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2023

Resnick, E. (2023). Hawks, doves and US credibility in East Asia. RSIS Commentaries, 049-23.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/168725>

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Hawks, Doves and US Credibility in East Asia

By Evan Resnick

SYNOPSIS

A credibility problem afflicts both the hawkish and dovish US policy options for dealing with an increasingly assertive China. The dilemma facing America is that although China has a higher stake in the territories it presently covets, ceding them to China's sphere of influence in pursuit of great power peace will alarm US allies in the region.

COMMENTARY

Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become [increasingly assertive](#) in efforts to control neighboring maritime territories. In the Taiwan Strait, as well as in the East and South China Seas, Chinese military and quasi-military forces have repeatedly engaged in brinkmanship against the navies, coast guards and military aircraft of the US and other nations.

Hawkish and Dovish Options for Dealing with China

The Obama, Trump and Biden administrations have responded to China's expansionist activities by adopting an [increasingly hardline policy](#) towards Beijing. Most notably, they have [boosted US military deployments](#) to the region, established new multilateral security partnerships, such as the [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#) (or QUAD) and [AUKUS](#), and [restricted high-technology exports](#) to the PRC.

Several foreign policy commentators have either endorsed this policy shift or lamented that it is not tough enough. The cornerstone of an even more hawkish US policy would be significantly expanded military deployments and commitments throughout the region, including the extension of a formal security guarantee to Taiwan.

By contrast, some analysts have argued that a less confrontational policy towards China is preferable to avert war and address transnational threats such as climate

change. The centrepiece of a more dovish policy would be the cession to China of a sphere of influence (i.e., military preponderance) over Taiwan and the South and East China Seas.

Washington's Credibility Problem

Unfortunately, a serious credibility problem afflicts both the hawkish and dovish approaches, which undermines their likely effectiveness.

The hawkish option lacks credibility because the outcome of China's territorial disputes matters far more to China than to the United States. For the PRC, those disputes are transpiring in adjacent geographical areas that constitute vital strategic and economic interests, and significantly impact its national sovereignty. On the other hand, the United States is an ocean away, and many Americans may not view Taiwan and the South and East China Seas as vital interests.

This disparity is critical because scholarly research has shown that the outcomes of [crises and wars](#) often favour the side that has more at stake in the confrontation, not the side that is more powerful. In the last half century, the US superpower has itself lost large-scale wars against far weaker but more determined adversaries in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Since Taiwan and the South and East China Seas are ultimately less important to the United States than to China, doves argue that it would be geopolitically prudent for America to cede them to China's sphere of influence. Notwithstanding the [rhetorical scorn](#) which generations of US policymakers have heaped on the concept, [spheres of influence](#) have long served as a critical tool for promoting peace between great power adversaries.

Unfortunately, this option also entails a serious credibility problem for the United States. This is because granting China a sphere of influence would inevitably spark widespread alarm about the reliability of US commitments to the defence of its regional allies.

This strategic concern would be particularly intense for two reasons. First, among the states that are contesting China's maritime claims are Japan and the Philippines, which also happen to be lynchpins of the US alliance network in the region. Consequently, if the United States permits China to seize the contested territories, this will signal that Washington is also unwilling to oppose Chinese aggression against the Japanese and Philippine home islands.

Second, although the United States is no longer formally allied to Taiwan, the [1979 Taiwan Relations Act](#) commits Washington to provide the island with defence assistance and to "maintain the capacity...to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion [against Taiwan]." Also, [three of the last four presidents](#) – Bush, Trump and Biden – have either declared or strongly insinuated that they would come to Taiwan's defence if it were to be attacked by the PRC. Given the intense bipartisan anti-China mood in US politics today, it is almost inconceivable that the Biden administration would abandon Taiwan – an economically thriving liberal democracy – to the depredations of the PRC.

Averting the Worst-Case Scenarios

The United States can mitigate the credibility problems associated with both the hawkish and dovish strategies by navigating a middle course between them. Such a policy would seek to raise the costs of further Chinese expansionism in the South and East China Seas and Taiwan Strait through “[soft balancing](#)”, or the coordinated employment of non-military tools of coercive statecraft, including diplomatic ostracism and economic sanctions.

This middle-ground policy would also enable Washington to continue providing Taiwan with robust military assistance. In recognition of the unfavourable balance of stakes for China, however, the United States would have to scrupulously refrain from direct military intervention against China in these geographic areas.

Importantly, this prohibition means that the United States would not employ its military forces to defend the maritime claims of Japan and the Philippines. But it could reassure Tokyo and Manila of Washington’s ironclad commitment to the security of their uncontested homelands, however, by [significantly bolstering its military presence in both countries](#).

Although this approach would not appeal to diehard hawks or doves, it might avoid the worst-case scenarios associated with their preferred policies. For hawks, it is that Washington stumbles into yet another exorbitant and inauspicious war of choice on the heels of Iraq and Afghanistan, though this time against a nuclear armed [great power](#). For doves, it is that conciliatory initiatives aimed at forestalling such a war prompt disaffected US allies to bandwagon with China, thereby imperiling the regional balance of power.

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