

Asia's Security Architecture: The China Factor

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Insights from Mathieu Duchâtel

The Rebalance authors Mercy Kuo and Angie Tang regularly engage subject-matter experts, policy practitioners and strategic thinkers across the globe for their diverse insights into the U.S. rebalance to Asia. This conversation with Dr. Mathieu Duchâtel – Head of the China and Global Security Project at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) – is the nineteenth in “The Rebalance Insight Series.”

How would you assess the impact of U.S. rebalance to Asia on the region's security landscape, and how might U.S. Asia policy evolve under a new U.S. presidency?

The most obvious impact is on the regional balance of military power. Some observers dismiss the military dimension of the pivot as too little to be relevant but the United States is accomplishing rapid progress in the regional integration of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance [ISR] capabilities with Japan, Australia and the Philippines, but increasingly also Vietnam, and possibly Taiwan. This regional integration of ISR maintains the gap with the People's Liberation Army (PLA), especially in terms of maritime domain awareness. In response, the Chinese strategic community is promoting two narratives – one depicting the U.S. rebalance as a cause of strategic instability in the region; the other stressing a “U.S. decline” that the pivot tries to disguise and compensate. This discourse reflects China's ambivalent perception of the rebalance: The Chinese military modernizes fast but a strong regional reaction has already taken place. It seems to me that this will be a structural trend as long as territorial disputes are not resolved, and that whoever wins the next U.S. presidential election will do more rather than less to reduce the geopolitical impact of the PLA modernization in the region.

In a recent speech, Tsai Ing-Wen, chairwoman of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party, propounded a “model of new Asian value.” If elected as Taiwan's next president in the country's 2016 elections, what are the implications for the next U.S. administration?

All signs point to the Taiwan Strait being again a major test for U.S.-China relations. It is certain that Beijing will adjust its Taiwan policy if Tsai Ing-Wen wins the presidential election, even more if the DPP also secures a legislative majority. The important questions are the degree and the timeline of this upcoming policy adjustment. So far, China is in observation mode, pondering its options. The current infighting within the Kuomintang may redistribute the cards, at least to some degree. All in all, China will not risk opening a public communication channel with Tsai's campaign team. The key period, if she wins, will be between the election in January and her inauguration day in May. One can then expect strong Chinese pressure to obtain a mention of the 1992 Consensus in Tsai Ing-wen's inaugural address, including attempts to exert indirect pressure on the DPP through the U.S. Whether the U.S. helps defend the democratic outcome of the elections in Taiwan will be a test of its commitment to upholding the geopolitical status quo in East Asia.

With China's ongoing build-up efforts in the South China Sea, what is the role of EU-ASEAN relations in mitigating further tensions?

The EU follows an approach of principled neutrality in the South China Sea, which has three main features: (a) no position on sovereignty and no sides taken; (b) advocacy of crisis management tools; and (c) an emphasis on international law, especially the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Many observers too easily dismiss this approach as irrelevant. Of course, the EU will never be a game changer in the South China Sea, but it helps maintain international law and confidence building in the security equation. In my opinion, the EU could do more to leverage its position as a neutral third party, especially by putting more diplomatic resources in support of a regional maritime order based on UNCLOS. At the same time, the European arms industry has ambitions in Southeast Asia. Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines are all recent recipients of European arms sales.

Russia could be considered an Asian and European power. EU foreign affairs and security chief Federica Mogherini has called for strengthening defense and security cooperation between the EU and China. What are the strategic implications of this cooperation vis-à-vis Russia, particularly in the context of Moscow's current geopolitical moves in Syria?

Strengthening EU-China defense and security cooperation has been part of the EU's China policy for more than a decade. The EU seeks the support of China for its international security priorities: non-proliferation, terrorism, and management of regional security crises. However, exchanges in that area are extremely limited so far – the EU-China relationship is still mostly about trade and investment. The only concrete achievements to date have been two joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Aden, joint escorts of World Food Program shipments to Somalia, and some degree of diplomatic cooperation during the E3+3 talks on the Iranian nuclear program. China has only limited interest in developing defense and security cooperation with the EU – obtaining the lifting of the EU arms embargo is no longer a Chinese diplomatic priority. It increasingly becomes clear that the EU and China can only cooperate on the basis of immediate necessity and concrete interests, such as evacuating nationals from crises zones. These trends in EU-China relations are largely separated from the EU's and China's respective relations with Russia. On Syria, China is much closer to the Russian position (as vetoes at the UNSC have shown over the years). However, supporting the Russian military operations without a UNSC mandate would be crossing a huge threshold – China is likely to remain in the shadows, in large part because it does not want to attract too much attention from Islamist terrorist groups.

Cybersecurity has been and will remain a critical issue in U.S.-China relations. What is your outlook on how this issue will evolve following the recent U.S.-China summit?

Cybersecurity poisons U.S.-China relations, and it remains to be seen if the damage can be contained by current diplomatic efforts to rein in the most irritant activities and build trust. Like Europe, the U.S. is opposed in principle to the Chinese notion of cyber sovereignty. As a result, there is no common ground for an arms control type of approach to security challenges in the cyber domain. The separate U.S.-China discussion on cybersecurity could set examples and standards for other countries facing similar threats, but a more inclusive multilateral approach addressing rules of behavior by government agencies in cyberspace would contribute more to the cause of international security.

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