The Obama Administration’s Strategic Pivot to Asia: From a Diplomatic to a Strategic Constrainment of an Emergent China?

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This article examines the connection between President Barack Obama’s 2011 Strategic Pivot to Asia and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2010 Hanoi Declaration on the South China Sea dispute. Secretary Clinton’s statement during the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 2010 evoked a new diplomatic strategy in confronting an emergent and assertive China—constrainment. This strategy involved Washington working with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states in persuading China to adhere to a multilateral approach in resolving the South China Sea issue. However, China admonished the ASEAN states not to follow the U.S. bidding. As a major economic partner and an occasional political ally of most ASEAN states, China subsequently thwarted the U.S. design to form a regional bloc for a constrainment policy. Failing diplomatically, the Obama administration is rebalancing U.S. naval/air forces toward the Asia-Pacific region. This marks a shift from a diplomatic constrainment policy to a pivot strategy that is predicated on American military power.

Keywords: Constrainment, South China Sea dispute, emergent China, maritime disputes, Obama administration’s Strategic Pivot to Asia

In early 2010, the Obama administration announced a policy of reengagement in East Asia. This move aimed to enhance the credibility of U.S. security/diplomatic commitments in the region by buttressing its bilateral alliances and championing multilateralism. To substantiate the policy, the Obama administration took strong concrete foreign policy actions in the last six months of 2010. The most significant

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among these efforts was Secretary Hillary Clinton’s July 24, 2010 Declaration on the
South China Sea in Hanoi, Vietnam. Through the 2010 Hanoi Declaration, Secretary
Clinton argued that it is in the U.S. interest that the freedom of navigation, open
access to Asia’s maritime commons, and the littoral states’ respect for international
maritime law in the South China Sea are respected. She also mentioned that the
United States is prepared to facilitate multilateral negotiations to settle the dispute
over the Spratly Islands.

Indicative of the U.S. growing apprehension about China’s naval prowess and
assertiveness in the South China Sea, the 2010 Hanoi Declaration initiated a new
diplomatic strategy which is aptly termed “constrainment.” Such a strategy, however,
is far from simple. It is an arduous process requiring the United States and the
Southeast Asian states to press China to accept and soften if not modify its assertive
position on the South China Sea dispute. From 2010 to 2011, however, China has
undermined the constrainment policy by adopting these measures: a) deepening the
claimant countries’ economic dependence on China; b) keeping these countries from
developing the resources in the disputed areas; and c) avoiding outright confrontation
with the United States, while continuing to develop China’s naval power. Because of
their mutually beneficial economic ties with China, the Southeast Asian countries,
even with U.S. goading, could not form a diplomatic bloc that can constrain China.

In November 2011, the Obama administration announced a strategic pivot to
the Asia-Pacific region. The measure entails a gradual shift from the U.S. military
campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan to a deeper strategic involvement in the Asia-
Pacific region. This initiative is obviously an attempt to assert America’s leadership
in Asia and aimed to counter-balance China’s pervasive regional influence.

This article examines the direct interrelationship between the July 2010 Hanoi
Declaration and the November 2011 Strategic Pivot to the Asia-Pacific. It explores this
primary question: What is the link between these two foreign policy pronouncements?
It also addresses these corollary questions: 1) What is constrainment as a diplomatic
and later, a strategic strategy? 2) What is the politico/strategic basis of constraintment?
3) What are the key elements of the 2010 Hanoi Declaration? 5) How did China
respond to this constraintment strategy? 6) What are the problems in applying this
policy on an emergent China? 7) What are the limits of constrainment as a long-term
diplomatic strategy? And, 8) How does the pivot to Asia transform constrainment
from a diplomatic to a strategic initiative against an emergent China?

From Diplomatic to Strategic Constrainment?

The late Canadian scholar Gerald Segal considered the application of constraintment
on an emerging and potentially revisionist China in his 1996 article, “East Asia and
the Constrainment of China.” He argued that containment (a form of balancing) and
engagement (a form of bandwagoning) are artifacts of the Cold War and could not
address the problems attendant to a rising China. In other words, both strategies have
become anachronistic in the post-Cold War era. Alternatively, he called for a balanced
policy of engagement with a modified form of containment which he called “constrainment.” This term refers to the collective action of states that coalesce to pressure
China to moderate its stance on certain issues. Segal recognized the advantages of
deepling the economic, social, and political relations with China. However, he
cautioned Western countries and ASEAN member-states that such interactions would be optimized only if China could be prevented from using force to realize its irredentist claims and/to tilt the balance of power in East Asia in its favor.\(^7\)

There is a need to engage an emerging power like China, yet the international community should not hesitate to constrain it when necessary. Segal warned about some states’ tendencies to indulge or pander to its whims so as not to offend the sensibilities of the Chinese people, especially in what is perceived as an attempt to contain China.\(^8\) He noted, nevertheless, that China fears a concert of countervailing forces. Thus, it has softened or modified its positions on contentious issues in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and has even signed the Non-nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the Comprehensive Ban Treaty (CBT). Constrainment should never be a confrontational or a balancing policy against China. Instead, it must aim to integrate China into the international system.\(^9\) According to Segal “a policy to constrain China … is intended to tell China that the outside world has interests that will be defended by means of incentives for good behavior, deterrence for bad behavior, and punishment when deterrence fails.”\(^10\) Therefore, Segal’s constrainment approach is a “carrot-and-stick” policy in which engagement is matched by a tough-minded readiness to deter China from committing any aggressive acts.\(^11\)

In the same 1996 article, Segal commented that the primary responsibility of ASEAN member-states is to constrain China. He deplored the association’s general weakness and lack of coherence. Although Japan and other Northeast Asian states can possibly hold China at bay, the United States is still key to providing the balance of power and regional security. Moreover, the United States could only constrain China if states in the region wanted it.\(^12\) Segal observed, too, that U.S. policy vis-à-vis an emerging China was still vague in the mid-1990s. It took 16 years before a viable constrainment policy on an emergent China could be officially embodied in the July 2010 Hanoi Declaration.

Originally, Secretary Clinton envisioned a formal diplomatic mechanism involving ASEAN to resolve the South China Sea dispute. Based on the international law of the sea, this diplomatic strategy hopes to prevent an increasingly powerful China from dominating this strategic waterway. The July 2010 Hanoi Declaration, in a way, is essentially a diplomatic strategy to settle the dispute multilaterally and to impede the imposition of Chinese sovereignty and control over the contested maritime territory. Tactfully, the United States is neutral on the legality of the competing legal claims, and remains focused on the freedom of navigation and on formulating a multilateral resolution to the dispute.

China immediately countered Secretary Clinton’s diplomatic initiative by intimidating the ASEAN claimant states, and building up its naval capability. Eventually, the Obama administration shifted American focus and resources from Iraq and Afghanistan to the Pacific Rim where it could buttress its forward deployed forces and bilateral alliances to poise a strategic counter-weight to China’s naval build-up, diplomatic assertiveness, and maritime expansionism.\(^13\)

From Hedging to Constrainment?

Despite its cooperative relations with the United States, China regards the world’s sole superpower as a threat to its national security and domestic stability.\(^14\) This
mindset stems from Washington’s tacit support of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, and its alleged agenda of subverting the few remaining socialist states in the world through a process of “peaceful evolution.” China’s wariness of the United States is further exacerbated by the increased U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia as a result of the Bush administration’s War on Terror after 9/11. The Chinese leadership has repeatedly articulated the need for a new world order that is multipolar rather than unipolar as a defensive measure to what it perceives as a structural threat from the United States. Hence, China uses its economic and military power to foster a regional order which theoretically allows Southeast Asia states to freely side with either of the two powers (China and the United States) without making any firm commitment to any of them. Exploiting its prowess in the fields of security, production, and finance, China maintains a situation of “unstable balancing” in East Asia without undermining American pre-eminence in the region.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the United States neither confronted nor contained China but adopted a proactive hedging strategy to manage the latter’s capabilities and influence its intentions. The hedging strategy assumes that among the emergent powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States in the future. The strategy, however, does not consider China as an immediate threat or a Soviet-style rival. Rather, it sees China as inching its way to a direct confrontation with the United States. Thus, the United States has always stressed its intention to remain a dominant Pacific power, and that China can ill-afford a miniature arms race or a geo-political rivalry with America. The strategy also requires the United States to tighten its bilateral alliances across Asia, limit Chinese influence among the U.S. allies, and avoid any confrontation with China.

Upon closer scrutiny, the hedging strategy is limited and contradictory. For example, while Washington’s policy vis-à-vis Beijing is generally pragmatic and cooperative, some quarters of the U.S. government, specifically the Department of Defense, still perceive China as a potential military threat. Although aiming to integrate China into the current international system, this policy dictates that the United States strengthen its security relations with Japan, revitalize its bilateral alliances in East Asia, and deploy additional air and naval units from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. These are clear-cut strategic measures intended to balance, and not appease, an emergent power. Furthermore, hedging is a transitional strategy amidst the uncertainties associated with China’s emergence as a regional power. Before 2008, the United States was unsure whether China’s emergence would be disruptive to the regional order or not. However, China’s recent behavior indicates that it is acting like any great power in history. For instance, it attempts to change regional norms and structures as it develops the essential political and military capabilities to challenge the status quo powers.

China is gradually developing a navy that could go beyond pre-empting U.S. intervention in a Taiwan Strait crisis and block the entry of the U.S. Navy to the East China Sea and the South China Sea. China has shown an annual double-digit increase in defense spending since 2006. Consequently, in the past few years, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has acquired a growing fleet of Russian-made diesel-electric Kilo-class submarines and Sovremenny-class destroyers. Unprecedentedly, it has also completed the construction of seven classes of destroyers and frigates, five classes of submarines (two of which are nuclear-powered), and other naval force multipliers such as three types of capable maritime interdiction aircraft, fast missile
boats, and amphibious ships. With its naval prowess, China has become more assertive in the South China Sea. In March 2009, Chinese naval and fishing vessels harassed the U.S.S. Impeccable which was openly conducting surveying operations in the South China Sea. The following year, China warned the United States to respect its extensive maritime claims. In March 2010, Chinese officials told two visiting U.S. State Department senior officials that China would not tolerate any U.S. interference since the South China Sea is now part of the country’s “core interests” of sovereignty on a par with Taiwan and Tibet. Consequently, the littoral/ maritime states, both in Northeast and Southeast Asia, worry that China might seize some of the disputed islands in the East China Sea and South China Sea, given the potential energy reserves of these maritime territories, and their importance as sea lines of communications (SLOCs).

The United States is in a quandary as to how to approach or confront China’s economic clout, military capabilities, and political assertiveness. China’s extensive economic links with its neighbors, the latter’s military weakness vis-à-vis the PLA, and Beijing’s participation in several regional forums make balancing an expensive and difficult U.S. diplomatic strategy for the region. A Cold War grand strategy, containment may be inadequate in dealing with a generally pragmatic (not ideological), diplomatically astute, economically powerful, but unstable minimal status quo power like China. The evolving strategy is constraintment. It involves a group of states defending their collective interests threatened by China, which has become increasingly powerful and assertive. Currently, this diplomatic strategy is being backed up by American military power to make it effective, given China’s success in thwarting the coalition of states that have staked claims in the South China Sea.

The Obama Administration’s Reengagement Policy

The 2010 Hanoi Declaration is part and parcel of the Obama administration’s “U.S. is back,” or re-engagement, policy. As a policy process, reengagement has two goals: First, it aims to rectify the perception that the Bush administration’s myopic focus on the global War on Terror and the counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan had diverted the U.S. attention from East and Southeast Asia. Thus, it assures America’s allies and friends that they need not fall prey to any emergent power, and that there is no need for them to choose between Washington and Beijing. At the same time, it conveys that the United States does not seek to contain China, but to transform it into a responsible stakeholder in the region.

Second, the reengagement policy in Asia explores ways and means for the United States and the regional states to expand their bilateral relations for their mutual benefit. Hence, it requires strengthening U.S. leadership, increasing its engagement in Asian affairs, and applying new methods of projecting U.S. ideals and influence throughout the region. This thrust prioritizes the issue of changing the balance of power generated by China’s emergence. Definitely, China’s emergence affects the relations of the East Asian states with the United States. Nonetheless, these states view and assess the China challenge differently. For the Obama administration, the reengagement with Asia generates opportunities to formulate foreign policy objectives that transcend the balance of power, while managing the changing regional security landscape.

The United States regularly monitors such security flashpoints as the South
China Sea and East China Sea maritime disputes, and the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. This reengagement comes at a time when many Southeast Asian countries are increasingly concerned about China’s activist and assertive foreign policy. China flaunts its naval power beyond its coastal territories. Its creeping maritime expansionism not only challenges American naval supremacy in the West Pacific and East Asia, but also demonstrates its aggressive intentions toward its neighboring states. Thus, China negates its image of peaceful emergence, and creates political fissures between Beijing and its smaller and weaker neighboring states.

Undoubtedly, the rising tensions between China and the other claimant states augur well for the Obama administration whose comeback is welcomed in many East Asian countries. The reengagement policy boosts the confidence of Southeast Asian states to redefine their relations with the emergent power—China. This diplomatic gambit would be tested when the U.S. affirms categorically its position on the South China Sea dispute, and becomes instrumental in its resolution.

Constraining an Emergent China

The South China Sea issue hibernated in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century when China began its charm offensive in Southeast Asia while the United States was preoccupied with its War on Terror. The dispute flared up again in 2009 as China consolidated its jurisdictional claims by expanding its military reach and pursuing coercive diplomacy against the other claimant states. China also increased its naval patrols (using submarines, survey ships, and surface combatants) in Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and territorial waters, and intimidated foreign oil companies that tried to operate in the South China Sea. Prior to the 17th ARF meeting in Hanoi, Vietnamese, Philippine and Malaysian officials voiced their respective concerns to Washington about China’s assertiveness in laying claims to the Paracel and Spratly islands. In response, the United States informed ARF member-states of Secretary Clinton’s diplomatic intervention and asked for their support. Consequently, 12 Asian countries supported the U.S. plan to create a multilateral mechanism to handle the South China Sea dispute.

Secretary Clinton fired the opening salvo of the constrainment policy on China via her 2010 Hanoi Declaration. She emphasized U.S. navigational interests in the South China Sea, and proposed that jurisdictional disputes among the claimant states be addressed by a collaborative multiparty process. The significant developments that triggered the three-year tension in the South China Sea, and culminated in the 2010 Hanoi Declaration included:

a) Beijing’s verbal threats against international companies conducting oil exploration activities. Chinese envoys warned top executives of ExxonMobil that their business in China would suffer unless they withdraw from their oil exploration deals with Vietnam;
b) China’s promulgation of unilateral fishing bans that led to the arrests of hundreds of Vietnamese fishermen; and
c) The impasse in the China-ASEAN working group drafting a code of conduct in the South China Sea, because of the inherent lack of Chinese interest in such a multilateral undertaking.
The 2010 Hanoi Declaration was also issued a few months after Chinese officials and scholars classified China’s expansive claims in the South China Sea as part of its “core interests.”—a category previously reserved for Tibet and Taiwan. The pivotal points of the declaration are summarized as follows:

a) Like every other nation, the United States has a national interest in the freedom of navigation, open access to Asia, maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea.

b) The United States supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion. It also opposes the use of threat of force by any claimant state.

c) The United States does not take sides on the competing territorial claims; and

d) The United States welcomes initiatives and confidence-building measures consistent with the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

In substance, the 2010 Hanoi Declaration merely echoes the May 10, 1995 U.S. State Department Policy on the Spratly Islands and South China Sea except in one respect—the U.S. role in the dispute. Previous official U.S. pronouncements on the South China Sea dispute were limited to invoking the freedom of navigation, the sanctity of international relations, and the need for a peaceful resolution. Already, the 1995 State Department Policy signaled U.S. willingness to help resolve the dispute in whatever way the claimants would see fit. Explicitly, the 2010 Hanoi Declaration presents the United States as facilitator of peaceful initiatives, and other confidence-building measures adhering to the 2002 code of conduct in the South China Sea. An American scholar sums up this development: “Secretary Clinton offered a facilitative role for the United States in multilateral negotiations. This statement was in contrast to previous anodyne expression of U.S. policy in which freedom of navigation, the sanctity of international waters and the need for peaceful resolution were mentioned.”

In addition, the United States appears to be “holding the ring” with regard to the South China Sea dispute.

Historically, the United States avoids taking an official stand on territorial disputes in East Asia. However, China’s aggressiveness in pushing for its maritime claims and the quiet pleadings from some ASEAN states have galvanized the Obama administration into issuing a policy statement. Interestingly, the 2010 Hanoi Declaration was announced after the Pentagon revealed that China’s PLA is strategically transforming its ground force into combined naval and air power. This shift has emboldened China, particularly in the South China Sea, and “this assertiveness has caused concerns among China’s neighbors.”

The ASEAN member-states, publicly and privately, commended the 2010 Hanoi Declaration. The policy’s emphasis on American national interests and the nature of territorial claims refuted the infamous dotted lines on a fourteenth-century Chinese map used by China to prove its “indisputable sovereignty” across the whole of the South China Sea. Nonetheless, ASEAN countries do not want to be confrontational and jeopardize their economic relations with China. They prefer the United States to act as a balancer, with them playing a supporting role. They also point out that the 2010 Hanoi Declaration (which is in America’s interest) has a long-term implication. It gives some substance to the 2002 Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties...
between China and ASEAN on the South China Sea dispute. Furthermore, only the United States can unite the small ASEAN powers and give them confidence to face China in multilateral negotiations, as well as to persuade this emergent power to submit the issue for resolution in accordance with international law. In any rate, the 2010 Hanoi Declaration has made constrainment a viable policy for both the United States and the ASEAN member-states in dealing with China.

Reacting to Constrainment

China’s reaction to the 2010 Hanoi Declaration was swift and critical. China’s Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi lambasted Secretary Clinton for saying that the South China Sea situation is cause for grave concern. He argued that “turning the bilateral issue into an international or multilateral one would only worsen the situation and add difficulties to solving the issue.” Interestingly, China also warned the smaller ASEAN states against multilateralizing the dispute. Minister Yang Jiechi even told Singapore’s then Foreign Minister George Yao that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is a fact.” Finally, he reminded the ASEAN states of their economic ties with China. These vehement attacks sprang from China’s traumatic constrainment by the ASEAN states in the aftermath of the Mischief Incident, and its forced signing of the 2002 Conduct of Parties in the Declaration on the South China Sea. Even the proposal for a multilateral resolution conjured up the image of the United States and its allies ganging up on China.

A stream of nationalistic rhetoric and a series of military exercises followed the 2010 Hanoi Declaration. The *China Daily* editorialized that “some ASEAN countries are engaged in a power game in the South China Sea because they want to seize more ocean resources despite China’s claim to unimpeachable sovereignty.” A Chinese academic commented that “China will ignore Clinton’s call and reject any U.S. role in the consultation to resolve its territorial disputes with the neighboring states.” Chinese envoys all over the region echoed the official mantra that the “South China Sea dispute should be resolved bilaterally between China and individual claimants to the island chains”—a ploy to play up China as a great power and undermine the July 2010 Hanoi Declaration. Even the PLA joined the fray by declaring that “China has indisputable claim over the South China Sea” but insisted that it would continue to allow others to freely navigate one of the busiest waterways in the world.

The PLA statement on China’s claim of sovereignty over the South China Sea defied the 2010 Hanoi Declaration somewhat. At the same time, it conveyed to the United States and several ASEAN states that China’s regional policy had been most open and accommodating. However, China’s intentions were ambiguous and perplexing. In late July 2010, the PLAN conducted a live-fire exercise in the South China Sea. China’s three fleets were deployed, along with fighter jets and missile launches against hypothetical long-range targets. This show of force reflected not only China’s displeasure about U.S. involvement, but also its toughened stance on the South China Sea dispute. Understandably, China resents the Obama administration’s reengagement policy, which it considers to be blatant interference by a distant non-Asian power in a region where Chinese influence and political clout might otherwise go unchallenged. It opposes as well the 2010 Hanoi Declaration which offers a multilateral approach
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to solving the dispute according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the norms specified in the 2002 Declaration on the Code of Conduct of the Parties on the South China Sea. In the short term, the constrainment is policy is workable only if the United States will simply “hold the ring” and let the ASEAN member-states themselves stand up against China.

Undermining Constrainment

Less than a year after the 2010 Hanoi Declaration, China tested the U.S.-led constrainment policy. On March 2, 2011, two Chinese maritime surveillance boats harassed and ordered a Philippine survey ship to leave the Reed Bank (also called Recto Bank), which is 80 kilometers from the Philippine island of Palawan. The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs filed a diplomatic protest before the Chinese Embassy in Manila on March 5, and claimed that China has provoked five to seven incidents in the South China Sea. The communiqué also indicated the increasing presence and activities of Chinese vessels in the Philippines’ EEZ. In particular, it cited Chinese patrol boats firing warning shots against Filipino fishing trawlers inside Philippine territorial waters in late February 2011. These Chinese incursions hamper the normal and legitimate fishing activities of Filipino fishermen in the area and undermine the peace and stability of the region.

Incidentally, Vietnam also complained about Chinese activities in its EEZ and accused Chinese patrol boats of harassing an oil-exploration ship conducting a seismic survey 120 kilometers (80 miles) off the Vietnamese coast. On May 28 and June 9, Chinese patrol boats cut the cables of Vietnamese oil exploration ships. Claiming that the two incidents happened within its EEZ, Vietnam lodged an official protest against China. Responding to these two ASEAN states’ diplomatic protests, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson arrogantly declared that “China has undisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and adjacent waters.”

The Chinese encroachments are perceived as testing the resolve of the other claimant states in the South China Sea dispute. Furthermore, they generate tension in the region and set China on a collision course with the Philippines and Vietnam. In return, the Philippines and Vietnam accused China of violating the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. They also mobilized the other ASEAN states for diplomatic support, and asked the United States, as well as Japan and Australia for their diplomatic support. Six ASEAN member-states supported the Philippines’ call for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. Unexpectedly, Singapore pressed China to be transparent about its claims in the South China Sea, and noted that Beijing’s ambiguous stance had raised international concerns. Australia stood behind the Philippines’ position during the Philippine-Australia Ministerial Meeting in Canberra on June 16, 2011. In a joint statement, Washington and Tokyo warned that Chinese naval activities could destabilize maritime security and heighten tensions in the South China Sea. The two allies urged China to take “a responsible and constructive role in regional stability and prosperity and called for its adherence to international norms of behavior.”

Clearly, this volley of events is a case of two ASEAN states, along with six other ASEAN-member states, and three major powers (the United States, Australia, and Japan) applying the constrainment policy against an assertive China. Pressuring
China to moderate its aggressive behavior in the South China Sea is the ultimate test for the ASEAN states and the United States. It is extremely crucial given that the Philippines, Vietnam, and China are not willing to back off from their claims over the Spratlys and the surrounding waters.59

Interestingly, a few days prior to the 2011 ARF annual meeting in Jakarta, China and the ASEAN states agreed on vaguely worded guidelines to implement the supposed 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea. These guidelines are supposedly for joint ventures that both sides will undertake in the South China Sea to address marine and environmental degradations, SARS, transnational crimes, navigation, and other biodiversity issues.60 Collectively, the guidelines are only part of the 2002 Code of Conduct and cannot stand on their own. They lack the mechanism for the management and much more, the resolution of the dispute. They are neither rules of engagement that regulate the operation of the claimant states’ warships in the disputed waters nor a diplomatic framework in case of complaints or grievances. Clearly, China’s motive in forging these guidelines was to mollify the ASEAN member-states so that they would exclude the South China Sea dispute from the ARF’s agenda before Secretary Clinton’s arrival in Bali, Indonesia.61 This created a chasm between the United States and ASEAN, deterring them from pursuing a common front against China’s irredentist agenda in the South China Sea.

Challenging Constrainment

Not satisfied with its efforts in preventing the United States from unifying ASEAN as a political bloc, China challenged the Obama’s administration’s diplomatic initiative by building up its naval capability. As previously mentioned, China has shown an annual double-digit increase in defense spending since 2006. Consequently, it has developed a formidable navy. At the advent of the twenty-first century, China has introduced three new classes of destroyers (Luyang I, Luyang II, and Luzhouchou) with more capable radar and air-defense weapon system as well as frigates (Jiangwei II, Jingkai I and Jingkai II) with improved war-fighting capabilities and seaworthiness.62 These capability upgrades enabled the PLAN to enhance its operational range from the first-island chain, an imaginary line that runs from southern Japan—to Okinawa, Taiwan and the Philippines, to the second-island chain, which extends from northern Japan to the Northern Marianas Islands, Guam, and further south to Palau.63

Moving beyond its strategic focus on Taiwan, China has developed the naval capabilities to generate regional tension by challenging the claims of smaller littoral states over parts of the South China Sea, and by changing the strategic pattern in the maritime commons of East Asia and West Pacific where the U.S. Navy could be eased out. In support, Chinese media commentators, academics, and analysts have emphasized their country’s naval power and the need to protect China’s sovereignty over its surrounding waters. They are unanimous in their views that the PLAN should have unlimited operational range, and must possess blue-water capabilities to show a military presence at sea, provide deterrence, and conduct military diplomacy.64

China’s heavy-handed behavior in the South China Sea and East China Sea has increased in tandem with the expansion of its navy and maritime services.65 To advance its maritime claim, China conducts numerous naval exercises that involve modern surface combatants and even submarines.66 These exercises are undertaken
to show China’s determination to unilaterally and militarily resolve the dispute, to flaunt its growing naval capabilities, and to impress upon the other claimant states its de facto ownership of these contested maritime territories. China invests more resources in its naval build-up in the South China Sea. The PLAN established an enormous submarine base on Hainan Island that places its Southern Fleet closer to the disputed area. In July 2011, China officially acknowledged the rebuilding of an aircraft carrier for trial deployment that same year. It is also seriously considering the development of another carrier, since its first carrier (the former Soviet carrier Varyag) was refurbished to carry out scientific research and training. There is yet no plan to deploy its first carrier in a battle group, but it will be used as a prototype or blueprint for more indigenous carriers. Reportedly, China is constructing two indigenous aircraft carriers at the Jiangnan shipyard in Shanghai as part of the PLAN’s extensive modernization program. In addition, it successfully reverse-engineered the Russian-designed SU-33 and test-flew in 2008 its version of this naval fighter in 2009 designated as J-15. The J-15 is likely to enter production in the next few years, providing the PLAN a capable fourth-generation fighter plane that can be operated from its incipient carrier force.

These developments worry China’s neighbors still reeling from their confrontations with Chinese patrol vessels in the contested sea. In the short-run, Chinese naval analysts project the deployment of future PLAN aircraft carriers in its coral-island-assault campaign against the other claimant states. In the long-run, these carriers will afford the PLAN the offensive air-capabilities to “attack its enemy navies” rear and to become a regional blue-water navy operating effectively in what Chinese naval analysts call the “far seas.” Apparently, the PLAN believes that preponderant naval power will resolve China’s territorial row with the smaller claimant states according to Chinese terms, and force the U.S. Navy to steer clear of the disputed areas in the South China Sea.

The PLAN now has the capacity to conduct long-range, technologically sophisticated, and high-intensity combat operations along China’s maritime periphery. Boosted by increased budgets and improved domestic shipbuilding capabilities, the PLAN is at the forefront of Chinese military modernization and has been on the cutting edge of China’s coercive diplomacy. More significantly, it is an effective instrument in the pursuit of China’s national policy. Consequently, top-level Chinese officials have abandoned their earlier moderate and reassuring public posture and have become assertive and nationalistic, declaring China’s emergent status, the decline of the United States, and their absolute rights over the East China Sea and South China Sea. They consistently portray their country as a reactive and defensive victim in the face of increasing intrusion into its maritime territories by two small powers—Vietnam and the Philippines—and the unwarranted meddling of the United States.

In the summer of 2011, landing vessels, destroyers, marines and aircraft of the PLAN’s South Sea Fleet conducted a large-scale amphibious exercise based on the mock-up scenario of China’s winning back the South China Sea islands occupied by its enemies—the Philippines and Vietnam. Belying its rhetoric of joint cooperation and general de-escalation of tension in the South China Sea, China asserts that its sovereignty over the region is non-negotiable—a stance that is unlikely to change, as it would be “too politically compromising to its long-held logic of indivisible territorial integrity.”
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After the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Chinese military criticized the internationalization of the dispute and conducted four major naval exercises in the South China Sea. China warned Southeast Asian countries against engaging in a power game in a bid to control the resources in the South China Sea. Militarily and diplomatically, it also pressured Hanoi and Manila to negotiate bilaterally with Beijing, to recognize the legitimacy of its expansive claim on the South China Sea, and to render the 2010 Hanoi Declaration moot and academic.

With these developments, the Obama administration decided to pursue the diplomatic strategy of constrainment with the stick, not to pursue a Cold War containment of China which is deemed simplistic and wrong. Rather, to make China respect “America’s strength, determination, and strategy.”74 In November 2011, President Obama warned President Hu Jintao that the U.S. Navy would move more warships to the seas off China during the G-20 Summit in Seoul.75 A year later, he announced in front of the Australian Parliament that with the American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan coming to a close, the United States is refocusing on the fast-growing but pervasively Chinese influenced Asia-Pacific region.76 President Obama also announced the stationing of 2,500 Marines in northern Australia for regional training missions and military exercises and to help protect the vital sea-lanes along the South China Sea. Incidentally, he also mentioned enhanced U.S.-Philippine military ties in obvious reference to the latter’s territorial dispute with China.

Accordingly, this refocusing of U.S. strategic attention to the Asia-Pacific guarantees America’s major and long-term involvement in influencing the region’s future. Its ultimate goal is to shape regional structures and rules, particularly to make sure that international law, and norms are respected, commerce and the freedom of navigation are not impeded, that emerging powers build trust with their neighbors, and that disagreements are resolved peacefully without threats of coercion.”77

President Obama’s announcement of the pivot strategy implies a substantial reorientation of U.S. global strategy from the post-9/11 focus on the War on Terror to a rebalancing of American attention, efforts, and resources to meet the challenges and to seize opportunities in East Asia. It signals a shift from a hedging policy to an outright commitment to strategically constrain China.78 It is also indicative of the Obama administration’s decision to take the middle road between containment and appeasement of China after the constrainment policy based on the diplomatic approach failed. The Obama administration is sending a clear message that the United States is prepared to ensure stability in Asia, protect its allies, and strategically balance, and not confront, an assertive China. In the final analysis, President Obama’s strategic pivot to Asia expands rather than transforms U.S. defense policy in Asia since 1945—which is the maintenance of forward-deployed forces to guarantee America’s involvement in major regional developments.79

Emphasizing Strategic Constrainment

President Obama’s pivot strategy entails two interconnected strategic tasks: a) a geographical rebalancing of America’s priority from the Middle East and South Asia to the Asia-Pacific; and b) a shift from the Army-centric, expensive, and troop-intensive
counter-insurgency campaign to the development of robust conventional military
capabilities to maintain the U.S. technological edge in air and naval warfare. 80

Specifically, the tasks underscore these realities: First, notwithstanding U.S.
commitment to global security, the focus on the Asia-Pacific suggests that American
economic and security interests are linked to the region’s growth and dynamism; 81
Second, the strategy spells the end of the U.S. Army’s and Marine Corps’ large-scale
counter-insurgency campaigns that have dominated military operations since 2001,
while it will still maintain the U.S. Navy’s 11 aircraft carriers. Third, there will be fewer
investments in new weapon systems like the Joint Strike Jet Fighter, cyberspace
defense and offense, weapons technology for Special Operations forces and existing
nuclear forces, and for the broad area of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. 82
Accordingly, the emphasis will be on new technologies that will allow the U.S.
Navy and the U.S. Air Force to counter China’s and Iran’s latest asymmetric military
capabilities to disable American power/force projection near their shores or airspace,
through cyber-warfare, ballistic and cruise missiles, and advanced air defenses. 83

In June 2012, during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, former Defense
Secretary Leon Panetta provided more details on the pivot strategy. He announced
that the U.S. Navy would shift 60 percent of its maritime assets to the Asia-Pacific
by 2020. This move involves the deployment of six aircraft carriers, a majority of the
U.S. Navy’s cruisers, destroyers, and littoral ships designed to operate close offshore. 84
He added that advanced weapons systems like the F-22 Raptor fighter jets, Virginia
Class fast-attack submarines, lightly armed but fast Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), and
a new class of destroyers labeled DDG-1000, improved precision-guided weapons,
and new electronic warfare communication capabilities will beef up America’s naval
forces in the Asia-Pacific.

The U.S. military is also developing a new defense system capable of crisscrossing
the vast distances of the Pacific. Its improved features include as an aerial-refueling
tanker, a bomber, and an aircraft for anti-submarine warfare, which will provide
American forces “the freedom of maneuver in areas where their access and freedom
of action may be threatened.” 85 Evidently, the system is designed to counter China’s
“anti-access, area-denial strategy,” which utilizes diesel-electric attack submarines,
anti-ship missiles, and other weapons to deter the U.S. Navy from operating near its
coast. The pivot strategy also provides for expanded U.S. military exercises in the
Pacific and port visits to countries that ring the Indian Ocean.

The Obama administration’s Asia Pivot was made at a time when China looms
large in terms of its naval build-up and aggressiveness in the South China Sea. It
serves as balance to China’s continuous efforts to prevent the formation of a coalition
of Southeast Asian states, which could derail its hegemonic designs in the Asia-Pacific
region. It is apparent that the Obama administration is determined to maintain peace
and stability, ensure the free flow of commerce and trade, and shore up American
leadership and influence in Asia. In essence, the United States wants to deal with
China from a position of strength by backing up its diplomatic initiative with hard
power amidst the Chinese naval build-up and assertiveness.

All these boil down to the administration’s realization that diplomacy will not be
enough. The U.S. constraint strategy must be backed up by a military capability
so that a comprehensive new “rule-based” system designed to resolve the competing
territorial claims can take root in a region made up of Westphalian states. 86 On the
Asia pivot policy, the March 2012 U.S. Congressional Research Service Report states:
“The administration’s increased emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region appears to be more of a change in means than a change in policy goals … underlying much of the Obama policy is the long-standing challenge of managing tension in Sino-U.S. relations while seeking to deepen China’s integration into the international community.”

China remains suspicious of the Obama administration’s strategic pivot to Asia. A month after its official pronouncement, the Chinese defense ministry denounced the policy as a product of Cold War thinking. Chinese leaders also foresee a revival of Sino-U.S. rivalry that will increase friction and conflict in the region. Cognizant of their country’s growing military power, they also take note of the current U.S. fiscal crisis which casts doubts on the Obama administration’s ability to finance larger forward-deployed forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Consequently, China has responded to the strategic constrainment policy with countervailing military power and renewed assertiveness in the South China Sea.

From July to August 2012, it was reported that China conducted flight tests of a new multiple-warhead, ground-mobile missile and the JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missile. China also took extraordinary measures to demonstrate its power over the disputed parts of the South China Sea, such as: a) Utilizing maritime and fishing security ships to coerce other claimant states to respect China’s sovereignty over the disputed islands and waters; b) unilaterally exploiting marine resources; c) creating a multi-faceted administrative structure backed up by a military garrison to govern the disputed territories; and d) preventing ASEAN from coming up with a unified position on the issue. These moves are reflective of China’s displeasure with U.S. meddling in the maritime dispute and readiness to do anything, short of war, to undermine the policy of strategic constrainment.

The Obama administration is unfazed by China’s adverse reaction to its strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific. In the aftermath of the 2013 U.S presidential election, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon announced that the Obama administration would implement a comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategy toward the Asia-Pacific region harnessing all the elements of American national power—military, political, trade, investment, development, and values. Specific to the strategic component, Assistant Secretary for Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs Mark Lippert detailed that the pivot involves: a) Home-porting 60 percent of the U.S. Navy into the Pacific by 2020 and increasing the number of U.S. Air Force assets by 2017; b) shifting U.S. investments away from counter-insurgency capabilities to the acquisition of platforms and capabilities with direct utilization in the maritime expanse of the Asia-Pacific such as Virginia Class attack submarines, 5th-generation fighter planes, P-8 reconnaissance/anti-submarine/aircraft, and cruise missiles; and c) the development of strategic doctrines for the region’s maritime environment such as the Air-Sea-Battle concept and amphibious warfare operations.

**Conclusion**

An immediate outcome of the 2010 Hanoi Declaration is the start of the official implementation of the constrainment policy against China. Former Secretary Clinton articulated that it is America’s national interest to maintain the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Hence, the U.S. supports the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea; and favors a collaborative and multilateral process
in resolving the maritime disputes. Clearly, the constraint policy enables the Obama administration to back up its rhetoric of reengagement by “holding the ring” against China which is attempting a territorial reconfiguration in East Asia. Thus, the small Southeast Asia powers consider the United States to be the primary actor to constrain an emergent and assertive China.

However, China has continuously and vigorously undermined the constraint policy that was put in place in July 2010. An important economic partner and occasional political ally of most of the ASEAN states, China has derailed the U.S. effort to form an ad hoc coalition of Southeast Asian states that can constrain Chinese expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. Following its unsuccessful diplomatic initiative, the Obama administration decided to buttress its constraint policy on China through a pivot strategy, a gradual redeployment of American naval and air assets from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. Instantaneously, China expressed its readiness to confront American policy of strategic constraint. If this strategy fails, East Asia will face either of these three worst-case scenarios: 1) An Asian balance of power in which the great and small powers are locked in a constant competition that runs the risk of alliance formations, and realignment, aggression, and other tense diplomatic crises reminiscent of the Cold War; 2) a region dominated by a great-power condominium; or 3) a major systemic war between an emergent East Asian power and the only superpower in the world.

Notes
6. Ibid., 185.
10. Ibid., 186.
on Regional Order (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 54.
17. Ibid., 54.
19. Ibid., A.1
47. Torode, “ASEAN Shows Sudden Resolve against Beijing,” 2.
49. Ibid., 2.
52. Ibid., 2.
58. Ibid., 1.


75. Ibid., 4.


These are states that remain fixated on the issues of territorial integrity and remain relatively unencumbered by norms against the use of military force to resolve lingering territorial or political disputes among each other. Territoriality is the key characteristic of the Westphalian states and functions as the “hard shell” protecting state and societies from the perceived hostile and potentially dangerous external environment. Emil J. Kirchner, “Regional and Global Security: Changing Threats and Institutional Responses,” in *Global Security Governance: Competing Perceptions of Security in the 21st Century*, eds. Emil J. Kirchner and James Sperling (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 282.


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