Anarchic East Asia on an American Tether—and Cushion

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"Oh, the Chinese hate the Japanese and the Japanese hate the Chinese—to hate all but the right folks is an old established rule. The Koreans hate the Japanese and the Vietnamese hate the Chinese, and the North Koreans hate them all. Oh, the People hate the Communists and the Communists hate the People. The Nationalists hate the Communists and the Communists hate themselves. The Confucians hate the Buddhists and the Muslims hate them all. All of my folks hate all of your folks. But during National Brotherhood Week, be nice to people who are inferior to you. It's only for a week, so have no fear—be grateful that it doesn't last all year."

These cadences, if not these words, are from Tom Lehrer's satirical song, "National Brotherhood Week" from the early 1960s. It is remarkable that, seventy years later, most of these hatreds go back to the events of the Pacific War. That is, one of the great and seemingly unending legacies of that great war is just this: intense mutual hatred in the East Asian region. Missing from my rendering of Lehrer's song, however, is none other than the United States, which made war in East Asia from 1941 to 1975, and during those wars hated "the Japs," "Red China," North Korean commies, the Viet Cong (all such hatreds nicely reciprocated by East Asians), and, by the 1980s, had even contrived to be hated by the South Koreans, too. Today anti-Americanism is as rare in the region as

the days when pundits sought out the occult, mysterious source of the "Japanese miracle" or when "the Four Tigers" seemed to be sweeping the world economy before them. Here there is a Middle Eastern analogy: just as Israelis enjoy watching Shiites hate Sunnis, Arabs hate Persians, Kurds hate Turks and vice-versa, all simultaneously at each other's throats, Americans bask in the apparent senselessness of Chinese maritime strategy, which if it were trying to unite the region under the American wing, could hardly be doing better—even Vietnamese communists now call for an alliance with their old adversary in Washington,[1] and the North Koreans can't be far behind.

The usual explanation for the recent turmoil in East Asia goes under the rubric of "the rise of China." For practitioners of the "realist" school, like John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago or the late Samuel Huntington of Harvard, all this is merely, and entirely, predictable: "rise" is what budding great powers do, just as in the fullness of time, a war with the leading great power is only to be expected (as both predicted in their most famous books—*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* and *The Clash of Civilizations*). Realists of the containment school take this a bit further, to a strategy for America: *contain* rising China. This was certainly the policy of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, lining up publicly as she did with the Philippines and Japan against Chinese island encroachments—which may also turn out to be the policy of President Hillary Clinton in 2017. And this is unquestionably how nearly all experts in China see American policy: containment, encirclement, all in the interests of keeping rising China . . . down. Of course, President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry fall all over themselves to deny that containment is the policy—and under their (questionable and unsteady) leadership, perhaps it isn't.

Instead the overriding Obama strategy is benign neglect of the political and the military, thus to *engage* China in the overarching global commons, neo-liberalism, bringing it ever deeper into capitalist practice and the world economy thus to muffle if not contain its insurgent impulses. But then that has been American policy since Richard Nixon ended the Cold War between Washington and Beijing, supported all along by a quiet but very secure bipartisan coalition in Washington embracing Democrats and Republicans, and more broadly Wall Street and multinational corporate leaders. Everybody has been making money in China, even recently-bankrupt General Motors (China now has the largest auto market in the world, and Chinese like to buy GM's Buicks even though hardly anyone else does, perhaps because forefather Sun Yat Sen drove a Buick). The watchword here is neo-liberal interdependence, but the practice is to let the colossal dailiness of Sino-American exchange fly under the radar, or remain *sotto voce*, unacknowledged, even secret—hoping no one pays too much attention.

Few remember that fifteen years ago Republicans in Congress were up in arms about Chinese spying, making wild charges about Beijing stealing American nuclear secrets, or that when George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Condoleeza Rice came to power in 2001, their focus was going to be on corralling two big powers, China and Russia; indeed the first crisis they faced was on April Fool's Day 2001, when the Chinese downed one of our spy places and captured the crew. All that went to the back burner as 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq overwhelmed Bush's foreign policy, leaving China alone to double its industrial production and to cultivate its near neighbors in what was, for many years, a highly active and benign diplomacy corresponding to President Hu Jintao's rhetoric about China's "peaceful rise" necessitating a "peaceful environment." Now that

Beijing has abandoned that strategy for a quixotic venture in bullying smaller countries, Republican (let alone Democratic) voices demanding that the U.S. do something about it are notably few.

Speak Loudly and Carry a Small Stick

What has led to this new direction in China's foreign policy? After China tried to intimidate Taiwan in 1995-96, popping missiles off its coast and leading President Bill Clinton to place two carrier task forces in Taiwan's eastern waters, it was pretty clear that heads rolled in Beijing, soon giving rise to an expansive diplomacy in East Asia—amid a vacuum that developed as Bush went to war. The Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program were one of Beijing's big achievements, and seemed for a time to be a likely template for long-term diplomatic interaction in a region not known for it, one sorely lacking in Europe's alphabet soup of international organizations. What provoked the big change?

China's motives are exceedingly opaque, but today they emanate directly from President Xi Jinping. He has far more control over the military than did his predecessor, Mr. Hu; foreign policy power is concentrated in his hands, and analysts say he barely consults other members at the apex of power in the Politburo Standing Committee. They say he believes the U.S. is in decline, Obama is a lame duck, so it's a good time to "push and push again," according to Prof. Shi Yinhong of Renmin University in Beijing.[2] China's recent expansionism might also be its response to Obama's "pivot to Asia," except that, as we will see, Obama has yet really to pivot, overwhelmed as his foreign policy still is by Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Russia/Ukraine and the ever-popular Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. Even so, China shows no interest in directly confronting U.S. power in the region.

What China has displayed instead is a startling pattern of creeping ineptitude—tiny, incremental steps to assert control of ersatz (tiny) islands in the South China Sea, featuring Chinese sailors as Robinson Crusoes in search of their very own island, dumping tons of sand onto reefs and atolls in search of some *terra firma* where they can actually plant their feet; or surreptitiously towing a Haiyang Shiyou 981 (low-tech) oil rig into territory claimed by Vietnam, touching off anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam; then appearing to challenge Tokyo's naval and air forces over the Senkaku/Diaoyu rocks in the East China Sea, when everyone knows China is no match for Japan's high-tech military—and meanwhile the largest U.S. Air Force base outside the U.S. sits within easy striking distance at Kadena in Okinawa, along with the 3rd Marine Division. And let's not forget the maiden voyage of China's first aircraft carrier, a 1980s Soviet model once christened the Varyag, rescued from its rustbin in Ukraine by a Macao casino company. Now called the Liaoning and said to be newly refurbished, Chinese pilots had barely learned how to land on its deck when a general engine failure put it in drydock. China has submarines capable of firing nuclear missiles, but has sent few on operational patrol. Its bombers are similar to the Tupulov Tu-16 of the 1950s.[3]

Meanwhile, abuilding in General Dynamics Bath Iron Works in Maine, is a high-tech naval ship, the Zumwalt, "unlike any the world has seen," in Gregg Easterbrook's words. "The $3.3 billion Zumwalt destroyer uses all-electric propulsion, employs stealth features, carries a huge arsenal of guided missiles, and mounts advanced cannons that can hit targets 63 miles away." It will probably never be tested in battle, he wrote, "because

no other nation is even attempting to build a warship like the Zumwalt, which symbolizes the gigantic advantage the U.S. Navy enjoys."[4] And then there is Japan, a formidable naval rival of the U.S. from the 1890s to the 1940s, which is fielding its own high-tech ships far ahead of anything China can produce—like the Izumo, a helicopter carrier as big as Japan's mammoth Pacific War aircraft carriers.[5]

China is also ringed by nations with formidable military power, as we will see. Take them all away, and you would still have the global U.S. military towering over China: take it from former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who in some uncommon remarks at the Eisenhower Presidential Library in May 2010 asked, "Does the number of warships we have and are building really put America at risk when the U.S. battle fleet is larger than the next 13 navies combined, 11 of which belong to allies and partners? Is it a dire threat that by 2020 the United States will have only 20 times more advanced stealth fighters than China?"[6]

China is doing little more than tiptoeing toward military conflict in its nearby waters, more of a feint really, like kids running up to a line and daring others to cross it—while enraging all of its neighbors (including once-close ally North Korea; for unclear reasons President Xi flew to Seoul for a summit with President Park Geun Hye in June 2014, but has yet to meet with Kim Jong Un, who has been in power for three years). Beijing's recent behavior has been petty, self-defeating, and not worthy of the great power it wishes to be. Furthermore every Chinese provocation pushes the U.S. and Japan to ante up their deterrent and strike forces in the region. Japan has seventeen Patriot Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) systems, four Aegis destroyers that are ABM capable, and four more on the way. The U.S. has several Aegis ships in the Seventh Fleet (headquarters at

Yokosuka, just south of Tokyo), along with Global Hawk surveillance drones and TPY-2 systems (portable missile defense radars).[7] Every time Pyongyang tests a long-range missile or blows off an A-bomb, the Pentagon puts several more anti-missile batteries in the region, which happen also to be useful against China's older missile inventory. And even without Washington flexing a single muscle, China faces huge armies along its borders—India, the world's third largest army, with nukes; North Korea (fourth, with nukes), Russia (fifth, with nukes), South Korea (sixth), Vietnam (thirteenth), Taiwan (eighteenth), not to mention Japan (nukes whenever they decide to make them)—and at least five of these militaries are more advanced technologically than China.

China's greatest weakness, however, is not military, or economic, or technological. It is something different: *it has no ideas*. Hegemonic powers always rise not just on their economic and military prowess, but on ideas that appeal to the world: British liberalism and utilitarianism, Jeffersonian egalitarianism and democracy, the Bolsheviks' revolution of the workers and peasants. Paradoxically, China had far more influence ideologically under Mao, when it was a beacon to the Third World, than it does today when it stands for one thing: rapid if reckless economic growth, come hell (Beijing's air) or high water (rising sea levels). Everything beyond that is somebody else's idea "with Chinese characteristics." To see *in nuce* how bereft Beijing's leaders are, consider the 450-odd Confucius Institutes around the world, many at American universities—a global Chinese investment in "soft power." It wouldn't do to call them Mao Institutes, but how about a pragmatic, say, Sun Yat Sen Institute? No, the Politburo geniuses—ultimate arbiters of what goes on at these institutes—resurrected 5th century b.c. Confucius, whom they spent the 1970s lambasting in the anti-Confucius campaigns,

and who would be rolling in his grave to have his name associated with institutes that will not discuss the Dalai Lama, Tibet, Tiananmen, or what Chinese democracy might look like if it ever appears, all the while using simplified Chinese characters that would make him nauseous.[8]

The Prison-House Called Diaoyu/Senkaku

Here we find eight islets, but we might as well be talking about the sand spits China is furtively piling up in the Spratleys. The largest islet is 4.2 square kilometers; it and the other islets are uninhabited, and the other seven are miniscule, a quarter to a tenth the size—basically four uninhabited islets and three rocks. These are the mini-stakes that China and Japan are fighting over. Of course, once you occupy them you can claim seabed resources underneath, especially oil, and a large circumference of exclusive maritime rights. (Perhaps there will again be a time when it might be worth a war to secure more oil, but for now, the world is awash in it.) Associated with Taiwan (and therefore China) for centuries rather than Japan or Okinawa, these rocks were seized after Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) as part of its colonization of Taiwan. After Japan's defeat in World War 2 they fell under the jurisdiction of Okinawa, which was run by Americans until 1972. During the Okinawa reversion, the U.S. determined that "administrative rights" over the islets would be returned to Japan, without prejudice to any claims about who owned them—that issue should be negotiated by the parties concerned (these would be Japan and Taiwan, then recognized as the legitimate government of China by the U.S.). But reversion occurred while Nixon and Kissinger were secretly scheming to open relations with the PRC and jettison Taiwan, so Kissinger, homing in on this overarching logic, remarked that this formula "is nonsense since it

gives the islands to Japan." Instead he wanted a more neutral American position, presumably one less offensive to Beijing. Kissinger was correct—ever since, Japan has pretended that there is no ownership dispute, and proceeded to nationalize three of the islets in September 2012.[9]

China stirred the pot by positing a special "air defense zone" over this rockpile in late 2013; from now on any planes that wanted to fly through it would need Beijing's permission. Since then various pundits have declared that the U.S. must side with its great ally Abe Shinzo, even if it means war with China. Hugh White, writing in *The National Interest*[10] in July 2014, opined that this might or might not be a wise move; it would depend "as much as anything, on how a US-China war over the Senkakus would play out." (Impeccable logic: if we win, it's wise. In his defense, later in the article White acknowledged that such a war was a bad idea.) Abe roiled the waters even more when he pushed through parliament a new interpretation of the famed Article 9 of Japan's "Peace" Constitution, stretching its pacifist logic to the breaking point: Japan's "self-defense" would now encompass active assistance to the U.S. military in whatever it wanted to do in the Western Pacific. Retired Admiral Dennis Blair, formerly head of the U.S. Pacific Command and Director of National Intelligence, instantly welcomed this new adventure: these changes in Japan's security policy "are long overdue," he wrote, they will offer "tangible support for the U.S. pivot to Asia," and will enable Japan to join the U.S. in responding to "aggression by adversaries." Leaving no stone (rock?) unturned, Blair said "American assurances that our treaty with Japan applies to the Senkakus" would surely deter China. (Note that Blair now heads the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, namesake of Sasakawa Ryoichi, a Class A war criminal until laundered by the American authorities.[11])

The author of the "pivot" proved smarter than Mr. Blair: Obama nonchalantly sent two B-52 bombers screaming through China's special air zone two days after it was declared and—need one say it?—Beijing took this lying down.

At the end of May last year, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel showed up in Singapore for a regional security meeting, looking haggard and clueless as usual, a few days after a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Vietnamese fishing boat near the offending oil rig, and a week after two Chinese SU-27 fighter jets buzzed Japanese YS-11 reconnaissance planes near the prison-house, shadowing them at a distance of 100 feet. While Hagel blasted China's "intimidation and coercion" and chided China for its "land reclamation activities" in the Spratleys, the Chinese and others lambasted Abe for visiting the incendiary Yasukuni Shrine, and an unnamed American official remarked that "none of these countries are helping matters" (rather an understatement). While Hagel defended the American alliance system in the region, Admiral Sun Jianguo said it should be thrown in the dustbin of history and replaced by a Sinocentric security arrangement that President Xi had first tabled two weeks earlier.[12]

The routine solution to real estate problems like Senkaku/Diaoyu is for lawyers to get together, make a deal, pay one side or the other for ownership of the rocks, or agree to split whatever resources might be associated with them. Another would be to lob a few 7th Fleet cruise missiles into this prison-house and put it in the seabed. But after living recently through the centenary of a summer when a Serbian hothead miraculously found himself in a position to murder Archduke Franz Ferdinand, pulled the trigger and touched off the war to end all wars, we know what human nature is like—and so a thousand

hotheads can fill the streets of Tokyo or Beijing the minute it looks like one side is gaining the slightest advantage over the other.

Herding Cats

As we have seen, the Chinese don't like the Vietnamese don't like the Japanese don't like the Koreans—and everybody hates North Korea. But it gets worse: Park hates Abe hates Kim, and so does Beijing; Abe loves grandpa and Park's father, but no one else does; Kim loves grandpa and hates Abe and *his* grandpa; and everybody hates Kim. Whatever happened to the utility of getting everybody together to hate Uncle Sam (Beijing's preferred option for a quarter-century, and still Pyongyang's)? Into this milieu rides a president who does not know much about East Asia or have any real experience of it (some childhood spent in Islamic Indonesia, which resides in Southeast Asia, doesn't count), perhaps cares less, and when all is said and done, is not really interested in foreign policy. Thus there is no Obama doctrine generally, so far no real Obama pivot regionally, indeed little movement in his East Asia policy since his inauguration, and little hope that anything will change before he leaves office.

Instead Obama has relied for his East Asia policy on battle-tested, tried-and-true insiders (that is, inside the Beltway) who move in lockstep, bipartisan fashion regardless of which president or which party happens to be in office, toward their desired policies (the best place to see this in action is the informative daily blog known as *The Nelson Report*). Hillary Clinton was the perfect Secretary of State for such people, being such a quintessential Beltway product herself, beginning with her Watergate investigation days in the 1970s.

When Obama arrived in 2009 there was a big problem, a smaller problem, and a clear remedy: the big problem was the rise of China, which needed somehow to be contained, while not disrupting global economic exchange: the remedy was to get Japan and South Korea working together under the umbrella of the American alliance. The smaller problem, however, was that Seoul had been through a fit of "anti-Americanism" as Beltway denizens saw it, under presidents Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) and, especially, Roh Moo Hyun (2003-2008). Fortune smiled in the form of President Lee Myung Bak (2008-2013), a former Hyundai executive who harked back to the good old days of Korean-American amity when the dictators were in power (1948-1987). Even better, they thought, was dictator's daughter Park Geun Hye, elected in 2012. Along came Prime Minister Abe yet again, and the best laid Beltway plans went awry.

Obscure genealogists (like myself) had sought to point out that Abe's grandpa was Kishi Nobusuke, who was in charge of munitions in Manchukuo when Kim's grandpa, namely Kim Il Sung, was fighting the Japanese there in the 1930s, and therefore grandchild Kim and grandchild Abe were likely on a collision course (or at minimum, you guessed it, hated each other); the advent of Ms. Park stirred the pot, since her father, namely Park Chung Hee, had been an officer in the Japanese Imperial Army, also in Manchukuo, and had colluded with Kishi in the still-controversial normalization of Japan-South Korean relations in 1965. Standing behind all this was the United States, which, after momentarily designating Kishi a Class A war criminal, quickly let bygones be bygones in the early postwar period and proceeded to promote him as a good anti-communist and modernizer (which he was); which during the U.S. Military Government in South Korea also pushed Manchukuo officer Park through the second class of its

military academy in Korea in 1946, and then supported him militarily, economically and politically after his *coup* in 1961; which moved heaven and earth to achieve Japan-Korea normalization in 1965; and which has never, as a matter of high policy, shown much regard for Korean hatreds and grievances arising from nearly forty decades of Japan's colonial rule (1910-1945). Instead from the 1940s down to the present, Americans have urged Koreans also to let bygones be bygones, and unite under the fabled U.S.-Japan alliance. A corollary was U.S. support for a Korean elite that collaborated first with the Japanese and then with the Americans, while always denying this reality; South Korean scholarly studies have documented the overwhelming influence of this elite, lasting well into the 1990s.

This and other aspects of 20th-century history have severely constrained President Park, as she seeks to maneuver between a voting public that suspects she is pro-Japanese and an Obama administration that wants her to love Abe, and by extension Japan—thus to contain the greater menace of rising China. But to all appearances she hates Abe; she hasn't consented to a summit with him in spite of much pressure from Washington and Tokyo to do so; she denounces his or his close aides' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and has been particularly vociferous on the issue of Japan's continuing unwillingness to deal honestly and truthfully with the sordid legacy of its wartime sexual slavery ("comfort women"), the vast majority of whom were Korean. So Park won't talk to Abe or Kim but will talk to Xi; Xi won't talk to Abe either, nor to Kim, but will talk to Park. (Result: nobody at all talks to grandson Kim, no doubt to his consternation).

Obama's Half-Hearted 'Pivot'

With little fanfare and far less media awareness than one might expect, in the winter of 2011-12 the Obama administration insinuated a series of defense policy moves that, at the time, appeared to foreshadow the most significant transformation of the American military position in the world since the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed. This new defense posture even sought to rework the post World War II order itself. After all, if we were witnessing the eclipse of Europe, a withdrawal from insoluble Middle East and South Asian crises, the gravitational pull of a growing China, and an America once again turning around to face the Pacific rather than the Atlantic (as it first did in the heyday of "Manifest Destiny" in the 1840s), this was no small matter.

Nor is it a small matter that the principal author of this pivot may be the next president of the United States. This shift began with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's article, "America's Pacific Century," in the November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy*, announcing "a pivot point" away from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and "a strategic turn" toward the Asia-Pacific, now said to be "the key driver of global politics," where nearly half the world's population lives and where "key engines" of the world economy reside—and the security of those engines, she noted, "has long been guaranteed by the U.S. military." She argued more generally that this region would be more important and more central than any other in the world, for the rest of this century. Soon enough Clinton showed up in Burma (Myanmar), presumed to be democratizing, and announced a resumption of diplomatic relations with this pariah-state, one of China's closest allies.

Meanwhile President Barack Obama journeyed out to reestablish a World War 2-era American military base on the under-populated north coast of Australia, not far from

the Malacca Straits through which passes most of the petroleum fueling East Asian dynamism; some 2,500 Marines were soon rotating through the small city of Darwin. Shortly thereafter, with domestic attention focused on the continuing economic crisis, the Republican presidential primary contest, and simply the holiday season, President Obama brought a definitive end to the Iraq War by announcing that he was calling home the last U.S. combat forces by the end of 2012. At the same time his Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta, supported a move away from the "two war" posture that had defined Pentagon strategy for the past six decades—that is, the capability to fight large wars along both the central front in Europe and in East Asia; he also indicated that the "defense triad" of air, naval and land forces was outmoded.[13] The seemingly endless European crisis over piles of debt in Greece, Portugal and Spain, with the future of the euro and the European Union hanging in the balance, added its own punctuation to the apparent eclipse of Europe and the dawn of a new Pacific era.

It will be recalled that American troops never entirely came home from our major wars since 1941, except for Vietnam—and if Washington had found a way permanently to divide Vietnam, troops would remain there as well. With the wars in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq, many new bases appeared in the Middle East and Central Asia. Having written much about this archipelago of bases, which always had the dual motive of containing an enemy and constraining an ally (thus creating defense dependencies among our economic competitors like Japan, Germany and South Korea), I wasn't surprised that Hillary Clinton called attention to the enormous U.S. military presence in East Asia. But I was stunned to learn that Obama actually meant it when he said all our soldiers would be out of Iraq by 2012—because it is the first time since 1945 that any

president has done likewise at the end of a war—unless we lost it. (If ISIS keeps expanding or a full-blown civil war develops again in Iraq, perhaps our troops will return—and as of this writing prominent Americans like Senator John McCain are calling again for U.S. "boots on the ground" in Iraq). Panetta may just have run some new ideas up the flagpole to see what happened, because he later appeared to retreat from giving up the two-war strategy and the triad.[14] But with big defense cuts starting in March 2013 with the "sequester" and the prospect of a Clinton presidency, this new posture may win out; certainly most people outside the Air Force find it odd that the 60-year-old B-52 bomber is still one leg of a nuclear-war triad that lacks any credible enemy—and where can we imagine two simultaneous wars requiring U.S. infantry-style, meat-grinder warfare?

The pivot (subsequently dubbed a "rebalancing") toward the Pacific not only seemed to place Europe in the shade (Panetta wanted to remove as many as 10,000 American soldiers from the continent), but also arrived amid an Arab Spring and a Middle East not necessarily going in a direction Americans could welcome (serious strains in our alliance with Egypt, Libya diving ever further into chaos, Iran gaining the upper hand in several countries—including Bush's Iraq—unpredictable outcomes from the Syrian civil war, and loud rumors of war, most likely catastrophic war, if Israel were to attack Iran's nuclear facilities). If you ask, for which serious Middle Eastern problems has the U.S. provided solutions in the past generation, the only one is the 1978 Camp David Accord, itself also under strain because of crises in Egypt and the most serious strains in memory between Washington and Tel Aviv.

By contrast the Asia/Pacific region seems placid, like the great ocean itself

viewed from southern California; with Burma moving in a startling and utterly unanticipated pro-Western direction, the only real fly in the ointment (assuming conflicts in the East and South China Seas can be contained) is North Korea—still and all, the same old fly since 1953, and preoccupied over the past three years with grooming and tutoring the young Kim Jong Un for his seat at the apex of this garrison state. The Obama administration is the first since the Cold War ended to pay little or no attention to nuclear-armed North Korea, perhaps guided by Colin Powell's dictum that "they can't eat plutonium." But it has paid close attention to healing strains with Tokyo over U.S. bases in Okinawa (which brought down the Hatoyama cabinet in 2010) and with Seoul concerning changes to the U.S. defense posture in Korea (relations were at their all-time worst from 2002 to 2007, with George W. Bush and President Roh Moo Hyun barely on speaking terms). Along a great crescent from Rangoon to Darwin to Manila (with ongoing negotiations to bring in more US forces there) to Seoul to Tokyo, all this is being done with the permanency of the U.S. Pacific defense posture in mind—and China in focus. That posture, with its political-economic corollary, is now nearly seventy years old, and has provided a remarkably durable regional order for the vast economic exchange taking place in recent decades.

The Great Crescent

I wish this phrase were my coinage, but it was Dean Acheson's at the dawn of the Cold War, when as Harry Truman's key advisor he sought a revival of the devastated Japanese and German industrial economies, fueled by an ocean of Middle Eastern oil then sloshing into world markets—a crescent stretching, in his words, "from Tokyo to Alexandria."[15] Cheap energy, revived industrial structures, mass production and mass

consumption, here was the ticket to bringing "the American way" to Japan and Western Europe, as consumers hopped into their Toyotas, Volkswagens, Fiats and Renaults and sped off into the future, with the wars that wracked the first half of the 20th century receding in their rearview mirrors. Acheson's advisor, George F. Kennan, was more of a "realist"; his containment doctrine said, in essence, you need an advanced industrial base to be serious about war-making; we had four in our zone and the Soviets had one, and containment meant keeping things that way.

American military bases on the territory of our allies (Japan, West Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy, Spain) would be the *cushion*, they would provide essentially "free" security, and with the Japanese and German militaries turned into inconsequential constabularies, the forces that brought on World War II would be neutered. Harvard historian Charles Maier and others have referred to this as a "productivist" coalition, working in tandem to produce "miracle" economies in West Germany, Japan, and subsequently South Korea and Taiwan. This coalition so dramatically out-performed their counterparts in the communist world that the latter essentially threw in the towel in 1989-91.

Not China, however, which in 1979 looked around at its Asian neighbors and asked, essentially, how about our own miracle economy, right here, right now? Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, had famously remarked that "a socialist train running late is better than a capitalist train running on time;" this was the purest poppycock to Deng Xiaoping, who was in full command by 1979 and asked whether China wanted to crawl along at a snail's pace, or take a lesson from Japan and South Korea. In the 1980s Chinese leaders like Zhao Ziyang invented "the new authoritarianism," a theoretical legitimation for a strong

(communist) state guiding a booming (capitalist) economy along the path of export-led growth. The rest is not just history, but probably the strongest growth spurt in recorded history (South Korea and Taiwan grew at an average of about 9.4% per annum from the mid-1960s to the late 1990s; China's annual rate since 1979 has been about the same, until dropping to about 7.5% in 2014).

A North Pacific Crescent

The new productivist coalition is similar—centered on a rapidly growing country exporting to the capacious American market, a country moving up the technological ladder from toys to textiles to autos and steel, which just happens to be run by Communists—but the great crescent today is rather different. Middle Eastern oil is still critical, but more critically, it is systematically declining in importance as new oil and gas sources (especially fracking) and alternative fuels emerge, and China's environment gets so fouled and polluted that the only way out is to stop burning oil and coal. Instead we should think of a North Pacific crescent making up the most dynamic core in the world economy—not this or that country, but complex human exchange across an expansive ocean. When talking about a coming miracle or menace, the mote in so many writers' eyes is to assume that *nations* compete. As Paul Krugman showed in his book *Pop Internationalism*, they don't: industries compete, firms compete, and exports and imports don't compute: that is, about one quarter of China's exports to the U.S. consist of Walmart subsidiaries making things and sending them back to . . . Walmart. The most valuable firm in the world, Apple, makes its splendid iPhones in China, through a Taiwan-owned subsidiary employing 200,000 workers. In contrast to the Japan and South Korea models, China has allowed much more direct foreign investment--$50 billion

worth by U.S. firms alone, according to Hillary Clinton's 2011 essay. Absent the American market, and the Chinese economy would collapse. Absent Beijing's willingness to pile up more than $1 trillion in U.S. debt, and the American economy might collapse. The Pacific crescent is a multi-faceted, multi-layered web of interdependence.

In her article Clinton referred to the Pacific holding half the world's population: true, but that's far less important than an Asia-Pacific region with half the world's trade, more than half of the buyers of American goods, and almost half of global GDP.[16] When you also add in the $2.7 trillion GDP of the Pacific states (California, Oregon and Washington—collectively almost as big as France's GDP), and remember the hundreds of millions of producers and consumers along this arc, you have the most dynamic region in the world economy, clearly destined to be its core for decades to come.

This crescent begins in San Diego and the U.S.-Mexican *maquiladora* production complexes, moves up the coast through Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, Portland and Seattle, around the Aleutians to Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei, and Beijing; then down to Shanghai, Hong Kong/Shenzhen and Singapore. It encompasses the world's top three economies, vibrant cities holding tens of millions of well-educated people, and city-states more prosperous than any others in the world. In any of these places, including presumably declining, vegetating-in-the-teeth-of-time Japan, all you see is affluence and high technology solutions to the intractable problems that plague the middle regions of the U.S.: bullet trains speeding from Tokyo to Osaka, or Shanghai to Beijing; the most wired city in the world, Seoul; two city-states, Hong Kong and Singapore, with a combined GDP of half a trillion dollars; millions of bright young people who score

highest in global tests of math and science skills. To think of it another way, California by itself is another Italy in GDP; Japan's economy is sixty per cent bigger than the highly productive German one; South Korean GDP is approaching the size of Spain's; Silicon Valley and Seattle are unmatched in high technology prowess—as they have been since the 1930s if not earlier.[17]

The financial crash in September 2008 stimulated another period of handwringing about American decline, but the key point is that over the past six years the U.S. suffered relatively less than the European economies, and the East Asian economies hardly suffered at all. And just like previous recessions going back forty years, you can be in Detroit (median household income $28,357) and experience a post-industrial nightmare, or travel to San Jose ($79,405) or Seattle ($60,665) or Silicon Valley (estimated GDP $176 billion, same as Ireland), and witness incredible affluence and the high-tech core of the global economy. Real estate prices are again skyrocketing in Silicon Valley, as hundreds of employees reap the riches of public offerings by Facebook, Twitter, and many other companies. Now try to name one significant high technology that China has that the U.S. doesn't, and you instantly see why China is no security threat to the U.S.—and they know this better than anybody.

The Obama pivot acknowledged three overwhelming facts of our time, and quietly asserted a venerable but largely overlooked American codicil. First, the North Pacific is today and will be for the long-term future the center of the world economy; second, Europe's long ascendancy in the modern world is eroding; third, the U.S. has intervened almost everywhere in the Middle East (Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Libya) but has failed to solve just about every problem or crisis going back to 1953, when it

conspired with the British to overthrow a democratically-elected regime in Teheran (and you can draw a direct line from that to the Ayatollah's 1979 revolution down to our present enmity with Iran); meanwhile Washington has relied on one feudal sultanate or monarchy after another to extract petroleum from under the desert and spew it into the sky via millions of exhaust pipes, pushing our environment to intolerable limits. If Obama is actually spelling out the end of U.S. armed intervention in the Middle East, it is long overdue. But those who a few years ago imagined a coming calamity for Europe, or even a collapse of the EU, are wrong, and they have overestimated the extent of U.S. pullback from Europe;[18] furthermore in my view major European cities remain the most civilized, hospitable and historically-grounded in the world, and Americans and East Asians have much to learn from them about how to live comfortably in a modern built environment within one's history and traditions—and without the necessity of empire.

Hillary Clinton's assertion, this "Pacific Pivot," exploiting the hundreds of military bases we operate in the region (more or less hidden in plain sight), and goes back to Acheson's political economy and Kennan's *realpolitik*, namely, that if you want a productivist coalition to succeed, Americans think they have to provide a public good called *security*, which has the dual advantage of scaring off potential enemies and assuring that allied countries stay inside their defense harnesses; that way you avoid Japanese and German militarists and Korean and Vietnamese civil wars. China's distinction is that it is the one great economy in the world that is still outside the harness—and so you build new bases and reinforce old ones all along its perimeter, make friends with pariah states like Burma, and who knows, maybe you even warm up to Kim Jong Un.

The Pentagon's Archipelago

In the U.S. we are encouraged to think about "China" (military threat or economic miracle) as if it exists in a vacuum; like the "Japan as Number One" literature, most of the scenarios for what China's rise means and where China is going demand of us a certain determined blindness or averting of the eyes, such that somehow they never alight on the American lake known as the Pacific, CINCPAC in Honolulu, the Navy's 6th and 7th fleets, the Kadena airbase, the singular Marine expeditionary force permanently located abroad in Okinawa, the international proctology practiced by myriad satellite and other technologies on China, the spy planes that the Pentagon sends along China's coasts (while China has no such capability on American coasts), the incessant computer hacking practiced by both sides, or the B-2 Stealth bombers that can lift off from Knob Noster, Missouri, bomb any point on the globe, and return without landing. The practiced eyes of the national security pundits miss an entire archipelago of empire.[19]

American bases in East Asia are a legacy of war going back to 1945, when they completely neutered the Pacific rivalry between Japan and the U.S. that went on for half a century before Pearl Harbor, but their utterly unimagined and unprecedented longevity also reflects a mix of atavism and anachronism: an outgrowth of World War II and the war in Korea, these bases persist well into the new century as if nothing had changed—50,000 American troops in Japan, 28,000 in Korea, tens of thousands more in Europe. Recently Thomas Friedman lamented the collapse of Cold War structures of power after 1989, unleashing conflicts here and there around the world,[20] while failing to notice that only one structure collapsed—the Soviet empire. The Pentagon, by contrast, took 1989 in stride and since 9/11 has vastly expanded its archipelago of empire around the world—

especially into former Soviet bases in Central Asia that put American power on the ground near Russia's southern and China's western borders for the first time—while retaining most of its Cold War leverage over its allies: the U. S. still holds the linchpins of international and military stability among the advanced industrial countries.

The essential structure constraining every country in East Asia, beginning with China, is that for the first time in world history the leading power maintains an extensive network of bases on the territory of its allies and primary economic competitors—Japan, Germany, Britain, Italy, Spain, South Korea—that is, all the major industrial powers save China, France (which sent U.S. troops home in 1966) and Russia (and even then, the U.S. now has many bases on the territory of the former U.S.S.R.). This marks a radical break with the prewar balance of power where it would have been inconceivable for, say, Britain to base its troops in Germany or France. For seventy years this archipelago of bases, hidden in plain sight, has neutered the operation of *realpolitik* among the major powers and still does, save for Russia and China, which are outside the archipelago—and political scientists will be the last people to recognize this particular reality, wedded as they are to a "Westphalian system" that ill fits today's world.

Meanwhile President Obama herds East Asian cats about as successfully as he does Republicans in Congress. But after two military failures in East Asia—Korea (stalemate) and Vietnam (defeat)—and two more failed wars in the Middle East and South Asia (Iraq and Afghanistan), maybe American policy is doing its best when it is doing nothing. Among all the Oval Office occupants, Barack Obama is easily the best basketball player (which might not be saying much). He is a small forward with a good jump shot. He does not play in the pivot, and if he did, in the real world, he would pivot

right only to hit Chinese piling up sandbags, and if he pivoted left he would bang into Abe Shinzo making another insensitive remark.

Why play in the pivot—why pivot at all—when you control the court? The "pivot to Asia" is usually seen as a move back to a neglected area, as if American forces abandoned East Asia years ago. In fact the Obama pivot was meant to change the subject, from failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan back to the latent, ever-present structure of U.S. military power in East Asia that undergirds economic exchange in the world's richest and most productive region, and that towers over any conceivable rival. President Obama can file his fingernails, take a nap, or shoot a few jump shots on the White House court, sure in the knowledge that no one would be rash and stupid enough to challenge the core structure of American power in the world's largest body of water, which also happens to be an American lake: the Pacific.

When it looked like Japan would be the atavar of the 21st-century Pacific economy, Tokyo's leaders liked to describe Japan as the lead bird in a formation of flying geese. If Japan is not flying so high today, there are still many flying geese: on the eastern side of the Pacific—San Diego, Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, Seattle; on the western side, Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore—in other words the productive core of the neo-liberal world economy, the beating heart of the global commons—and no one, not even China, not even Xi Jinping, wants to stop these geese from laying their golden eggs. They will continue to do so, underpinned by massive American military might, for the foreseeable future. When disputes over Pacific War history and skirmishes over rockpiles in the East and South China seas will come to an end is anybody's guess. But I would wager that none of the parties to these disputes will

allow them to escalate to the point that they seriously interfere with the vast economic exchange across the Pacific that is filling everyone's coffers.

We said earlier that there is no Obama doctrine generally, so far no real Obama pivot regionally, indeed little movement in his East Asia policy since his inauguration, and little hope that anything will change before he leaves office. But after he leaves office, a Hillary Clinton with an overcompensating *macho* tendency might send things in a different direction.

Conclusion

If we bring into focus what we know about China today, rather than what it might or might not be in the future, and try to comprehend its current and likely effects on the rest of the world in an historical and comparative perspective, we will see that China has in large part become the "China" that Americans wanted it to be (minus its dictatorial politics). If Henry Luce were alive today, he would think China was finally carrying out his "American vision"—a vision of a surfeit of consumer durables, as he argued in his famous 1941 "American Century" article, which had people running to or admiring and envying the U.S. from Azerbaijan to Zambia—with China doing what American leaders want it to do, without having to be told (the most effective kind of power). But more broadly, the overriding Western and East Asian stake in China, in my judgment, is a hugely powerful business coalition that finally got access to the storied China market after Deng Xiaoping's reforms, and has been cavorting with abandon in that capacious arena for almost four decades, making money hand over fist. Beijing's determination to allow much higher levels of foreign direct investment than its competitors like Japan or South Korea helped to create this

coalition, but its real strengths are two: first, American political leaders hardly ever talk about these interests, so they barely enter the press outside of the business pages. (James Mann is almost alone in reminding us that the modal atmosphere enveloping the Sino-American relationship is an elitist interaction prizing extreme secrecy.[21]) Second, business interests come close to having a veto power over the China policies of both American political parties. That doesn't mean that a military crisis could not override business interests: it certainly could. But in the dailiness of Sino-American relations since 1978, the largest interest is the business interest, which forged a bipartisan political coalition in Washington overwhelmingly favoring engagement.

Republican administrations tend to come in with harsh rhetoric about China to appease the right wing of the party, then quickly turn toward engagement (true of Nixon, Reagan, and Bush II; Bush I was a congenital engager)—a quiet strategy that usually flies under the radar of most Americans' attentions. The Democrats have no anti-PRC elements in their constituency except protectionist blue collar unions and workers, and a small but vociferous human rights contingent.

Underpinning this business/politics coalition is a relatively simple fact, namely, that China does not remotely threaten the United States technologically, commercially, financially, or militarily—and neither does Japan. Twenty years ago when Japan also appeared to be a looming menace to American technology, commerce, and finance, most of the experts claimed that the U.S. was lagging behind Japan in just about every important technology, that Japan had a predatory business model that enabled it to capture global markets, and had somehow accumulated six

or seven of the ten largest banks in the world. That "threat" evaporated in the early 1990s. And today China has no world-beating technology, the firms capturing global markets are usually foreign firms in co-production arrangements with China, it has no firms that can compare to Korea's Samsung, let alone Apple or Microsoft, China's financial sector is still quite immature, and the health of its economy is utterly dependent on access to the American market. Chinese scholars like Li Minqi correctly note that China is not the "economic powerhouse" of American dreams and fears, but "a backward late industrializer;" Hu Angang's judgment is that "generally speaking, China has by now reached a phase of lower-middle income development."[22] Here we have the essential basis for the overriding characteristic of the Sino-American relationship since 1972, namely, peaceful cooperation and competition. And I can't think of a more successful American strategy since the revival of Western Europe and Japan after World War 2: kudos (for once) to Richard Nixon.

The U.S. has a full-blown structure of containment and "constrainment" in the region that is now entering its eighth decade and shows no signs of diminishing. The structures and field forces of power that East Asian history has created in the past century also still hold sway: these days Chinese and Koreans appear to care much more about Japan's failure to reckon seriously with its own imperial history (going back at least to 1895) than they do about this or that coming imbroglio with the U. S.. China's future cannot be imagined apart from these lingering pressures, just as its economic growth absolutely cannot—and will not—continue at the 1979-2010 pace of nearly ten percent per annum (and today is not; the global crisis

sharply reduced its growth in 2009, and the rate in 2014 was about 7.5 percent). At some point the capitalist gravity of the world economy will capture it, if it hasn't already (there are many examples of this happening to Japan, for example the Plaza Accord of 1985), just as its own people and its sorely taxed environment bring mounting pressures to bear on the leadership to decompress and live with the rest of the world, rather than disrupt or dominate it.

Of course we can find problems. Taiwan's predicament always carries weight and the capability to disrupt (or even destroy) the relationship, and recent conflicts over barren islands are a worrisome indication of Chinese expansionism. But every rough patch or crisis since 1978 pales before the onrushing juggernaut of business access to China. Also, no East Asian country has a politically powerful diaspora in the U.S., analogous to the Cuban community in Miami or the Polish community in Chicago, nor does policy toward East Asia have much of a constituency outside of business, military and political circles. The general condition of most Americans, even college-educated ones, is ignorance about China, which of course leaves them open to easy manipulation, even stampeding; this makes of China not a nation, but a permutating metaphor and a palimpsest for American imaginings—and its "rise," a surefire way to sell stupid books. American elites—as we see with the Republican leadership in Congress—can stoke or slake the fires of popular outrage almost at will. If and when they need a stampede, they will get it. In the meantime, well, everybody makes money.

Notes

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[3] Ian Easton, "China's Deceptively Weak (and Dangerous) Military," *The Diplomat* (January 31, 2014).
[4] Gregg Easterbrook, "Our Navy is Big Enough," *New York Times* Op-Ed page (March 9, 2015).
[5] Reuters, "Japanese Navy Gets Biggest Flat-Top Since WWII-Era Aircraft Carriers," *New York Times* (March 25, 2015).
[6] Robert Gates, "Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates," Abilene, KS, Saturday, May 08, 2010, http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1467
[7] Itsunori Onodera (Japan's Defense Minister), "Remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies" (Washington D.C., July 11, 2014), p. 4.
[8] Marshall Sahlins, "Confucius Institutes censor political discussions and restrain the free exchange of ideas. Why, then, do American universities sponsor them?" *The Nation* (November 18, 2013).

[9] Yabuki Susumu and Mark Selden, "The Origins of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute between China, Taiwan and Japan," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* (Vol. 12, Issue 2, No. 3, January 13, 2014).
[10] "Asia's Nightmare Scenario: A War in the East China Sea Over the Senkakus," *The National Interest* (July 5, 2014).
[11] Blair, in *The Nelson Report*, July 3, 2014.
[12] Helen Cooper and Jane Perlez, "U.S. Sway in Asia is Imperiled as China Challenges Alliances," *New York Times* (May 30, 2014).
[13] Peter Goodspeed, "Obama Looks to Counter China's Influence with Australian Naval Base," fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2011/11/15; Elisabeth Bumiller and Thom Shanker, "Panetta to Offer Strategy for Cutting Military Budget," *New York Times* (January 2, 2012).
[14] Spencer Ackerman, "All Posts Tagged 'Leon Panetta': Humans Lose, Robots Win in New Defense Budget," www.wired.com/dangerroom, January 26, 2012.
[15] I discussed this at length in Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, v. 2 (Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 45-54.
[16] Data in Tina Gerhardt, "America's Pacific Century," www. Huffingtonpost.com, February 11, 2012.
[17] See Cumings, *Dominion From Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (Yale University Press, 2010), ch. 7.
[18] Even after currently planned American troop withdrawals, some 70,000 American military personnel will remain in Europe, with about 50,000 of them in Germany. See Elisabeth Bumiller and Steven Erlanger, "Panetta and Clinton Seek to Reassure Europe on Defense," *New York Times* (February 7, 2012).
[19] I discuss this phenomenon at greater length in *Dominion From Sea to Sea* (2009).
[20] "The World According to Maxwell Smart," *New York Times* (July 13, 2014), Op-ed page.
[21] Mann's account consistently calls attention to both the business component and the secrecy surrounding China policy. See *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), pp. 9-10, 284-85 and *passim*.
[22] Quoted in Wang Chaohua, ed., *One China, Many Paths* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 232, 322.