

America's Response to China's Rise: Conflict or Co-existence?

1. Introduction

China's opening to global trade and investments (ca. 1978) was initially well received by the West. Since China desired a peaceful and stable international environment for its development, it strove to minimize friction and to ensure friendly relationships with its Western trading partners and Japan.

Less than two decades after China's opening, its astonishingly rapid economic growth enabled it to gain notable geopolitical power and influence. By the start of the new millennium, China's military modernization had attracted the attention of successive American administrations. Although China endeavored to keep a low profile in the international arena, its rise was perceived by the United States - the dominant Western nation - as a challenge, if not also a threat, to its position as the world's sole superpower.

After the U.S. ended the Iraq war in 2003, it progressively deployed more military forces to the Asia-Pacific region, effectively targeting China. In 2009 the Obama administration signaled an important geopolitical policy "pivot" from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. Although the increasing economic importance of this region would justify the U.S. policy shift to some extent, the main driving force behind the change was China's continuing rapid rise, especially its military modernization. China's success in integrating its economy with those of

many Southeast Asian nations during the 2000s also provided a certain urgency to the U.S. change of focus.

The pivot was followed in 2011 by a further intensification of that posture, referred to as a “rebalance”. These actions drew corresponding reactions from Beijing. Tensions have only increased subsequently, particularly in the South China Sea area. Recently, there has been open discussion of the possibility of war between America and China, and how to avoid it.

What follows is an account of U.S. actions in response to China’s rise, and China’s corresponding reactions. With the aim of promoting better mutual understanding, I try to present things from both the American and the Chinese point of view, a balance that is often lacking in the Western media.

2. China Containment

U.S. policy towards China has proceeded along two main lines: engagement and containment. During the first twenty years of China’s rise, the first of these formed the basis of U.S.-China relations. Chinese leaders considered that, in general, both sides tried to seek common ground and shelve differences. However, by 2005 Beijing had formed the view that the U.S. now saw China’s rise as a threat to its global dominance. Beijing believed that the U.S. would use all available means to curtail China’s rise. The *People’s Daily*, the Chinese government’s mouthpiece, accused the US of following a comprehensive containment strategy against China. Perhaps because the U.S. was actively

engaging China in trade, in diplomatic and many other forms of exchanges, Washington refused to accept this allegation. President Barack Obama famously asserted in 2009, at the time of the pivot, that the U.S. did not seek to contain China, but his assertion had little credibility in Beijing.

In 2011 the Obama administration deepened its 2009 move to project U.S. power in the Asia-Pacific by announcing a “rebalancing”, which amounted to an intensification of the earlier pivot. (Mark E. Manyin et al, ‘Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama administration’s “Rebalancing” Toward Asia,’ Congressional Research Service’s report to Congress, March 28, 2012, p.2.) Since a primary element in the U.S. power projection was a demonstration of U.S. military power, the rebalance entailed the deployment of 60% of America’s naval and air-force capacities in the Asia-Pacific region by 2020. (China Daily “Report on the Growing U.S. Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific Region,” updated 2016-11-07.) Among that 60% were advanced reconnaissance aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, and electronic surveillance ships. (Ibid. Fu Ying, p. 22.)

Soon after the rebalancing, Washington rapidly made a number of moves that were seen by Beijing as tightening the containment of China. One was the stationing of American Marines in Australia for the first time (Goldstein, p. 278.). Another involved developing a strategic partnership with Communist Vietnam, a former U.S. enemy and China’s rival claimant in the South China Sea (SCS – see the following section), and conducting joint exercises with the Vietnamese navy in the SCS. Around this time the U.S revived the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty that enabled the U.S. forces to use a number of bases in that country.

The U.S. also transferred warships to the Philippines, another party in the SCS territorial dispute against China, and carried out joint U.S.-Philippines naval exercises in the SCS. In addition, the U.S. helped both Vietnam and the Philippines to improve their reconnaissance, patrol control and anti-access capacity.

From Beijing's point of view, the Obama administration's rebalancing represented an extension of the U.S. strategy of containing China to a regional level. Although the rebalancing had economic, diplomatic and political aspects, the military aspect had the "most high-profile and concrete elements" according to the U.S. Congressional Research Service Report to Congress. (Mark E. Manyin et al., 'Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Toward Asia,' CRS Report for Congress, March 28, 2012, p. 10.) This was hardly surprising, since China's military modernization was a driving force behind the change. (Ibid., p. 15)

It soon became clear to the Chinese that the increased American military presence enabled the U.S. to "accelerate provocative and coercive actions" towards China.

(http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/13/c_135357811.htm.)

China became the number one target of the American close-in reconnaissance in terms of frequency, scope and means. (Ibid.) The intensity of the U.S. reconnaissance activities in the SCS increased over time. The number of sorties made by U.S. planes to carry out close-in reconnaissance at South China Sea islands increased from about 260 in 2009 to 1,200 in 2014. (Fu Ying, p. 21.) The Chinese authorities frequently pointed out that such U.S. reconnaissance operations

“threaten China’s national security, damage China’s maritime rights and interests, and undermine Sino-US strategic mutual trust.” (China Daily, Report on the Growing US Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific Region, Updated 2016-11-25, available online.)

In addition to objecting to and protesting against these U.S. activities, China sometimes sent fighter jets to track the offending U.S. planes, or vessels to harass U.S. warships, a situation that carried the risk of collision. In 2015 the U.S. carried out 700 naval patrols in SCS. (Ibid.) Since that year, the U.S. has started asserting freedom of navigation by sailing its warships within 12 nautical miles of territorial waters of islands in the SCS belonging to China. (Fu Ying, p. 21.) Viewing these ships as trespassers, a spokesman for China expressed the opinion that the U.S. concern about “freedom of navigation” was a pretext for its truer intention of preserving U.S. dominance in the Asia-Pacific.” (Cui Liru, “Managing Strategic Competition Between China and the U.S.,” China & U.S. Focus Digest, August 2016, p.40.) Due to their differences in interpreting UNCLOS relating to “freedom of navigation,” China and the U.S. also clashed over the U.S. Navy conducting surveillance operations within the 200 nautical mile limit of China’s coastal exclusive economic zones (EEZs) along its coast. (Zhou Bo, “Can China and the U.S. agree on Freedom of Navigation?” China & US Focus Digest, August 2016.)

Beijing demanded an end to U.S. surveillance near China after the Pentagon complained to the Chinese authorities about two Chinese fighter jets which flew too close to a U.S. military plane east of the Hainan Island, a base for China’s nuclear submarine fleet. (Reuters World New, May 19, 2016: ‘China Demands End To U.S. Surveillance

After Aircraft Intercept,” available online.) But since the U.S. was keen to find out about the disposition of China’s expanding fleet of nuclear submarines, it was not prepared to give up its spying in this area in response to China’s complaint.

Scholars of many nationalities have written about different aspects of China containment by the U.S. () Prominent U.S. commentators on foreign affairs concede that Washington has an interest in containing China in such a way as to “check,” “block” or “reshape” its rise. In their view, the “sentiment behind the containment policy of the Cold War is at play in today’s U.S.-China relationship,” and China’s perception of being contained is justified. (Shannon Tiezzi, Yes, the US Does Want to Contain China (Sort Of) in Diplomat, August 08, 2015, available online.)

3. The South China Sea Territorial Disputes

There was one area where Beijing felt especially vulnerable to Washington’s activities in containing China. That is the South China Sea (SCS), through which a vast volume of ship-borne trade related to China passes. This is the area where China has had territorial disputes with a number of Southeast Asian nations, namely: Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei, all of which are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Beijing had records of Chinese jurisdiction over the islands in the SCS going back well over one thousand years, while most of the other claimants, attracted by the abundant fish stock and the estimated riches in oil and gas in the SCS, started to stake their claim for some of the land features in it from the 1950s onwards. The fact that, in 1946, the Republic of China (ROC) was assigned by the Allied powers to receive the Japanese surrender of these islands, which had been seized by Japan, was seen by Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Straits as implying international recognition of China's ownership of these SCS islands.

After the Chinese Nationalists who led the ROC lost the civil war to the Chinese Communists in 1949 and retreated to Taiwan, they held on to only the Taiping Island, the largest of the Spratly chain of islands in the SCS. Despite their official proclamations claiming ownership of all of the SCS islands, the Chinese Communists who ruled mainland China as the PRC took control of only a couple of the islands among the Xisha Qundao (Paracel Islands) during the 1950s. From the 1960s onwards, China's rival claimants in Southeast Asia actively seized control of islands and other land features in the SCS with their naval forces. Besides planting their countries' flags on these islands, they also built airfields, and carried out land reclamation, in addition to exploring for oil and gas in the waters surrounding these islands. In 1974, a short naval engagement between the PRC and Vietnam resulted in the former taking possession of the Xisha Qundao or Paracel Islands near China's Hainan Island. However, the PRC was slow to join the fray in taking over the islands in the Nansha Qundao (Spratly

Islands) until the 1980s, by which time many of the larger islands were already occupied by the other claimants.

After taking over six minor islands and reefs in the Spratlys, China was more focused on building friendly relationships with ASEAN (to which most of the other claimants belong) than on clashing with them in territorial disputes. As the political ties and economic relationships with members of ASEAN grew, Beijing became interested in the formation of a China-ASEAN free trade area. In order to prevent the SCS conflicts from escalating, China proposed “setting aside dispute” and “cooperating in joint development” in the face of what the Chinese authorities saw as provocative activities from the other claimants. During the 1990s Beijing persisted in pursuing diplomatic negotiations with ASEAN to work out a code of conduct in SCS. Years of difficult dialogue led finally to China and ASEAN signing in 2002 the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). This document, not binding as a code of conduct, called on the disputants to exercise self-restraint in all actions, such as occupying and controlling more islands, that would exacerbate disputes and increase tension. It also urged them to resolve their differences through peaceful means. During the same year the parties concerned also committed themselves to form a China-ASEAN Free Trade Area by 2010. Since China was keenly interested in the success of the DOC as well as the regional Free Trade Area, it “refrained from taking actions that might escalate the dispute in the South China Sea.” Although the DOC did not prevent tensions from continuing to simmer in the SCS, from Beijing’s perspective the situation was under control up until 2009.

It was in that year that President Obama announced the US pivot to Asia, a policy shift that brought China containment, and in particular the SCS territorial disputes, to the center of America's geopolitical strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. In that year too, more active American military intelligence-gathering in the SCS led to risky confrontations between Chinese ships and US naval surveillance vessels, especially those operating near China's strategic submarine base on Hainan Island. Each of the two nations blamed the other for the dangerous incidents that occurred. The U.S. pivot to Asia-Pacific narrowed China's policy options in relation to the other parties involved the SCS territorial dispute. It caused China to change from a policy of maintaining calm in the SCS by working through the DOC, to one of actively defending China's interests in that area.

In 2010, the Chinese noticed an important change in the U.S. position on the SCS territorial dispute. While the U.S. had previously been adhering to a neutral stance among the claimants in the SCS, from 2010 onwards the U.S. showed an inclination to take sides (Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, *The National Interest*, "South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage," May 9, 2016, p. 15). Alarmed by the fact that the U.S. was ready to support China's rivals' claimants in the SCS territorial disputes, Beijing tried to demonstrate its resolve to defend China's position by letting it be known that SCS was China's "core interest." (Goldstein, pp. 275-277.) The U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, ready to challenge China's assertion, declared at the ASEAN regional forum held in Hanoi, Vietnam in July 2010, that the U.S. "has a national interest" in the resolution of the SCS dispute and in freedom of navigation. (Ibid. 277.) She also encouraged the claimants to pursue their territorial

claims by invoking the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). (Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, pp. 15-16.)

A stated aim of the U.S. 2011 rebalance was “to provide confidence to other Asia-Pacific countries that want to resist pressure from Beijing now and in the future.” Chinese observers noticed that the U.S. move “obviously contributed to the confidence of the other claimants in the South China Sea to challenge China,” especially Vietnam and the Philippines. (Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, p.15.) In Beijing’s view, the hand of the U.S. was behind the rising tension between China and the Southeast Asian countries, which were emboldened by U.S. support to act more assertively towards China in pursuit of their claims (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/13/c_135357811.htm.) American backing for the other claimants heightened Beijing’s fear of failing to safeguard China’s territorial integrity, as its Qing dynasty predecessor had done during the 19th century (Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, pp. 21-23). Beijing changed from its previous practice of self-restraint to a policy of pushing back against the other claimants. (Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, pp.15-21.)

After 2011 China’s rival claimants around the SCS built links with one another and stepped up their activities in pushing their claims forward. Beijing’s initial reaction towards the increasingly provocative rival claimants was to redouble its efforts to resolve the disputes via peaceful talks and by invoking the DOC guidelines. Beijing’s soft approach did not lead to self-restraint on the part of other claimants. In April, 2012, the Chinese people were reportedly outraged after their media showed the

Philippines Navy boarding a Chinese fishing vessel near the Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Island) and arresting a number of Chinese fishermen. This was the last straw to the Chinese authorities, and they decided to take more assertive actions from this point on. Two months of tense standoff between the vessels of the two countries resulted in the withdrawal of the Filipino ships and China's takeover of the Scarborough Shoal.

Beijing's greater assertiveness in the SCS did not lead it to seize the thirteen larger Spratly islands (seven of which were controlled by the Philippines and six by Vietnam), even though China most likely had the naval capability to do so. Beijing's reluctance to provoke the U.S., together with China's desire for a more peaceful and constructive relations with these regional neighbors were likely reasons for Beijing's self-restraint. Since the PRC and Taiwan were on the same side of the territorial dispute, Beijing had no interest in antagonizing Taiwan by trying to take over Taiping island. China also began to behave like the other claimants had been doing for some time in undertaking land reclamation, building aircraft runways, and placing military facilities on maritime features it controlled. (Ibid. p. 19.) Since most of the larger islands in the Spratly were already taken, what was left for China to reclaim and build upon were minor reefs and sandbanks. While the U.S. media had been silent while China's rivals were carrying out such activities for many years in the past, they were quick to denounce the Chinese reclamations as aggressive acts that infringed upon freedom of navigation by militarizing islands in the SCS. (Ibid.)

In January 2013, President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines initiated an arbitration proceeding against China by an ad hoc Arbitral Tribunal set up by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague as the means for settling the dispute between the two nations over sovereignty and maritime boundary delimitation of the islands in the SCS. The PCA is not a UN body, and it should not be confused with the United Nations International Court of Justice, also in the Hague. The Chinese government refused to participate in the arbitration, citing, among other reasons, that in 2006 China had made a declaration under Article 298 of UNCLOS that no tribunal shall have jurisdiction over disputes concerning sovereignty or sea boundary delimitation. (Full text of the statement of China's Foreign Ministry on the award of South China Sea arbitration initiated by Philippines, available online as news from Xinhua on 2016-07-12.) The Chinese government also pointed out that the Philippines violated its agreement with China and its commitment to the 2002 DOC to settle disputes through bi-lateral negotiation. (Ibid.)

On July 12, 2016, the Arbitral Tribunal decided the case overwhelmingly in favor of the claims of the Philippines, and against those of China. It rejected the validity of China's historical "nine dash line" in the SCS. Questioning the legality and neutrality of the Arbitral Tribunal, China declared its award "null and void" and refused to be bound by it. (Ibid.) Since the Arbitral Tribunal had no means to enforce compliance with its decision, it was left to the Philippines to decide whether or not to confront China by taking control of the areas in SCS awarded to them.

The Philippines' new President Rodrigo Duterte, who succeeded the pro-U.S. Benigno Aquino III in May 2016, decided to prioritize his country's economic development with China's help, rather than prolong the tension between the two countries. Soon Manila and Beijing renewed their countries' political ties and advanced mutually beneficial economic and other agendas. (Zhang Yunbi, "Beijing, Manila to Promote More Trade," People's Daily USA, October 19, 2016. "Xi, Duterte Agree on Full Improvement of Ties," People's Daily online, October 20, 2016.)

As an observer of the turn of events between the Philippines and China, Vietnam refrained from resorting to legal action against China. (Sebastien Colin, "The South China Sea Since the Arbitration: Between Changes and Continuity", China & US Focus, April 18, 2017.) Instead it joined China, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries to work out a Code for Unplanned Encounters in the SCS, and to continue the negotiation for a Code of Conduct in SCS. (Ibid.) The Straits Times reported on May 18, 2017 that China and the ASEAN member nations had completed a draft framework for the code of conduct in the SCS at a senior officials' meeting on that date. It might strike outside observers as ironic that the Philippines and Vietnam, the most active opponents to China's SCS claim, decided to cooperate with China rather than continue their previous confrontational stance. The tension in the SCS among the rival claimants subsided rather than increased after the arbitration.

In contrast, the U.S. continued to pressure China to back away from its SCS territorial claims. The strongest and most insistent U.S. pushback in this area was directed against China's rapidly reclaimed reefs in the Spratlys on which China has reportedly installed advanced weapons systems. (Kate Hunt, "China Installs Weapons on Contested South China Sea Island, Report Says," Hong Kong, CNN, December 15 2016, available online.) Despite strong criticism and condemnation by the U.S. government and media, and an unprecedented amount of U.S. military muscle-flexing in the SCS against these fortified reefs, Beijing would not give them up. Beijing held the position that China had a lawful right to build whatever it wanted on its sovereign territory. ("U.S. Flexes Its Military Muscle Off China" — NBC News, February 24, 2016. "How America and Japan are Pushing Back Against China in the South China Sea" in the National Interest, May 2, 2017. "China Mounts Detailed Defense of South China Sea Reclamation," in Reuters, April 9, 2015.) To counter hostile foreign speculation on China's purposes in arming these reclaimed reefs, Beijing explained that the military installations were "mainly for self-defense". ("China Installs Weapons on Contested South China Sea Island, Report Says" — CNN.com.)

What was the motivation behind U.S. exerting such strong diplomatic, media, and military pressure to force China to abandon its effort to enlarge and fortify the sandbanks on the Chinese-controlled reefs in the SCS? Why did China resist the U.S. pressure so adamantly? The possibility of a future war appears to have been the chief motivation for both countries. Should war break out between the U.S. and China,

according to Thomas Shugart, a U.S. submarine warfare officer and senior military analyst, the chain of heavily fortified sandbanks would enable the Chinese military to deploy an “anti-access/area-denial” (A2/AD) force as a frontline against U.S. attacks on their homeland. (<http://waronrocks.com/2016/09/chinas-artificial-islands-are-bigger-and-a-bigger-deal-than-you-think/>) (The American Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment defines “anti-access” operations as enemy action which inhibits military movement into a theater of operation, and “area-denial” operations as activities which seek to deny freedom of action within areas under the enemy’s control.) This might well explain the strengthening of the face-off between the U.S. and China on the militarization of the artificial islands in the SCS.

4. The Specter of a US-China War

History provides many examples where the confrontation between a rising power and a dominant existing power resulted in war between them. A classic case is the Peloponnesian war between the city-states of Sparta and Athens during the fifth century BCE, as chronicled by the Greek historian Thucydides. According to Thucydides, what made the war inevitable was the fear inspired in Sparta, the existing power, by the rise of Athens, which was perceived by Sparta as challenging its supremacy. In a recent book, Graham Allison coins the term “Thucydides Trap” to describe this scenario.

Allison points out that, out of sixteen occasions in Europe where a rising power emerged to challenge an existing one, twelve resulted in war. Concerned that the U.S. and China might fall into the Thucydides Trap

as the shadow of war lengthens, Graham Allison urges the leaders of both “to talk to each other more candidly about the likely confrontations and flash points”, and “to make substantial adjustments to accommodate the irreducible requirement of the other.” (Graham Allison, *The Thucydides Trap: “Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?”* *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, available on line.) Allison does not believe that war is inevitable; after all, there are still four out of sixteen cases of such situations during the last 500 years that did not result in war. (Ibid.) However, in his opinion, managing a peaceful coexistence between U.S. and China will demand extraordinary efforts, much deeper mutual understanding, and “more radical changes in attitudes and actions, by leaders and public alike, than anyone has yet imagined”. Although China’s history since the Qin unification (221-206 BCE) has few parallels to that of Europe in the last 500 years, Chinese thinkers are well aware of Allison’s argument.

Another influential American political theorist, John J. Mearsheimer, who wrote “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” was sure that China’s rise would not be peaceful, and that a war between the U.S. and China was a possible scenario, about which he freely speculated. (John J. Mearsheimer, “Can China Rise Peacefully?” in *The National Interest*, October 25, 2014. Peter Navarro, “Mearsheimer Strangling China & the Inevitability of War,” *Huffington Post*, 03/10/2016, updated 03/10/2017.) According to the political theory of “offensive realism,” which he developed out of the theory of “structural realism,” he was certain that when China became really powerful militarily, it would push the U.S. out of the Western Pacific and then endeavor to become the world’s hegemon, as the U.S. has been since the end of the Cold War. (Ibid.)

This perception led him to advocate total containment of China, to the point of going to war with China if necessary. (Ibid.)

Chinese leaders regarded Mearsheimer's theories and proposals as "actually providing a foundation for the U.S. move to stop China's rise and preserve its hegemony". (Ibid., p. 41) In their view, the Obama administration's pivot signified such a move. This move gave China's leaders a sense that the U.S. sought to 'contain China's development in an all-round manner, disseminating "China threat" theories, instigating neighboring countries to make trouble for China, creating an Asian version of the NATO to hedge and contain China, and plotting to create a financial crisis in China'. (Ibid. p.42.) The more extensive and intensive U.S. strategy to contain China following the pivot led China's leaders to conclude that a "new cold war against China" had begun. They were also afraid that the active Sino-U.S. rivalry in the SCS might lead to a hot war.

Other voices have argued for the avoidance of war. Alarmed by the rapid downturn of Sino-American relations since 2012, Professor Lyle J. Goldstein of US Naval War College published *Meeting China Halfway*, which argues strongly for the US and China to shift from vicious circles of escalating conflicts into "benign spirals" of a cooperative relationship. His book also suggests a number of concrete steps to achieve this important about-face in the direction of Sino-American relationship.¹⁷ His belief in the importance of paying attention to the views of the other side in a cooperative relationship is demonstrated by his inclusion of a large amount of written materials from the Chinese side in addition to Western publications in his analysis.¹⁸

Troubled by the prospect of a U.S.-China war, Amitai Etzioni, adds his voice to those who want to prevent such a disastrous event with his book, *Avoiding War With China*. (Amitai Etzioni, *Avoiding War With China*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017.) In his opinion, the U.S. and China share many complementary interests and have few substantive reasons to come to blows. He points out that a major segment of the U.S. military and corporations do have vested interests in preparing for war with China, but these interests do not necessarily coincide with what is good for the U.S. He would like a public debate on whether the two countries should ever go to war with each other. His book contains many recommendations on how to avoid such a conflagration while preserving U.S. core interests and its position as a global power.

The US former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, regards the idea of pursuing the containment of China to the ultimate extent of going to war as both dangerous and wrong.¹⁴ In his opinion, conflict is a choice, not a necessity.¹⁵ He strongly advocates greater cooperation between the US and China because this cooperation is of vital significance to international political order. (Cui Liru, "Managing Strategic Competition Between China and the U.S." *China & U.S. Focus*, 11 August, 2016, p. 43.)

Such are the views of some contemporary commentators. What about the positions of the respective governments? Beijing's known position on war with the U.S. has been that China would not start one, but would fight if forced to do so. Since the U.S. is much more powerful militarily than China, it would be unwise for China to start a war against the U.S. However, China's relative military weakness at this point could provide the U.S. with a window of opportunity to set back China's rise for a long time through a pre-emptive war against it.

Reflecting on the likely scenarios and consequences of a nonnuclear war led the U.S. army to commission the RAND Corporation to make a study for a war between U.S. and China in 2015 and then ten years later in 2025. The result of the study was published by RAND as a monograph with the title of "War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable." (Available online.) According to this study, a severe and prolonged war in 2015 could lead to a 5-10% decline in the U.S. GDP, and a 25-35% decline in China's. Since the war would take place on Chinese soil, there would be widespread hardship and dislocation, and China's development could be stalled. In 2025, the gap of losses between the U.S. and China would be far less. The study confirmed a widely held view that even a conventional war would be so damaging to both countries that their leaders should place a high priority on avoiding one.

During President Obama's second term (2012-2016), the intensified U.S.-China rivalry associated with the U.S. pivot to the Asia-Pacific continued unabated. An authoritative American think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Defense to conduct an assessment of the U.S. rebalance to Asia and to make recommendations to Washington and the U.S. Congress for sustaining the rebalance. (Michael Green et al, *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025, Capability, Presence, and Partnerships*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 19 January 2016. *An Independent Review of U.S. Defense Strategy in the Asia-Pacific.*) The document produced by CSIS reinforced Washington's assumption that China intended to push America out of the Asia-Pacific region. (Ibid. *Under Assessment of the Rebalance to Asia.*) It recommended the American government to continue strengthening its military capability and expanding its military capacity in this region to maintain the U.S. military superiority. In the case of war, U.S. Air Force and Navy, equipped with the most advanced weapons, would use AirSea Battle tactics to devastate mainland China with massive strikes to destroy that country's key military assets and bases, and infrastructures, as well as damaging its communications and economy. (Peter Symonds, "A Blueprint for U.S. War with China: Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS) Report", *Globalist Research*, January 25, 2016, available online.)

Having in mind the aim of prevailing against China in a potential conflict, the CSIS report exhorted the U.S. to upgrade existing concepts and accelerate research and development of new advanced weapons. (Michael Green et al. sections 4 to 4.7.) With regard to America's allies and partners in the region, the report urged the U.S. to strengthen their military capability in a number of

ways, including training their armed forces and conducting joint military exercises with their forces, especially in China's seas. (Ibid., sections 1.4, 2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) It also advised the American military to coordinate closely with the allies' forces in a variety of undertakings, or even to integrate the forces of militarily advanced allies like Australia and Japan with the U.S. military force. (Ibid., sections 1.4 2, 2.1 and 2.4) With a view to enhancing the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability of America's allies, the CSIS report suggested "co-development of ISR platforms and analysis tools." (Ibid., section 3.10). It also advised the U.S. military to conduct ISR operations together with them in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and to analyze the results of these ISR missions with them (Ibid.) Considering the high cost of the U.S. military rebalance, the report suggested sharing the cost with the allies as a way to make this move sustainable. (Ibid., section 3 and 3.1.) The report's exhortation to the U.S. Department of Defense to stockpile precision munitions in order to be ready to fight a large-scale high-intensity conflict at a moment's notice surely meant that a war of that kind with China was sufficiently probable that the U.S. should prepare for it. (Ibid., section 3.9.)

After President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, his agenda of "putting America first" and increasing military spending seemed consistent with the aim of sustaining the U.S. rebalance to Asia. The new administration's support for a continuation of this policy was demonstrated by increased aggressive display of U.S. military hardware in Chinese waters since the President's inauguration. (Robert Windrem and William M. Arkin, "U.S. Flexes Its Military Muscle Off China," NBC News, February, 24, 2017.) In February 2017, the U.S. aircraft carrier

USS Carl Vinson with war planes and a destroyer patrolled the SCS as a “routine operation”. More attack submarines were sent to the West Pacific including the SCS. (Robert Windrem and William M. Arkin, “U.S. Flexes Its Military Muscle Off China, NBC News, February, 24, 2017) During the same month, a dozen U.S. stealth fighters were sent to an American military base in Australia that was closest to China, for coalition training and exercises. (Ibid.)

The Trump administration resumed the U.S. navy’s freedom of navigation operations in May 24, 2017. (Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, “The First Under Trump, U.S. Warship Challenging Beijing’s Claims in South China Sea,” Reuters, May 24, 2017.) Prior that date, President Trump put this operation on hold for a few months when he wished to encourage China to help the U.S. to rein in North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. During the same month, the U.S and Japanese navies conducted a joint show of force in the contested area in the SCS, a type of operation the CSIS report favored. (Kris Osborn, “How America and Japan are Pushing Back Against China in the South China Sea,” The National Interest, May 24, 2017.) Also in 2017, the U.S. installed a Terminal High Attitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile interceptor system in South Korea as recommended by CSIS. (Bill Chappell, “THAAD Missile System in South Korea Is Now Operational, U.S. Says: The Two-Way: NPR, May 2, 2017, available online.)

China considered the THAAD in South Korea as a game changer, with the implication that it could be extended to Japan and elsewhere. This development was perceived as undermining China’s own nuclear deterrent that relied on a relatively small nuclear arsenal of some 400

nuclear warheads, as compared to more than 7,000 possessed by the U.S. For these reasons, Beijing vehemently opposed this U.S. move, and warned that “the THAAD will bring an arms race in the region.” (Gerry Mulling and Chris Buckley, “China Warns of Arms Race After U.S. deploys Missile Defense in South Korea,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2017.)

5. China’s position.

Since the Chinese people and their leaders have painstakingly modernized their country through building modern industries, infrastructure, cities and towns during the recent decades after suffering years of foreign invasions, civil wars and revolutionary upheavals, they value their country’s unity, stability, and peace very highly, and certainly did not, and still do not, want a war that could or would destroy their new country. This has been a major reason, among others, that since the Nixon-Mao rapprochement, Chinese leaders have striven to rein in conflicts and strengthen the engagement side of the Sino-American relationship. This might be surprising to the American public, which has become accustomed to the U.S. media’s presentation of China as a bully to its neighbors and a threat to peace-loving democracies. On the U.S. military activities in the SCS, a former top Chinese official said that China would not resort to force “unless challenged by armed provoking,” but China had had enough of Western “bullying.” (Ben Blanchard and Megha Rajagopalan, “China says Wants Peace After Paper Warns on South China Sea Clash”, *Reuter World News*, July 5, 2016.) A Chinese government spokesman told a news briefing on the territorial disputes in the SCS that “China will work with ASEAN countries to safeguard peace

and stability in the South China Sea.” (Ibid.) And this was what China did after the arbitration Tribunal’s decision came out in July 2016. Cui Liru, the former head of the influential China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, wrote that China is unswervingly committed to the path of peaceful rise and will “co-exist peacefully with the U.S. hegemony under certain conditions”. (Cui Liru, “Managing Strategic Competition Between China and the U.S.” *China & U.S. Focus*, August 2016, pp. 43.-44.) This means that China might not challenge the U.S. hegemony, on which the U.S. military strategic posture towards China has been based. The assumption that when China becomes equal to or overtakes the U.S. in wealth and military power, it will inevitably strive to dominate Asia-Pacific as a regional hegemony, if not also to dominate the world, might well be proven wrong. China sees the future of the Sino-American relationship in the Asia-Pacific region as a partnership, “jointly building regional order in the area”. (Ibid., p. 44.) Since U.S. hegemony requires unrivaled military superiority, it might be too costly for the U.S., for its part, to retain it in the long run. Cui suggests that the U.S. might eventually abandon its policy of hegemony, when the cost of retaining it becomes too high.

The rising tension together with China’s need for peace prompted China’s President Xi Jinping to make an effort to bring the engagement side of the Sino-U.S. relations to the forefront. He took the opportunity during his 2013 summit with President Obama to propose a “new model of major-country relationship” that prioritized peaceful coexistence between the two countries. The major points of his proposal were:

- (1) Avoid confrontation through seeking common ground, shelving differences, and resolving conflicts through dialogue;
 - (2) Practice mutual respect, including respect for each other's core interests;
 - (3) Strive for win-win cooperation and abandon the zero-sum mentality.
- Because of the mistrust between US and China, Xi's American hosts had misgivings about his fine-sounding proposals and responded to them warily. From the US point of view, respecting China's core interest could amount to obliging the US to accept China's SCS claims; practising mutual respect could be taken to mean acknowledging China as an equal. Xi's attempt to turn the U.S.-China relationship into a more cooperative mode found a lukewarm reception with his American hosts.

6. Conclusion

At present the U.S. appears to be determined to maintain its supremacy in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the rest of the world. Since a full-scale war between the U.S. and China would lead to mutually assured destruction (MAD), the two nuclear arsenals have thus far acted as an effective deterrent to such a war (or even a conventional war that might escalate into nuclear exchanges). This has remained true, despite China's continuing rise and the increasing friction and tension between the two countries. Even those who had a vested interest to keep China as an enemy, in order to justify the U.S. military spending and weapons production, advocated crisis management so as to avoid miscalculation that might result in an apocalyptic war. (Michael Green et al., "Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025....section 1.5.)

This situation means that in military terms the U.S. and its allies, especially Japan, will continue to strike offensive postures against China, which will then react with defensive measures. It also means that the two sides will continue to engage in a costly arms race. This will be a tragic waste of resources for both countries, but especially for China, a country struggling to clean up its damaged environment, offer more social security for its aging population, provide better health care, and continue raising the standard of living of its people.

Dangerous confrontations between the U.S. and China will continue to occur, for example in the SCS, situations which require careful risk management measures to keep a hot war at bay. The U.S. and China could also be dragged into a war by the actions of their allies, such as North Korea's missile tests and Japan clashing with China over their disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. The shifting currents of populist or nationalistic domestic politics may also play a role.

The leaders of China regard U.S.-China cooperation as indispensable for the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific and for coping with the common challenges of the twenty-first century, such as climate change, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, epidemic diseases, and mass migration, among others. They have expressed a determination to avoid the big-power confrontations that have occurred in history. (Cui Liru, p. 44.)

They believe that China can cultivate a state-to-state relationship with the U.S. that will enable the two countries to transcend their differences and work together to build a new type of major country relationship that is aimed at peaceful co-existence under new historical conditions (ibid. p.44). We may say with Hamlet that such would be a "consummation devoutly to be wished."