

POLICY BRIEF **10.02.20**

Time to Reapply Defense Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific

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Everywhere one looks in the Indo-Pacific region, a potential geopolitical crisis seems just on the horizon. Whether it is maritime vessels plying the disputed waters of the South China Sea,¹ rising tensions related to Taiwan, or the contested Line of Actual Control² separating India and China, the risks of armed conflict appear to be rising as the projection of hard power continues apace. These ongoing flashpoints require that the national security establishments of adversarial countries intensify their resolve to pursue discreet defense diplomacy, which has the potential to mitigate conflict and avert crises.

Competition among nations over influence and territorial claims is an enduring feature of the international system. The preeminence of the United States throughout the Indo-Pacific in the post-Cold War period has largely helped maintain a stable equilibrium. However, tectonic shifts largely driven by the dramatic rise of China are underway in the region, presaging a more dangerous future.

While a strong military deterrent posture is an essential component of conflict prevention, so too is proactive diplomacy, which can lower the temperature of regional dynamics. According to *The Military Balance 2020* from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, defense spending in Asia has increased by more than 50% within the last decade.³ However, there has not been a concomitant rise in diplomatic investments.

As former Secretary of Defense James Mattis once noted in support of diplomacy, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately.”⁴

Nationalism and populism have become powerful currents in global politics, which threaten to undermine the post-World War II liberal international order.⁵ Against such a backdrop, de-escalating conflicts in the Indo-Pacific, some of which have persisted for decades, seems elusive. Nonetheless, there is the potential for constructive solutions.

VALUE OF DEFENSE DIPLOMACY

Strategic engagement can be defined as defense diplomacy between actors who are potential adversaries, which leads to the establishment of instruments that allow these states to manage their relationships with the ultimate goal of diminishing the risk of interstate conflict. As research elucidates, given the interference of politics in diplomatic efforts, history affirms the value of secrecy in the conduct of strategic engagement.⁶

Key examples include military-to-military diplomatic efforts between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, notably involving the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) to avoid dangerous encounters at sea and the Standing Consultative Commission to ensure compliance with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Though maintenance of secrecy is challenging in the contemporary era due to rapid dissemination of



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information via the internet and cyber intrusions, maximum efforts to ensure privacy of diplomatic engagements should be pursued.

A PATH FORWARD WITH BEIJING

The current status of the relationship between the United States and China, often regarded as the most consequential bilateral relationship in international affairs, is arguably at its lowest point since the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. As the White House asserted in its May 2020 strategy document on China, “The CCP’s [Chinese Communist Party] expanding use of economic, political, and military power to compel acquiescence from nation states harms vital American interests and undermines the sovereignty and dignity of countries and individuals around the world.”⁷ The current anti-China rhetoric publicly promulgated by the U.S. government runs counter to the discreet approach pursued by former President George H.W. Bush. Following the incidents in Tiananmen, Bush secretly dispatched then-National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger to Beijing to attempt to salvage the rapidly deteriorating Sino-U.S. relationship.

The competition between the United States and China is playing out most prominently in the South China Sea. Beijing has steadfastly maintained that its sovereignty and territorial claims over the South China Sea are based upon sound historical and legal principles. However, in July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines against the legitimacy of the Chinese nine-dash line claim based upon alleged historical rights.⁸ The United States, although not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), complies with the treaty’s provisions, including freedom of navigation in territorial waters.

In a sign of strengthened support of the rights of South China Sea claimant states as well as unrestricted access to the global maritime commons, the United States has

increased the frequency of its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS)—recently to include two carrier strike groups—and openly endorsed the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling.⁹ During planned Chinese military exercises in August 2020 in multiple regional seas including the South China Sea, the United States conducted a U-2 reconnaissance overflight that elicited strong Chinese protests.¹⁰ In response, the People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force fired multiple land-based, medium-range ballistic missiles into the South China Sea, including the DF-21D and the DF-26B.¹¹ The DF-21D has been portrayed as a potential “carrier killer” able to overcome the U.S. Aegis Combat System.¹²

During the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, China has become increasingly assertive on the global stage. Chinese government representatives have bristled at any criticism leveled at the country’s behavior, employing “wolf warrior” diplomacy¹³ to condemn the United States and Europe. Belligerent Chinese activities include, but are not confined to, live-fire drills¹⁴ as well as increased deployments of naval and air assets in the South China Sea, the passage of far-reaching national security legislation in Hong Kong,¹⁵ indifference to international condemnation of imprisonment of Uighurs in Xinjiang,¹⁶ and a deadly clash with Indian soldiers along their mutually contested border.¹⁷

Taiwan has been a persistent subject of U.S.-China enmity dating back to the normalization of bilateral relations and the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979. While the United States officially acknowledges that there is only one China, Washington’s position of “strategic ambiguity” is not a feasible long-term policy. China consistently maintains that Taiwan is one of its core interests, and its ultimate goal of reunification is non-negotiable. The United States continues to sell arms to Taiwan consistent with the TRA. Rising friction between China and Taiwan is likely in an environment in which Taiwan is increasing its defense budget and China is escalating its military deployments in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁸

Defense diplomacy has a key potential role to play in ameliorating a perilous security environment. While the United States has agreed not to mediate any agreements between China and Taiwan as part of the Six Assurances of 1982, Washington can nonetheless play a constructive behind-the-scenes function to convey to Beijing in unambiguous terms that the United States will not abandon Taiwan should China preemptively attack. In order to send a clearer and more forceful message to Beijing regarding U.S. commitment to defense of Taiwan, the United States should consider inviting Taiwan to participate in the 2022 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) joint naval exercises in Hawaii.¹⁹ By comparison, China was disinvited from participation in the 2018 and 2020 RIMPAC exercises due to the downturn in U.S.–China security relations.

Given the increasing operational tempo of military assets deployed in the region by the United States, China, and Taiwan, defense diplomacy can contribute to risk reduction and crisis management architecture to avert an accident that could lead to open warfare. While strategic ambiguity has maintained the status quo since 1979, China has developed vastly greater regional power over the intervening decades that renders this policy outmoded. We cannot assume that past strategies are predictive of future success.

In previous years, Beijing has canceled military-to-military exchanges as a means of expressing displeasure with Washington over a range of actions, most consistently related to arms sales to Taiwan.²⁰ These cancellations are largely political in nature, not specifically at the behest of the respective militaries. An advantage of military-to-military dialogue as compared to political exchanges is the greater degree of longevity of career military officers vis-à-vis elected government officials, particularly in the United States. This allows potentially valuable relationships to be established. In the context of U.S.–China relations, this is especially important given the documented underdevelopment of crisis management mechanisms.²¹

Continuity of military personnel was particularly beneficial historically in the case of INCSEA between the United States and the Soviet Union, even at the height of the Cold War. Given the current climate of hyper-nationalism prevalent in the United States and China, high-level confidential dialogues between military officers and national security officials of both countries are more likely to yield positive results.

In the naval domain, the United States and China have had an existing institutional framework in place since 1998 in the form of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA). Discussions with participants in these dialogues indicate that China acknowledges the value of the forum to increase operational safety and has buy-in from political leadership to avert a crisis at sea. The United States and China should reinvigorate the MMCA and incorporate the activities of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia²² as well as the Chinese Coast Guard in the South China Sea.

It is unlikely that the traditional tools of coercive diplomacy,²³ as espoused by the late Alexander George, would be successful if used by the United States unilaterally towards China given the latter's global economic and military strength. Nonetheless, the United States, in concert with like-minded countries that find China's behavior threatening, must devise a strategy to alter the Chinese calculus. China will not change its trajectory unless it perceives benefits for itself as well as downsides to continuing on its present course.

Alongside increased diplomatic efforts, the United States should continue robust FONOPS individually and in concert with regional allies. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, initiated in 2007 to include the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, is a burgeoning strategic partnership, members of which have recently affirmed their resolve to cooperate in defense and security in pursuit of freedom of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific.²⁴ The purpose of FONOPS is not, as the Chinese allege, to establish hegemony, but rather to assure all nations that the waters and airspace in and around the South China Sea are part of the global commons.

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INDIA-CHINA TENSIONS

Increasingly assertive Chinese behavior is not confined to the maritime domain. The June 2020 clash between Chinese and Indian soldiers along their disputed land border known as the Line of Actual Control resulted in dozens of fatalities and left both countries with few good options going forward.²⁵ Bilateral military diplomacy has stalled since mid-July and the situation remains tense due to large numbers of troops massed on either side of the border.²⁶

Civilian diplomats and military officers from China and India have been meeting periodically in an effort to de-escalate tensions. There are reports that renewed diplomatic efforts are scheduled to occur in the near term.²⁷ The two countries fought a war over the border areas in 1962 with great loss of life. The perceived strategic value of the territory for both sides is a disincentive to mutual compromise.

Territorial disputes between China and India have been a long-standing concern and are unlikely to dissipate imminently. Since nationalism runs high in Beijing and New Delhi, breaking the current logjam will likely require commitment by both countries to diplomacy outside the public domain as well as continued efforts at military disengagement in contested areas.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The current trajectory of rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific portends danger for inadvertent armed conflict that could escalate to warfare. Discreet defense diplomacy shielded from nationalistic and partisan sentiments presents a valuable opportunity to advance regional security and to forge the path to a more equitable and peaceful environment. The following is a list of policy recommendations that will aid in the development of such a future:

Importance of Alliances and Regional Engagement

A robust defense posture must accompany any diplomatic approach in order to

negotiate from a position of strength. The United States will be a more effective negotiator if backed by the resolve of traditional allies such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia, as well as by emerging regional partners such as India and Vietnam. However, the withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in January 2017, as well as the weakening of the American commitment to post-World War II regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, have given pause to many countries that rely upon U.S. support.

Avoiding the U.S.-China Binary Choice

Countries in the region do not wish to be placed in the position of choosing between the United States and China. While China is often their largest trading partner, the United States is their most significant security guarantor. This complex geostrategic dynamic is unlikely to change. Defense diplomacy, therefore, is of even greater importance to mitigate the risk of conflict among rival nations, particularly as applied to flashpoints such as the South China Sea.

U.S. Ratification of UNCLOS

The United States would be conferred greater legitimacy in its efforts in the South China Sea by ratifying UNCLOS. Though China is an UNCLOS signatory, it consistently fails to abide by the terms of the agreement. The United States would be able to exercise more effective moral leadership following formal treaty ratification.

The Nuclear Factor

Given the fact that China, India, the United States, and North Korea are already nuclear powers, conflict is likely to remain below the threshold of full-scale warfare. The role of the contemporary military is therefore avoidance of minor or proxy conflicts as opposed to victory in combat. Even the remote chance of deployment of nuclear weapons is a sufficient incentive for defense establishments to maximize all efforts aimed at strategic stability.

Diminishing the Impact of Politics

Defense diplomacy will be most successful if it is conducted with minimal political interference and shielded from the public domain to the greatest extent possible. While civilian leadership is ultimately in charge of national security efforts, the military can serve an important role given their common professional mindset and detachment from electoral concerns. Amidst a competitive security landscape in contested domains, the militaries function as the frontline projection of a state's hard power. Reducing operational risks is best accomplished by defense practitioners rather than politicians.

The Indo-Pacific will be the geostrategic nexus of the 21st century. It is imperative that the United States remain strongly engaged in the region for its economic, military, and political future. Attempts to ameliorate contentious issues must be regarded by all concerned parties as beneficial to a stable security environment within which countries can prosper.

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