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Title	Why war is unlikely in Asia
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Citation	Desker, B. (2008). Why war is unlikely in Asia. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 071). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2008
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/40178">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/40178</a>
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## Why War is Unlikely in Asia

Barry Desker

27 June 2008

*While war in the Asia-Pacific is unlikely, the emergence of East Asia, especially China, will require adjustments by the West, just as Asian societies have had to adjust to Western norms and values during the American century.*

THE ASIA-PACIFIC region can, paradoxically, be regarded as a zone both of relative insecurity and of relative strategic stability. On the one hand, the region contains some of the world's most significant flashpoints – the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the Siachen glacier – where tensions between nations could escalate to the point of resulting in a major war. The region is replete with border issues, the site of acts of terrorism (the Bali bombings, Manila superferry bombing, Kashmir, etc.), and an area of overlapping maritime claims (the Spratly Islands, Diaoyu islands, etc). Finally, the Asia-Pacific is an area of strategic significance, sitting astride key sea lines of communication (SLOCS) and important chokepoints.

### **Stable, despite the strains**

Nevertheless, the Asia-Pacific region is more stable than one might believe. Separatism remains a challenge but the break-up of states is unlikely. Terrorism is a nuisance but its impact is contained. The North Korean nuclear issue, while not fully resolved, is at least moving toward a conclusion with the likely denuclearization of the peninsula. Tensions between China and Taiwan, while always just beneath the surface, seem unlikely to erupt in open conflict (especially after the KMT victories in Taiwan). The region also possesses significant multilateral structures such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the nascent Six Party Talks forum and, in particular, ASEAN, and institutions such as the East Asian Summit, ASEAN + 3 (which brings together the ASEAN 10 with China, Japan and South Korea) and the ASEAN Regional Forum which ASEAN has conceived.

Although the United States has been the hegemon in the Asia-Pacific since the end of World War II, it will probably not remain the dominant presence in the region over the next 25 years. A rising China will pose the critical foreign policy challenge, probably more difficult than the challenge posed by the

Soviet Union during the Cold War. This development will lead to the most profound change in the strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific.

### **The emerging ‘Beijing Consensus’**

On the other hand, the rise of China does not automatically mean that conflict is more likely. First, the emergence of a *more assertive* China does not mean a *more aggressive* China. Beijing appears content to press its claims peacefully (if forcefully), through existing avenues and institutions of international relations. Second, when we look more closely at the Chinese military buildup, we find that there may be less than some might have us believe, and that the Chinese war machine is not quite as threatening – as some might argue.

Instead of Washington perspectives shaping Asia-Pacific affairs, the rise of China is likely to see a new paradigm in international affairs – the “Beijing Consensus” – founded on the leadership role of the authoritarian party state, a technocratic approach to governance, the significance of social rights and obligations, a reassertion of the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference, coupled with support for freer markets and stronger regional and international institutions. The emphasis is on good governance.

Just as Western dominance in the past century led to Western ideas shaping international institutions and global values, Asian leaders and Asian thinkers will increasingly participate in and shape the global discourse, whether it is on the role of international institutions, the rules governing international trade or the doctrines which undergird responses to humanitarian crises. An emerging Beijing Consensus is not premised on the rise of the ‘East’ and decline of the ‘West’, as sometimes seemed to be the sub-text of the earlier Asian values debate. However, like the Asian values debate, this new debate reflects alternative philosophical traditions. The issue is the appropriate balance between the rights of the individual and those of the state.

This debate will highlight the shared identity and shared values between China and the states in the region. I do not agree with those in the United States who argue that Sino-US competition will result in “intense security competition with considerable potential for war” in which most of China’s neighbours, as John J. Mearsheimer puts it, “will join with the United States to contain China’s power”. These shared values are likely to *reduce the risk of conflict* and result in regional pressure for an accommodation with China and the adoption of policies of engagement with China, rather than confrontation with an emerging China.

### **Changing thinking in China**

An interesting feature is that in its interactions with states in the region, China is beginning to be interested in issues of proper governance, the development of domestic institutions and the strengthening of regional institutional mechanisms. Chinese policy is not unchanging, even on the issue of sovereignty. For example, there has been an evolution in Chinese thinking on the question of freedom of passage through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. While China supported the claims of the littoral states to sovereign control over the Straits when the Law of the Sea Convention was concluded in 1982, China’s increasing dependence on imported oil shipped through the Straits has led to a shift in favour of burden-sharing, the recognition of the rights of user states and the need for cooperation between littoral states and user states.

Engagement as part of global and regional institutions has resulted in revisions to China’s earlier advocacy of strict non-intervention and non-interference. Recent examples include Chinese support for global initiatives in peace-keeping, disaster relief, counter-terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation and anti-drug trafficking, its lack of resort to the use of its veto as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its active role within the World Trade Organisation.

Beijing has also lowered the tone and rhetoric of its strategic competition with the US, actions which have gone a long way toward reassuring countries in Southeast Asia of China's sincerity in pursuing a non-confrontational foreign and security strategy. Beijing's approach is significant as most Southeast Asian states prefer not to have to choose between alignment with the US and alignment with China and have adopted 'hedging' strategies in their relationships with the two powers. Beijing now adopts a more subtle approach towards the US: not directly challenging US leadership in Asia, partnering with Washington where the two countries have shared interests, and, above all, promoting multilateral security processes that, in turn, constrain US power, influence and hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

### **Adapting to the Asian century**

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is certainly in the midst of perhaps the most ambitious upgrading of its combat capabilities since the early 1960s, and it is adding both quantitatively and qualitatively to its arsenal of military equipment. The PLA has increasingly pursued the acquisition of weapons for asymmetric warfare. The PLA mimics the US in terms of the ambition and scope of its transformational efforts – and therefore challenges the US military at its own game. Nevertheless, we should note that China, despite a “deliberate and focused course of military modernization,” is still at least two decades behind the US in terms of defence capabilities and technology.

There is very little evidence that the Chinese military is engaged in an overhaul of its organizational or institutional structures. China's current military buildup is still more indicative of a process of *evolutionary, steady-state, and sustaining* – rather than disruptive or revolutionary – innovation and change.

War in the Asia-Pacific is unlikely but the emergence of East Asia, especially China, will require adjustments by the West -- just as Asian societies have had to adjust to Western norms and values during the American century. The challenge for liberal democracies like the US will be to embark on a course of self-restraint.

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