depend upon domestic political conditions in several of the larger regional countries. It will be affected by the role of India, the quality of Japan's diplomacy, the geopolitical destiny of the Korean Peninsula, and the roles played by Southeast Asia's rising middle powers, Vietnam and Indonesia. And it will depend on the norms and rules of the system that are still in embryonic form in the multilateral institutions centered on ASEAN.

An excessive focus on the Sino-US balance obscures the autonomous importance of these factors. It also creeps into places where it doesn't belong. A good example is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which will build on the four-country free trade area established by Singapore, Chile, Brunei, and New Zealand. In endorsing the TPP idea at the Hawaii APEC Summit, Barack Obama made a strong commitment to economic integration in Asia. This is promising because the US has been lagging in this area, and because the TPP is not being designed as an exclusive group but as a stepping stone to wider openness. But when treated as part of a US attempt to wrest influence from China, Washington's enthusiasm for the TPP can look like a geopolitical power play. This explains some of the nervousness about the Partnership in Beijing, where China's leaders are at risk of treating a trade agreement as if it were a military alliance.

In the midst of this competitive pressure, the region's small and medium powers need to dance nimbly. But the more the region's politics are boiled down to a China-US contest, the starker the options seem. This is clear in a recent report, (http://www.victoria.ac.nz/css/docs/CSCAP%20national%20study/CSCAP%20National%20Study%20Sep%202011.pdf) *Projecting Our Voice*, which has been published on behalf of the New Zealand branch of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific. Its authors suggest that in the event of serious China-US tensions, "New Zealand's alignment of values and tradition with the United States, Australia and Europe" will not necessarily ensure that Wellington sides with Washington. In the same situation, 'China may expect a country so economically dependent on it and which has avowedly pursued an independent foreign policy to resist any United States activities that it perceives as being contrary to China's interests.' If analysts in New Zealand are concerned about such a squeeze, it will be even tighter for countries located closer to the action.

This makes it even more important to ensure that our options do not start and end with the US and China. For example, as the authors of *Projecting our Voice* recognize, New Zealand's place in the Asia-Pacific also depends upon relationships with others including traditional and emerging Southeast Asian partners, Japan and Korea in North Asia, and India further to the west. The sometimes delicate balance that is struck between multilateral engagement and bilateral relationships in Asia is also part of the mix. These other relationships are important in and of themselves, not just in terms of what they mean for positioning between Washington and Beijing.

This is where the Gillard government's agreement to host US forces in Australia encounters potential constraints. At stake is not only Australia's place in the US-China equation, which has definitely swung in the US direction. The stationing of US forces could complicate other important relationships for Australia, including in Southeast Asia. This seems

counterintuitive because this new instance of US-Australian military cooperation reflects the increased strategic importance that the two allies attach to Southeast Asia. The connections with Australia's own geographical location on the edge of the Indian Ocean are also part of the picture.

But, wherever possible, Australia should demonstrate the importance of these adjacent places and routes in ways that boost its reputation for autonomous decision rather than strategic subordination. This is especially so for Australia's relationship with its closest Asian neighbor. If Indonesia feels that the Darwin decision brings the US-China competition closer to home and divides opinion in ASEAN, Australia may have succeeded in straining a regional grouping whose increased unity is in its clear long-term interests.

Australia's decision tightens the US-China straitjacket, reducing the breathing space that good strategic policy requires. But it should not be thought that retaining maximum wriggle room vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing is the universal secret to success: this notion also feeds the assumption that there is only one relationship in the region that really matters. And it may in fact be in both China's and America's interests to see this restricted vision perpetuated: views of them as either the region's essential partners or its deadly rivals both cement their place in the pecking order. But Asia is too interesting, promising, and diverse for such a crude logic to apply. Simple bipolarity did not exist in Cold War Asia and it has even less place in our thinking today.

Regional countries should be doing more to escape this bilateral constriction. And right now there may be a good opportunity to do so. China and the US are both overcompensating – China out of recognition that it was too assertive last year, the US out of a feeling that it was ignoring Asia diplomatically. Both will be preoccupied with domestic political contests next year. So it may be a good time for the rest of us to encourage a genuinely multilateral and multipolar approach to Asia's order.

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