
A Third Way for the US in the South China Sea

Washington should think beyond the dyad of containment and appeasement. The struggle for a rule-based order in South China Sea is enduring and comprehensive, which requires greater persistence and stronger engagements on the part of the US and other regional countries.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the presence and involvement of the US in key regions have been seen as critical to international peace and stability. However, in recent years, the US's engagement in the maritime Asia-Pacific, particularly the East Asian seas, has been increasingly challenged by China - a rising power. Against that backdrop, what the US should do to protect its national interests and the rule of law at the sea became a focal point in the policy discourse. One of the major debates on the topic, which has received great attention from the public, is an exchange between Ely Ratner, a Maurice R. Greenberg senior fellow for China studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Hugh White, a Professor of Strategic Studies at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. Standing at the two sides of the spectrum, Ratner advocates stronger US interventions in the South China Sea while White argues for a more accommodative approach with China.

Containment vs. Appeasement

The debate started with Ratner's thought-provoking article, titled "[How to stop China's maritime advance](#)" in *Foreign Affairs* in June 2017, where he criticizes the Obama administration for being soft and insufficient in dealing with China's salami tactic in the South China Sea. He pushes for a more aggressive South China Sea policy, which signals that the US is willing to go to war with China if necessary. Such a policy should include three steps: (i) to reconsider position of neutrality over sovereignty claims and support smaller claimants to consolidate their offshore

strongholds; (ii) to call on allies such as Australia and Japan to provide such supports; and (iii) to negotiate with small claimants for US permanent presence in the Spratly features under their control.

For Ratner, "demonstration of resolve" is particularly important to contain China. Therefore, US should strengthen its footprint in the region, by reviving the Trans-Pacific Partnership (or devising a similar agreement) and providing more information about China's maritime activities to Southeast Asia nations' public, especially the claimant ones.

Ratner's argument is based on three assumptions. First, the US has only two options, war and accommodation. Second, smaller claimants look to the US for supports to resist China. Third, China is itself risk-averse and not prepared to take war against the US and other claimants, as the stakes are too high. Therefore, the US should test, probe, and undertake a tougher South China Sea policy rather than succumb to the fear of risking a war with China. However, he proposes that the approach needs to be implemented carefully in a set of consequences and incentives for China (at acceptable cost to the US) such that even a tactical Chinese military success in the South China Sea would result in a major blow to China's economy, security, and standing in the world.

On the other hand, Hugh White [argues](#) that the US should recognize the rise of China and accept its newfound domination in the region. In his words, there remains a big gap between the US' rhetoric and actions in the South China Sea, and consequently Washington's credibility in Asia "will shrink even further". He challenges Ratner's all three assumptions.

First, he contends that persuading regional countries to stand up against China does not work. Given China's superiority in term of economy and military, none of its neighboring countries is willing to risk its relationship with China. He disagrees with Ratner's argument that the US's greater economic involvement in the region would motivate regional countries to stand up against

China. White claims that whatever the US plans to do, China has already gone ahead with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Specifically, he opined that whatever the US did would not affect China's economic dominance in the region because Asian countries already consider China as the driving force of their "economic prospect". He implies that it is impossible for the US to overtake China as the region's economic engine.

Second, White is not convinced that the US is willing to go to war with China. The Trump administration has showed no signs of readiness to accept such an option. His argument is built on the assumption that the US's foreign policy starts from inside not outside. The only way to reaffirm the strategic role of the US in the Asia is to show willingness to use force to protect it. However, armed forces can only be mobilized after gaining consensus domestically, which is extremely difficult.

Third, White takes on Ratner's premise that China is not willing to go to war with the US. On contrary, he believes that Beijing would continue to test Washington's determination that would eventually result in Washington's dilemma. Therefore, White advocates that the US should take seriously China's basic strategic challenge, fully consider the magnitude of the threat to the US's primary interests, and holistically weigh the costs and risks of preserving its primacy in Asia.

The third way

Both authors make valid points in their discussions of the challenges that the US is facing in the South China Sea where China is incrementally strengthening its foothold. The two scholars share the view of urgent need for the US "to do something" in the South China Sea but fundamentally diverge on their assessments and recommendations.

Hugh White's view of domestic support of the US foreign policy seems to be more convincing at this time when US President Donald Trump pursues an "Americans-first" policy. He is also

correct in pointing that out regional countries do not want to significantly damage its relations with Beijing. His line of argumentation tactlessly features in the dominant thinking in Asia. However, White overestimates China's confidence and underestimates the range of choices that Washington has to balance against China, ranging from FON operations, military assistance to small claimants, economic sanctions, and stronger forward presence.

On the other hand, Ratner's opinion is worth considering, as there is almost no time for the US to implement such a time-consuming effort to shape a proper perspective on the South China Sea in the face of China's steady expansions. Asian countries' expectations for US' stronger presence and posture are also higher at a time of uncertainties. Washington should work on a long-term and comprehensive strategy to maintain a rule-based order in the South China Sea, otherwise face erosion in its primacy in the entire Indo-Pacific region. Nonetheless, like Huge White, Ratner excessively focuses on the military aspect, which may be seen as too forceful from the standpoint of regional countries.

Overall, extremism is no good for the region. China is not recklessly rushing to dominate the South China Sea, but pursuing a long strategy to gradually subdue regional countries and exclude external powers. The US is losing the ground not because of its weaknesses but its lack of resolve to plan ahead and act forcefully if necessary. In 2012, China managed to control the Scarborough largely due to the US' half-hearted responses. Wars are not imminent, but tension remains, as China will continue to push the envelope.

Therefore, Washington should think beyond the dyad of containment and appeasement. The struggle for a rule-based order in South China Sea is enduring and comprehensive, which requires greater persistence and stronger engagements on the part of the US and other regional countries. In this regard, the US should not do it alone but to work with its allies and partners to chart out a blueprint for concerted and coordinated assertive actions to respond to any salami-slicing attempts

by China to change the status quo. Washington, its allies and partners should communicate such a contingency with China, sending a clear message that any move by China to change facts on the ground would meet with concrete and appropriate collective responses. That is the leadership role that the US should play.

Vu Quang Tiep and Le Thu Ha are research fellows at the Bien Dong Institute for Maritimes Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. Opinions expressed in the article are the authors' own.