

Presentations

Strategic Ambiguity in East Asia: Benefits and Costs

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Meaning and Purpose of Strategy

U.S. strategy in Asia is an important matter of interest to all in the region. In regard to some issues that strategy is quite clear, but in regard to others it is vague or uncertain. Some of the ambiguities are deliberate, for reasons to be explored below. In some respects, however, vagueness about U.S. strategy is related to vagueness about what "strategy" in general is supposed to be.

Common usage of the term strategy is very loose; it is often used interchangeably with "policy," or "objectives." In the realm of defense policy, however, it is important to distinguish policy, strategy, and military operations from each other, because it is the interrelationship of the three levels of concern that is crucial. For national security, the most fundamental issue is how to use military power to serve political purposes.

To some policymakers the idea that strategy must link force rationally to policy aims is a truism. It is deceptive, however, to think so, because devising an effective mechanism through which to link military force to policy objectives is far from obvious in many cases. To others the statement that strategy must link force to policy is incorrect, because it implies a preference for force, or an outmoded, narrowly military conception of security, which should be broadened or superseded by a more modern and enlightened "comprehensive" or "cooperative" concept of security that embraces economic, social, and other concerns.¹ To focus explicitly on planning military operations is at best naively parochial, losing sight of the issues that are now more central to international relations, or at worst dangerous, because it can be provocative and politically destabilizing.

In my view it is most dangerous to confuse the differences between foreign

¹ For example, Richard H. Ullman, "Redefining Security," *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Summer 1983); Jessica Tuchman Matthews, "Redefining Security," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Spring 1989); Edward A. Kolodziej, "Renaissance in Security Studies?" *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (December 1992); Keith Krause and Michael Williams, "Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies," *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 40 (October 1996). For a defense of the traditional focus on military aspects see Richard K. Betts, "Should Strategic Studies Survive?" *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997).

policy as a whole — in which economic or other matters of diplomacy may arguably be more important these days than military concerns — with security policy in particular. Security policy is one part of foreign policy, but it has a distinct core. That core is preparation for war. This is not to say by any means that preparation for war assumes that war is either desirable or inevitable. Such a stance could indeed be counterproductive, fueling mutual suspicion and making needless conflict more likely. (The preferred purpose of preparation for the eventuality of war is to make that eventuality less likely — “*si vis pacem para bellum*”). By preparation for war I mean a plan and capability for how to fight successfully if war were to happen, however unlikely it may be.

The reason that preparation for war is the core of security policy is that the essence of national security is to safeguard the political integrity and autonomy of the state. Prosperity and other aspects of national well-being are important concerns of foreign policy as a whole, but they do not usually relate directly to national survival or to the question of who rules a country or controls its policy decisions. Economic interdependence certainly limits the overall independence of states — by definition — but it does not subject a polity to foreign dictation. Interdependence or globalization make it hard for a state to control its own destiny, but it does not make it impossible for the state to determine its own policies. The most direct threat to survival or political independence is war. Therefore, in a world of separate states, each state must attend to the possibility of having to defend itself, either through its own efforts or through alliances that bring others’ power to bear on its behalf. War may be unnecessary and improbable, but as long as it remains possible states must be prepared for it, although how serious and effective that preparation is may vary immensely.

The concept of “cooperative security” should not be considered an alternative to traditional concern with deterrence and defense. In my view, the elements of cooperative security ideas that have most merit have to do with promoting mechanisms for communication to help avoid the development or worsening of conflicts of interest among countries, or to resolve such conflicts if they are relatively minor. Defense planning, however, is about dealing with conflicts of interest if they nevertheless emerge or prove impossible to resolve. Cooperative security is likely to work in an environment where relations among the parties are reasonably good in general; traditional security policy is to cope with an environment where the problems are substantial.

The seriousness of preparation for war varies with the degree of responsibility for defense. Countries that have little capacity for self-defense and who rely on patrons to protect them pay less careful attention to strategy for war than do the patrons. In any case, “strategy” in the world of national security policy boils down to plans for how to develop and deploy military forces in a manner such that they would win a war if one

were to occur, or at least achieve minimum political objectives at acceptable cost. (In many English dictionaries, the first definitions listed for the word strategy are “generalship” and “the science of planning and directing large-scale military operations.”)

Strategy is the plan that translates military means into political ends. Strategy is neither the ends nor the means themselves, but is the bridge between the two. To some this is clear. To others it is not. Many military officers, like experts in any profession, tend to conflate strategy with the means — the military operations that they are responsible for being ready to execute. Many diplomats and political leaders, on the other hand, in the United States but especially in more militarily dependent countries, tend to conflate strategy with the ends, the policy objectives of maintaining peace and prosperity.

Both of these tendencies toward conflation pose problems, but in regard to security in East Asia, the second poses the most problems. By allowing policymakers to avoid the ultimate question of precisely where and how military forces would engage in combat, it fosters confusion about what military policy does for foreign policy in the region. It abets too much reliance on the notion that simple “presence” of forces (particularly those of the United States) in and of itself contributes to stability, and indirectly may contribute to a process that produces greater risks in a future crisis. Objectives and strategy need to be disentangled, so that strategy — whether or not for public purposes it remains deliberately ambiguous — brings means and ends together in a manner that is conscious and not confusing.

U.S. Objectives in East Asia

It is fair to assume a consensus that the main American aims for the region are the simple and obvious ones of political stability and economic prosperity. Both depend on each other to some extent, but ultimately the first is most important since a major war would be more damaging than a depression. In contrast to the Cold War, when the winds of ideology and revolution swept the region, few if any in East Asia object to the value of stability in principle. The problem is specifying stability on what terms and with what exceptions.

In principle, the objective of stability is profoundly conservative. As long as there is no crisis throwing it into doubt, devotion to stability dulls the readiness of governments to cope with change. It also logically fosters a reactive stance in policy and strategy. One can hardly be active on behalf of the status quo unless someone is challenging it.

Despite economic disarray, the political and military situation in East Asia

remains remarkably stable at the end of the 20th century, as it has been since the 1970s. Though marred by serious tensions in several places, this situation contrasts markedly with the first half of the post-World War II era, when active civil war racked China, protracted international wars were fought in Korea and Indochina, and the United States, Soviet Union, and China confronted each other militarily in various combinations. There is now no war among small or medium powers in the region, and no apparent danger of war among any of the great powers. Although this stability in East Asia has lasted for two decades, it is not deeply rooted. There are several important underlying sources of instability — a volatile North Korean government, domestic politics in a democratizing Taiwan, and the uncertain future evolution of Chinese power and policy.²

The three great powers in the region apart from China are also, to varying degrees, in anomalous positions. Russia is economically prostrate and at the moment hardly functions as a great power (with the important exception of the influence inherent in its inventory of thousands of nuclear weapons). But it would be foolish to assume that Russia will never recover. Japan is a truncated great power. It has significant military power in an absolute sense, but not in the relative sense commensurate with its economic power. This unusual status has lasted for a long time, and appears stable as long as the Mutual Security Treaty with the United States lasts. All three of the local great powers — for varying reasons coming from their relations with each other and with varying degrees of ambivalence coming from their relations with Washington -- favor continued American military engagement in the region.

The U.S. engagement, however, is anomalous in its own way. The durability and scale of U.S. activism abroad after the Cold War is remarkable in a sense, since there is no longer a major animating threat to explain it. It now appears rooted in habit — a habit of empire, as it were, dating from the Cold War — and in conventional wisdom that isolationism earlier in the century made U.S. policy costlier than interventionism would have been. There is no reason to be sure, however, that these roots are not shallow, because the United States has not had to pay significant costs to maintain its military presence after the Cold War. Washington was able to bear high costs in the Cold War because transnational Marxist-Leninism appeared to put the long-term survival of liberal government in the world in doubt. Will Americans be willing to pay or risk paying high costs in blood and treasure — that is, to risk fighting a major war — if the stakes of

² See Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, "The Coming Conflict with America" and Robert Ross, "Beijing as a Conservative Power," both in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (March/April 1997), and Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). For a survey of potential developments in the region see Richard K. Betts, "Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Winter 1993/94).

stability seem to be local rather than global?

Part of the current stability also flows from an implicit division of dominant power in the region: China on the mainland, and the United States in the Pacific. This could blur if China succeeds in moving to sea, and presses claims in the Spratly/Nansha Islands, or as renewed conflict in Korea draws the United States back into activism on the mainland.

Such developments are by no means inevitable, perhaps not even probable. There is no reason to anticipate a rupture of the Mutual Security Treaty or a withdrawal of American military forces from the region under likely circumstances. Many observers are sanguine because of that; the glass is half full. For security policy, however, the glass is half empty; it is a mistake to plan on the basis of probable benign developments. Because most statesmen are sensible and go to great lengths to avoid tragedy, most wars are very improbable at any point in time until shortly before they happen. The stability of the region in the 1980s and '90s appears more reassuring than it should because we see it in contrast to the constant war and crisis of the 1940s, '50s, '60s, and '70s.

Ambiguities in Strategic Linkages Between Objectives and Capabilities

Where and under what circumstances would the United States go to war in Asia? The centrality of that question is sometimes obscured by the notion that simple presence of U.S. military power in the region will prevent conflict, and thus make the question beside the point. But why should anyone believe this? U.S. military presence did not prevent local wars in earlier years when the presence was much greater than it is now. If the answer is that the causes of conflict were more serious in the earlier period, that should remind us that the main reason there is peace now is not that the United States patrols East Asia, but that serious local conflicts of interest are in remission.

If presence itself dampens conflict, what is the nature of that presence now? In one sense U.S. military forces in East Asia are less prominent than they were during the Cold War. After nearly a century in the Philippines, two decades in Taiwan, and a dozen years in Vietnam, they are now based only in Japan and Korea. Manpower and numbers of units deployed are markedly lower than from 1945-90. While U.S. defense budgets declined for fifteen years, those of many of the local powers have grown.

In another sense the U.S. military presence is quite impressive. Naval and air forces range throughout the region, and U.S. ground forces are the only ones of any of the great powers in Asia that are stationed permanently outside their home country. If the U.S. military is not the region's police force it still comes closer to resembling one than anything else does.

In meaningful terms, however, the only clear commitments of U.S. military

power — that is, reliable commitments to fight in the event of a local war — are to the defense of Japan and South Korea. There are formal commitments to other nations under the Manila Treaty, but anyone sensitive to American domestic politics should lack confidence that such commitments would be fully honored (for example, if Vietnam attacked Thailand). Use of U.S. ground forces in combat anywhere outside Korea and Japan is particularly unlikely. Those who believe that the developing “Revolution in Military Affairs” is making airpower an independently decisive strategic instrument may see the prospect of limited U.S. strikes as sufficient to deter attack in other cases, or to be militarily effective. A realistic view, however, should be that commitment of U.S. forces limited to air and naval power would be only an ancillary support to local clients states’ own forces. It is especially deceptive to place great faith in airpower as a coercive tool of diplomacy.³

The U.S. strategic stance toward mainland Southeast Asia is the most ambiguous of all U.S. involvements in the larger region: formal commitment to defend some of the countries, but without a great deal of credibility as to intent; uncertain prospects in regard to unclear scenarios; but widespread expectation in the area that offshore military presence will stabilize local competition. These are ingredients which make for an acceptable security environment only as long as there are no sharp impending threats to political security — that is, as long as security policy is not a high national priority.

The clarity of the U.S. commitment to fight for Japan is a good thing, mostly because it provides the excuse for Japan to maintain its peculiar disparity of economic and military status. It is not highly relevant otherwise, though, because there is virtually no prospect in the next several decades of any great power being either interested in or capable of attacking Japan with conventional forces. And if the issue is deterring attack by nuclear weapons, the U.S. conventional forces in the region, and stationed in Japan, are far less relevant than nuclear forces stationed in the continental United States.

The other place where U.S. commitment is clear is a different story. War in Korea is comparatively easy to imagine. That mission for U.S. forces and policy, however, is thoroughly established and institutionalized. There is nothing more Washington could do to make the defense commitment to South Korea less ambiguous or more credible.

Apart from a replay of the June 1950 North Korean attack — on which there is no significant ambiguity about what U.S. forces would do — there are three other critical strategic questions, all of which involve China.

³ Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), chs. 2-4, 7-9.

First, what would happen in a messier Korean crisis, for example where the Pyongyang government crumbles, North Korean society begins to collapse, and Seoul sends South Korean forces north to distribute food, organize disaster relief, and establish order? Would U.S. forces participate in relief operations? What would China do? This is a scenario primed for miscalculation. In principle it cries out for prior consultation between Washington and Beijing, but the political sensitivities involved in admitting the possibility of North Korean collapse make that sort of consultation impossible.

Second, what is the main U.S. orientation to China? Should it be viewed as an adversary, a limited rival, or, in the words unfortunately accepted by the Clinton administration, a strategic partner? The use of that term actually reflects the non-strategic character of administration thinking about China. Policy appears oriented to economic issues first, political (human rights) issues second, and military strategic issues third. Part of the ambiguity about military strategic considerations is due to ideological beliefs that improving economic relations and proto-democratic political development will obviate the question of military strategic calculation. But part of it is inherent in the dilemma between being unprepared for potential conflict and making such conflict more likely by preparing for it.

The whole question of the strategic relationship with China will come into focus, however, if conflict erupts over the third issue where the U.S. stance is ambiguous: Taiwan. No one knows what Washington would do in the event of a PRC attack or blockade of the island. Since the spring of 1996, when Beijing executed missile test firings near Taiwan, recognition has grown that a crisis over Taiwan's independence could force hard choices on the United States. But the ease with which the Clinton administration decided to dispatch aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Straits in a symbolic act of deterrence — an act that would be meaningless if it were not meant to imply that the aircraft on those carriers might be used — is both reassuring and frightening. It is reassuring because it is better to put Beijing on notice that the United States might fight to defend Taiwan, since as an empirical matter it is reasonable to estimate that this could happen, whether it would be strategically wise or not. It is frightening because there is scant evidence that all the potential implications of war over Taiwan have been thought out. Most pertinently, there is to date remarkably little evidence of developed and detailed discussion inside the Washington Beltway of scenarios that could involve nuclear escalation, indeed in some quarters an alarming obliviousness to the possibility that Sino-American combat in the Straits might not be played out to the end with conventional means alone.

One final situation of strategic ambiguity is the South China Sea. Conflicting claims over the Spratly/Nansha Islands present the most likely venue for armed conflict in the region. It is highly unlikely, however, that the United States government would

decide deliberately to contest Chinese initiatives there by force. It is slightly less unlikely that confrontation might arise through a series of escalating demonstrations, akin to the dispatch of carriers to the Taiwan Straits in 1996.

Thus for both Taiwan and the South China Sea there is risk to the United States in seeing gunboat diplomacy as a cheap means of influence. One danger in symbolic shows of force is that if they are bluffs they may be called, in which case they are embarrassments and the source of deep irritations (to both sides) that outlive the event. The Nixon administration discovered this when the carrier *Enterprise* was sent to the Bay of Bengal at the time of India's invasion of East Pakistan. Another danger is that if the demonstration is made without thinking through its implications, it may create new stakes that had not existed and over which the side making the demonstration would not wish to fight if it had foreseen them. Sending aircraft carriers to a scene of conflict is an utterly empty gesture unless it is meant to suggest that the United States would fight. Yet unfortunately previous events suggest that this gesture might be made without thinking through whether it is or is not a bluff. Not all Presidents might accept the exposure of a bluff as Nixon did in 1971 over the Indian invasion.

Benefits and Costs

There are powerful reasons why U.S. intent regarding the defense of Taiwan remains ambiguous. First, clarifying whether the United States should or should not fight over the island would be politically bloody in the United States. Second, clarifying policy would be destabilizing. An American commitment to defend Taiwan would embolden pro-independence political forces on the island and raise the odds that a crisis would occur; or American commitment not to interfere would embolden Beijing to use force in a crisis. For reasons of policy prudence, therefore, strategic ambiguity is required.

Similarly, uncertainty about whether U.S. forces might jump into combat in a local war in mainland Southeast Asia, or combat over the Spratlys, may have at least marginal benefit in deterring local adventurism. But it is hardly a proper basis on which a local state should base its security planning.

In general, preserving ambiguities has the benefit of suppressing crises by maintaining uncertainty about U.S. involvement where a clear American decision, if forced, would be against involvement, and where more certainty would provoke or release one side or the other in the local conflict. Ambiguities preserve the benefits of U.S. strategic engagement on the cheap, and avert debilitating domestic debate about risks and merits of clear commitments.

The costs are the other side of these coins. Ambiguity increases the possibility

of miscalculation in situations where the United States actually would fight in a pinch. This happened in June 1950, when despite Dean Acheson's prior declaration of a U.S. defense perimeter that excluded Korea, Washington jumped into the war when North Korea attacked. That was actually not a situation of ambiguity abetting miscalculation, but more one of simple policy reversal. The ambiguity problem was evident forty years later, however, when Ambassador April Glaspie's meeting with Saddam Hussein before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait failed to convey a message that the United States would fight for Kuwait (indeed, because, no intention to do so had yet formed in Washington). In short, the danger of preserving ambiguity is that it allows policymakers to avoid making decisions until the heat of crisis forces the issue. Not facing the issue in advance limits incentives and resources devoted to serious strategic analysis and the back and forth debate that works out solid strategies.