

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

THE PROBLEM WITH THE PIVOT

THE SOURCE: “U.S. Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and U.S. National Security Strategy for East Asia” by Robert S. Ross, in *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer 2013

WITH BEIJING’S POWER GROWING BY THE day, the chess match between China and the United States is on. If the past inclinations of other great powers are any guide, China will move its pieces across the board with a fresh assertiveness.

That could spell trouble for the United States. A nation that holds sway over all of Asia invariably threatens North American security, writes Robert S. Ross in *Strategic Studies Quarterly*. But Ross, a political scientist at Boston College, has a bone to pick with the Obama administration over the “pivot,” its strategy for countering China’s rise by engaging with countries on the Chinese periphery.

Washington has the right idea in cultivating regional allies. This strategy enables it to secure bases and access rights that allow U.S. ships to dock



BULLIT MARQUEZ / AP / CORBIS

High-fives all around: U.S. Marines and their Filipino counterparts breathe easy after storming a beachhead during a joint military exercise in 2010. Officials in Beijing weren’t smiling; the mock assault unfolded near a shoal in the South China Sea the Philippines and China both claim.

and American troops and aircraft to keep an eye on China's doings. But many of these potential friends, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and South Korea, are mainland Asian countries right on China's doorstep. That makes Beijing nervous and has the potential to entangle the United States in fights it can't win.

Take Vietnam. In 2010, the United States raised eyebrows in Beijing when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Hanoi to promote the idea of strategic cooperation. The government of Vietnamese prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung was thrilled—Hanoi had long sought improved military relations. Vietnam has conducted annual joint exercises with the U.S. Navy for three years running and has facilitated port visits by U.S. ships. In a 2012 visit to Cam Ranh Bay, the site of a major U.S. base during the Vietnam War, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta pointed to “tremendous potential here for the future.”

But the new American presence is a little too close for Beijing's comfort. China fought a nasty border war with Vietnam in 1979, and a maritime dispute simmers.

The United States hasn't stopped with Vietnam. In 2010, the Obama administration sent American officials

to visit Cambodia—a neighbor to China that previous U.S. administrations had “all but ignored.” Military maneuvers involving the Cambodian military and U.S. Marines followed.

On the Korean peninsula, meanwhile, the Obama team halted implementation of the Bush administration's plan to gradually withdraw U.S. forces from South Korea. The Pentagon boosted the number of American GIs there and ramped up joint live-fire exercises with the South Korean navy, in part as a response to North Korean belligerence.

In Korea and Indochina, the United States is courting trouble, Ross warns: “Because both regions are on China's immediate periphery, U.S. naval power cannot effectively challenge Chinese coercive power.” In a clash on land between China and one of America's friends in the area, China's People's Liberation Army would maul its opponent. “Even as a primitive fighting force in 1950, the PLA held the U.S. military to a draw in Korea.”

Small mainland Asian nations are bound to fall into China's orbit eventually. “Unless South Korea and the Indochina countries are willing to once again host significant U.S. ground-force deployments and extensive basing facilities—therefore once again incurring

Chinese hostility—they will ultimately succumb to the rise of China by distancing themselves from the United States,” Ross writes.

Small mainland Asian nations are bound to fall into China’s orbit eventually.

That’s no matter, says Ross. As it learned after it pulled out of Vietnam, the United States can maintain a balance of power in the region by solidifying ties to offshore nations and distancing itself from hot-button local disputes. Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore are ideal non-mainland allies equipped with modern ports and ample space for bases.

Previous presidents saw the wisdom of the maritime approach. George H. W. Bush expanded military cooperation with the Philippines, winning wider maritime access for U.S. ships. George W. Bush deepened the alliance; the former U.S. colony is now the top recipient of U.S. military assistance in East Asia. In 1999, the Clinton administration capped its gradual shift of military assets from Europe to Asia by winning

Singapore’s assent to port access for U.S. aircraft carriers. The United States similarly won greater access to a Malaysian port in the Strait of Malacca. Stalwart American allies such as Japan continue to cooperate with and host U.S. forces.

As part of the pivot, President Obama duly attended to these maritime alliances. He warmed up to New Zealand and Indonesia and struck a deal with Australia to station U.S. Marines in Darwin, a city on that country’s northern coast.

But America’s mainland overtures broke with precedent. Ross says it’s no coincidence that China now makes trouble for the United States. In contrast to the early 2000s, it shows little interest in pushing the communist regime in North Korea to participate in six-party talks over its nuclear program. It has grown much more assertive in maritime spats with the Philippines and Vietnam, displaying its “eroding tolerance for small-power cooperation with the United States.”

Farther afield, China abandoned a record of cooperation with the West in UN action on Iraq, Libya, and Iran. “Whereas from 2006 to 2010 China voted for five UN Security Council resolutions imposing

sanctions on Iran, in 2012 it opposed U.S. efforts to tighten those sanctions.”

China has also been bolstering its presence in its own neighborhood. Since the 1990s, the PLA’s growing fleet of diesel submarines has worried Pentagon planners. The Chinese military is also developing antiship missiles that could make it dangerous for U.S. Navy vessels to venture too close to Chinese waters.

The United States nonetheless retains a military edge, especially on the open seas. In the long run, though, America will struggle to keep pace with Chinese spending in Asia. The Pentagon may need to jettison expensive weapons such as aircraft carriers in favor of “more capable and cost-effective platforms” such as remotely piloted aircraft and unmanned underwater vehicles.

A maritime-based American presence employing such military tools could counter China at an affordable price, Ross argues. On the other hand, he says, the Obama pivot will aggravate Sino-American relations and could lead to a fall. “Whereas post-Cold War U.S. administrations refrained from asserting U.S. power on mainland East Asia, the Obama administration has reversed course,” Ross writes. “The United States lacks the capabilities to sustain this effort.” ■

NATIONAL SECURITY 101

THE SOURCE: “Educating for National Security” by Jakub Grygiel, in *Orbis*, Spring 2013.

TODAY’S NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCHERS leave little to chance. When danger is at hand, consult the formula for the probability of war. If events don’t proceed as predicted, rewrite the formula.

Many graduates of degree programs in national security and international relations take their lab coats with them into government, where they discover that advanced statistics and theories cannot account for the vagaries of international affairs. “The world is not a clock,” writes Jakub Grygiel, a professor at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, “and a scientific approach may not be the best way to study it nor to educate the next national security wardens.”

Grygiel offers an old-school alternative: a broad-based liberal arts education in “the tragic beauty of worldly affairs,” in which contingencies, imponderables, and surprises reign supreme. “To defend a country is an art,” Grygiel writes in *Orbis*. “The challenge is that we can train scientists but we cannot teach students to be artists. We can only educate them to appreciate art.”