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Sep 10, 2006

Challenge of engaging a rising power

Fearing a challenge in Asia, the US is building stronger alliances and restructuring its forces

By Derwin Pereira

WASHINGTON - EARLY this month, US military forces fired a rocket interceptor that destroyed a mock warhead in outer space.

The dummy missile, launched from Fort Greely in Alaska, arched over the Pacific Ocean parallel to the California coast. Seventeen minutes later, the interceptor left a silo at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, hitting the target above the Pacific Ocean at a speed of 29,000kmh.

The Pentagon hailed the test as a 'total success'.

Clearly, the test was to signal to Pyongyang that the US is capable of shooting down a North Korean missile.

The application of the weapons programme, however, goes beyond rogue states such as North Korea. Chinese intelligence analysts see the National Missile Defence (NMD) system - and the sea-based Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) in the region - as directed at China.

For the Pentagon, it is just one of several measures used to constrain Chinese ambitions.

Two other evolving policies make up the US military hedging against China: force restructuring in the Asia-Pacific and the strengthening of defence links with Japan, India and South-east Asian countries.

In June this year, the US carried out one of the largest military exercises in the region in recent times. Close to 300 planes, three carrier strike groups and 22,000 American troops were deployed in a show of force.

B-2 and B-52 bombers, F-15 and F-16 fighters, E-3 airborne and control aircraft took off from the decks of the Lincoln, Kitty Hawk and Reagan carrier battle groups to conduct sorties for a range of exercises.

They were aimed at demonstrating US capability to deal with several regional security issues: North Korea, non-proliferation of nuclear arms, counter-terrorism and maritime security.

US hedging policy

THE exercises also had one other significant objective: the 'soft containment' of China.

A Pentagon official told The Sunday Times: 'America's interest is to remain the predominant power in the Asia-Pacific. The exercises demonstrated our capability...and this would not have been lost on the Chinese.'

US hedging against China began about 10 years ago, under the Clinton administration. More subtle and softer in form, it was known then as 'constructive engagement'. Washington focused on strengthening its alliances in the region to manage the rise of China.

Over the decade, US military hedging against China became much harder as Chinese power grew, according to Mr Dan Blumenthal, a former senior defence official in the Bush administration, now in the conservative Washington-based American Enterprise Institute.

Today, the US sees China as having the greatest potential to be a serious military competitor.

In contrast to the Bush administration's three previous assessments, the Pentagon's reports on China's military power last year and this year offer a worrisome account of Chinese plans and intentions.

Chinese military buildup in the near term appeared focused on preparing for Taiwan Strait contingencies, including the possibility of US intervention. The reports also noted that Beijing was developing capabilities to 'alter regional military balances'.

'The People's Liberation Army is no peasant military,' a Pentagon official said. 'How can it be if it has short, medium and intercontinental range ballistic missiles, space-based targeting capabilities and a range of other technological advances with military application?'

The Pentagon's perspective is shaped by uncertainties about Chinese intentions.

In the short-term, the United States must deal with how best to respond if China uses force against Taiwan. The thinking is to opt for military deterrence, to prevent Beijing from miscalculating that it might prevail in a conflict.

The longer term presents an even greater challenge for the US.

Writing in the Washington Quarterly last year, political scientist Evan Medeiros of the Washington-based think-tank Rand, noted: 'Washington faces the classic challenge in international relations of responding to a rising power in a region where the US has long been predominant.'

The US response at this point is to rely on American military power, and use Japan - and increasingly, other states in the region - to fill in the critical gaps, in order to maintain overall superiority over China.

The NMD system

THE NMD is intended to defend against intercontinental range ballistic missiles (ICBMs) striking North America. These strikes could come from rogue states such as North Korea and Iran or established nuclear rivals such as Russia or China.

Current estimates suggest that Beijing has 130 nuclear warheads for delivery by land-based missiles, sea-based missiles and bombers. Additional warheads are thought to be in storage for a total stockpile of approximately 200 warheads.

According to the community, Beijing has only 20 missiles, each carrying a single nuclear warhead, which can hit the continental US. The expectation though is that the Chinese arsenal will increase significantly over the next decade.

The US, by comparison, has 6,000 nuclear weapons - including those carried on land-based missiles, submarines and bombers - that could potentially hit China.

enough to make Washington think twice about getting into a serious tangle with China. During the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, which arose following missile tests by China in the 80-km-wide strait, Lieutenant-General Xiong Guangkai, the deputy commander of the People's Liberation Army General Staff, reportedly told a US official:

'You Americans are not going to threaten us again because, in the end, you care a lot more about Los

Angeles than Taipei'.

An NMD system would mean that the US might not have to face such a trade-off. But just how effective is it?

Originally known as Star Wars, the has been plagued by political opposition and technical problems since 1983. Thus far, it has had mixed results, with six test successes - including the latest - and five failures.

China poses a completely different problem from North Korea.

The Chinese missiles are vastly more sophisticated than the ones that Kim Jong Il might have. The tests thus far have shown zero capacity to deal with any types of counter-measures that Beijing has in abundance. China is also developing a new generation of submarine-launched ballistic missiles that the US might find hard to counter.

US forces restructuring

THE American military has been revamping its global strategy to deal with multiple threat and contingencies.

Partly in anticipation of China's rise, the Pentagon is also restructuring its force deployment in Asia.

Washington intends to maintain a ring of permanent military hubs on the American mainland and overseas territories - such as Guam - as well as in closely allied countries such as Japan.

Speaking before a congressional commission on US-China relations in March this year, Mr Peter Rodman, the US Assistant Defence Secretary for International Security Affairs, revealed that the Pentagon was moving strategic bombers to Guam and aircraft carriers and submarines to the Pacific as part of a hedging strategy against China.

Special hangars and other deployment and maintenance facilities are being built on Guam, an American territory about 2,900km from the Chinese coast.

Guam is fast becoming a pivot for US forces in the Pacific because of its relatively short distance to the Taiwan Strait, South Korea and South-east Asia. It is seen as a 'lily pad' - allowing troops to be deployed with maximum speed to trouble spots.

Besides Guam, the US has established 'forward operating locations' in Japan to support Taiwan should there be a conflict with China.

These deployments are also aimed ultimately at dealing with the larger issue of China's military buildup, especially if Beijing developed a deepwater navy capable of checking US naval power across Asia and the Persian Gulf.

'Encirclement' strategy

THE US is also stepping up defence links with Japan, India and key allies in South-east Asia.

Mr Ashley Tellis, a former Bush strategist and South Asia specialist, pointed out that this 'will create structural constraints that may discourage Beijing from abusing its growing regional power'.

He added: 'Even as Washington attempts to preserve good relations with Beijing - and encourage these rim land states to do the same - cultivating ties with these nations may be the best way to prevent China from dominating Asia in the long-term.'

Japan has agreed to develop the TMD assume a larger role in American-led military operations.

Last year, for example, Japanese forces took part in the US-Thai-Singapore 'Cobra Gold' military exercises for the first time.

In February last year, Japan and the US issued a controversial statement that tied their bilateral alliance to peace and security in the Taiwan Strait.

If Japan is America's ally on China's south-eastern flank, India is Washington's emerging strategic partner on the south-western boundary.

A key factor behind the US-India nuclear cooperation agreement was a simple trade-off: the White House was willing to risk losing ground in its campaign to limit the spread of nuclear weapons for a deal with New Delhi that could help it counter Chinese power.

The US has been holding joint exercises with the Indian military for the last five years.

In South-east Asia, military ties are at their most extensive since the end of the Cold War. The centrepiece of US military cooperation in this region is Cobra Gold.

Beijing has said that the US appears to be encircling China. In the post-Cold War world, scholars have debated the extent to which containment - or some variant of that strategy - continues to animate American policy towards China.

But there is little evidence to suggest that the US is doing that to China today. Borne out of the Cold War rivalry with the USSR, American containment meant isolating the Soviet Union and preventing it from expansion. Mr Rodman made clear that Washington 'consciously avoids using the language of containment with China because it is a very different relationship from that with the USSR during the Cold War'.

He said in an interview: 'We are putting a more benign face to it and staying away from alarming language. China today is linked to the global economy by forces of interdependence. Therefore, we also need to engage China.'

Containment a no-go

THE essential principles in US policy towards China have not changed.

The Bush administration will continue with its engagement with Beijing as long as it serves the national interests of both countries.

A strategic partnership is a no-go because both countries lack the intimacy and common purpose for one. There continues to be deep-seated distrust.

It is complicated by differences the Bush administration over the relative emphasis to be placed on engagement and coercive measures.

The Pentagon, planning for the worst-case scenario, prefers to hedge its bets. The public term for the US strategy is hedging, but in internal Pentagon discussions, it is 'effective preparations to swiftly defeat Chinese aggression'.

Others, including elements in the State Department and the White House, believe that China's historical evolution over the last 30 years makes a strong case for continued engagement.

Few countries want to choose explicitly between the US and China.

By and large, there is a growing acceptance of Chin influence in Asia. None of the Asian states has explicitly enunciated a China-centric containment doctrine.

Even those powers that are suspicious of China's longer-term interests, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, have chosen not to highlight the 'China threat' factor. Indeed, some might favour a more genuine balance of power in the region.

Here, Japan is a significant factor. Despite force posture changes, US hedging continues to be anchored on close security cooperation with Tokyo.

Undoubtedly, this will have a bearing on the other Asian countries, especially South Korea and some South-east Asian states. They regard the emergence of a more 'normal' Japan with concern because of Tokyo's past militarism.

It is a matter of time before China becomes a great power. And given the emerging regional dynamics, Washington will need to work towards some kind of accommodation with Beijing. Containment is not an option. It can never be.

The West tried to contain China for two decades after the Communists came to power there. The policy failed badly. Since former president Richard Nixon abandoned containment in 1971, American administrations have pursued engagement - with substantial benefit to China and the US.

Engaging China - and adapting to the new realities of power in Asia - will be the best option to manage its rise as a great power.

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- A PENTAGON OFFICIAL