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DETERRING CHINA

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The US, like Great Britain, rose to become a great power, establishing pre-eminence in the air and at sea. China, however, is still a land power like Imperial Germany of the 19th Century, essentially trying to break through the bottle neck. Europe, in the 19th century, was as multipolar as Asia is today. Both have had territorial disputes leading to war. The only difference between then and now is that, then, each individual nation was fighting for itself, cutting deals with other favorable nations, and trying to maintain a beneficial balance of power. But today, the centre of gravity of alliance making and balancing is the US. Earlier, in the absence of a 'supervisor', the power politics was played as usual. Great Britain was only an offshore balancer, trying to keep the balance by tipping the scale through its assistance to one side. Today, the US - though not an offshore balancer, but the provider of security - while removing the possibility of a future competition, has gradually moved on to become a supervisor. Its superpower status relies on its allies and the rest following its command.

When China started modernizing, it needed assistance to grow, which was willingly provided by the US. Now, the contention is between the US accommodating China's ambitions (of moving beyond growth while expanding its control on the region to a certain level of power projection) or stifling them. China, itself, benefits greatly through the US-led security system. But now, perhaps it is ready for its own sphere of influence outside of US jurisdiction. Thus, it is crucial to calculate China's future actions and prepare for the worst. At the same time, it is necessary to find ways to deter China from reaching a situation of armed conflict.



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Deterring China will only be successful if the conflict is viewed as not in China's interest and possibly outweighing the benefits. As for the US, it is in its favor if status quo is maintained. But if the US and its allies want to deter China from engaging in an armed conflict, it is of utmost importance to assess the significance of objective(s) China is pursuing. If the objective(s) is really non-negotiable and envisages a threat to China's survival, it is unlikely that China would step back. However, if it is expansionist in nature, the US needs to communicate its own intentions to China loud and clear. For example, if the US wants China to not encroach upon Philippines or Japan, it needs to send a strong signal to China to back off, failing which the US should be prepared to launch crippling actions against China. Deterrence would fail if China counts it as a pretense while the US is sincere in keeping its promise. The 'rebalance to Asia' strategy was for the same effect—to project (hostile) intentions towards China- but it failed as it did not deter China from occupying Scarborough Shoals, creating an artificial island in South China Sea, or announcing an Air Defence Identification Zone unilaterally. The insincerity in managing the conflicts of the allies by the US might lead China to not take any warnings in the future seriously. As a lost opportunity of deterring China, the US will now have to be more cautious and perhaps escalate the level of warning through significant actions supporting it in dealing with Beijing.

The Ukraine crisis, too, did not augur well for preserving the US reputation. The nature of actions taken against Russia was timid and non-threatening as perceived by China. However, this can also be interpreted as—the US has taken enough blow to its reputation, it is unlikely that it would pardon China again, thus would go all the way to maintain primacy (both real and symbolic). On the other hand, if China fails to read the signals and considers this as shallow and a pretense, it could result in a volatile situation emerging. And if the US is caught bluffing again, it would damage the US reputation irreparably and create an abrasive, uncontrollable China. At present, it is crucial for the US



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to convince China of its intentions and willingness to engage in armed conflict if the need arises. The alliance in the region is presently at an advanced stage where the nations are actively participating in the decisions of the US, but if China is not convinced of this intimacy, China is not deterred.

On the other hand there is real time politics playing out in Asia, as East Asians have made clear their resistance to Chinese grand plan by proceeding with heavy military modernizations, although one nation in South Asia is still ambivalent. India's foreign policy is usually studied in retrospect. However, in the PM Modi's administration, it seems foreign policy has taken the top seat. With him traveling around the world converting 'friendships' into defence partnerships (not alliances), one would think that India is taking a stand in this tussle of power and influence. But India, while distributing gifts, did not ignore China—announcing E-visas for Chinese citizens despite opposition from the Home Ministry.

This leads one to think whether India has a grand plan after all and whether India knows where it stands and what moves it must make when the pieces of its foreign policy genius fall in place. In other words, if China starts reacting in ways unacceptable to India (regarding the border dispute) these attained partnerships would have a role to play, albeit only symbolic. Thus, our walking closer to the US in the backdrop of a powerful and potentially hostile neighbor would give China valid reasons to show concern. And to subdue these concerns, PM Modi would extend the economic hand. The question is, if India comprehends the ultimate objective it would reap out of this for it will have to map out the actions and counter actions ahead of time to make sure that it does not lose more than it gains.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])
