

INTRODUCTION

Thinking About Strategy in Asia

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DESPITE THE MARKED DIVERSITY of their topics and perspectives, the chapters in this book form part of a coherent and distinctive intellectual project: to shed light on the past, the present, and above all, the possible future political and military interaction among nations of the Asia-Pacific region and between those nations and the United States. The reason for this focus is apparent. As Henry Kissinger and others have observed, Asia is emerging as the center of gravity in the international system.¹ The rapid economic growth that began with Japan during the 1960s spread to South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore in the 1970s; China in the 1980s; and India in the 1990s. As has become indisputable, throughout history, prosperity brings power in its train.

Today, Asian nations account for an increasing share of global military resources and overall economic output. Even though defense budgets and force levels have declined in Europe and North America, Asia's have expanded.² The region is home to five nuclear-armed militaries (China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Russia), and their number could increase. Meanwhile, on the conventional side of the weapons ledger, Asian nations have been investing in advanced combat aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, submarines, and surface vessels and progressively expanding arsenals of both long-range ballistic and cruise missiles.³

Compared to Europe, Asia has weak international organizations and means of resolving disputes. Moreover, it contains different types of states—from liberal democracies to authoritarian regimes of various stripes and repressive totalitarian dictatorships—with myriad outstanding differences over borders and maritime claims. Asia is also a region in which the domestic

politics of many significant players are characterized by strident forms of nationalism. For these reasons, Asia is one region of the world where conflicts among major powers remain plausible and may even be probable.⁴ It is also a region where the United States has substantial economic interests, strong alliance commitments, quasi-alliance relationships, and a continuing interest in preserving freedom of navigation across the Western Pacific.

Although it may be obvious *why* students of strategy should care about Asia, questions on *what* to study and *how* to go about it can be somewhat more complex. This book offers answers to those questions; taken as a whole, it provides three elements of a comprehensive program for studying and conducting research on Asia-Pacific strategic issues.

THE FUTURE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

The future security environment in which the nations of Asia will have to interact includes persistent features of the physical environment as well as material trends and processes that will affect the distribution of power among them but over which no one of them can exert full control.

Geography

Contrary to what Thomas Friedman has maintained, the world is not flat. Geography still matters, certainly in military affairs, and that is nowhere more evident than in Asia. Compared with Europe, the Middle East, and other areas of intense geopolitical interaction, *strategic Asia* is very large; distances within the region are huge, and one key player is more than six thousand miles away.⁵ Save for China and Russia, and partly for China and India (which are separated by the Himalayas), the major powers are not physically contiguous. Nations that wish to deter, coerce, or attack enemies must generally be prepared to project power across great expanses of water and airspace, which until recently few were actually capable of doing. Moreover, this is a region in which suitably equipped major powers may fight what Chinese strategists have called *noncontact* wars, engaging one another on the sea and in the air—and perhaps even in space and cyberspace—without ever coming into contact on the land.

With regard to material processes and trends, three stand out as particularly relevant to strategists: demographics, economics, and technology.

Demographics

In terms of its rapid economic development, expanding military establishments, and nationalist identity politics, Asia today resembles early twentieth-

century Europe in certain worrisome respects. In one important way, however, it is markedly different. Instead of experiencing rapid population growth and restive youth bulges, many Asian nations, including China, Japan, and South Korea but with the notable exception of India, face aging populations. Others, notably Japan and Russia, will shrink in absolute terms over coming decades. The implications of these demographic trends for economic growth, social cohesion, military policy, and international behavior more generally are unclear, but they could be profound and warrant further study.

Economics

Despite their remarkable performance in recent decades, there is considerable uncertainty about the future trajectories of major Asian economies. India's ability to achieve and maintain annual growth rates closer to 10 percent than 5 percent will go a long way toward determining whether it can achieve its potential to become a true great power. For China meanwhile, the question is when and how rapidly its economic engine will slow. Not even the most optimistic denizens of China's state planning apparatus think that the near-double-digit rates of the last three decades can be sustained indefinitely. What remains to be seen is whether growth slows gradually and gracefully or plummets, perhaps as the result of a crisis involving years of politically motivated overinvestment in real estate and infrastructure.

The ability of China to transition to a more balanced economic development model with greater emphasis on consumption, as opposed to more investment and exports, has significant implications for its national power as well as the welfare of its people. Steady, rapid economic growth has enabled China to expand military budgets without greatly increasing the share of its gross national product devoted to defense. Slower, more erratic progress would mean tougher trade-offs between guns and butter and the likelihood of budget battles among the military services.

Patterns of trade, investment, and infrastructure development within Asia also will have important strategic and economic implications. One possibility is a region in which every road (and pipeline) leads to Beijing, the renminbi is the preferred medium of exchange, and the field for the flow of both goods and capital is tilted in favor of Asian actors and against external competitors. This would clearly be different from a world in which Asia is integrated in a global economy that operates according to liberal trading principles.

Access to and control over natural resources also will drive strategic interaction. The recent intensification of disputes in the South and East China Seas

is the most obvious manifestation of this tendency. Economic development and rising living standards have increased demand for food and water as well as energy and minerals. The prospect of scarcity, or even worse, the deliberate denial of resources by hostile competitors, has already become a factor shaping the calculations of planners and decision makers across the region.

Technology

The development and diffusion of strategically relevant technologies will substantially affect the distribution of military power. Nuclear proliferation is the most obvious manifestation of this large and multifaceted process. Although its implications have not become fully apparent, that North Korea has established itself irrevocably as a nuclear weapons state is beginning to register in the minds of the people within the region. The likelihood of South Korea, Japan, and perhaps other nations following suit has always existed in theory, but today it is being considered more openly and taken more seriously than at any time in the past.

Whatever happens in the nuclear domain, more states are obviously determined to acquire the capabilities to project conventional military power beyond their borders. This trend, in turn, fuels interest in antiaccess and area-denial capabilities similar to those that China has developed to counter the preponderance of US military forces. Low-cost drones and cruise missiles launched from land, sea, subsurface, and aerial platforms will threaten naval vessels or commercial ships operating dozens or even hundreds of miles from China's coasts. The proliferation of antiship ballistic missiles could extend defenses even further and affect naval warfare in ways comparable to the advent of carrier aviation in the interwar years. Crowded Asian coastal waters could quickly be transformed into no-go zones in a war, with implications felt around the world. Outside nations that lack a military presence, as do most European powers, could find their interests threatened by developments over which they can exercise little direct control.

State and possibly nonstate actors will have the increasing capacity to launch cyber-attacks. The disruption to South Korean banking and broadcasting in 2013, possibly originating in North Korea, may offer a foretaste of things to come.⁶ This form of warfare is likely to be appealing in a region where disputes are deeply rooted, the cost of open conflict remains high, and prosperous, technologically advanced, and powerful nations are the most vulnerable in this dimension.

NATIONAL STRATEGIES

The security environment provides the context in which nations interact. Strategies are plans and programs through which major powers define goals, mobilize resources, and apply those resources to achieve goals, which may vary widely in coherence and integration. At critical moments they will be objects of intense debate and it may be hard to discern whether anything deserving to be called a strategy actually exists. That said, and despite the conceptual, bureaucratic, and domestic obstacles to developing strategies, governments devote considerable energy in trying to behave strategically, and the results of their efforts demand serious analysis.

Contrary to some theories of international relations, the strategy of a given nation cannot be inferred from its relative strength or position in the global order. Ideas, interests, and ideologies as well as external imperatives and material constraints influence strategy. Even the strategies of authoritarian systems are typically by-products of struggles among groups and individuals rather than simply handed down, fully formed, by powerful leaders. To appreciate what nations are doing at any moment and anticipate what they may do, it is necessary to follow elite debates on national strategy. Analysts must examine the logic of the alternatives put forward as well as the coalitions supporting them and the institutional processes and procedures that will determine which alternative, or what amalgam of approaches, emerges victorious.

Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and other nations are all engaged in debates of this kind. In Beijing the overarching issue is whether the dictum of Deng Xiaoping that China should “hide [its] capabilities and bide [its] time” has outlived its usefulness and, if so, whether it should be replaced with something more muscular. More concretely, the question facing the new leaders in Beijing is whether to continue the assertive approach to long-running maritime disputes with its neighbors that it began in 2010. In Japan, on the other hand, the question is how best to respond to Chinese forcefulness. The answer, at the moment, seems to involve resistance rather than appeasement. Tokyo has announced plans to increase defense spending and seek tighter strategic cooperation with Washington. It also has taken measures that include relaxing the ban on arms sales to third parties, which are aimed at shoring up the regional balance of power in the face of the current Chinese military buildup.⁷

Australian decision makers and analysts are debating how to manage deepening economic relations with China while preserving their traditional security alliance with the United States.⁸ The South Korean military posture and future diplomatic disposition are also in flux. Seoul has already taken steps to loosen American-imposed restrictions on its missile forces, and the issue of an independent nuclear deterrent seems to be back on the table.⁹ Even though South Korean elite and public opinion have been growing warmer toward the United States and cooler toward China, relations with Japan remain strained.

Meanwhile, in Washington, debate continues over whether the Obama administration's pivot, or rebalance, toward Asia, an initiative undertaken largely in reaction to Beijing's increasing assertiveness, is stabilizing or provocative. AirSea Battle, which is the integrated warfare doctrine associated with the pivot, has become a source of lively disagreement. Looming above such questions is whether the intensified geopolitical rivalry with China is affordable for the United States given fiscal constraints.

Of the factors at work in Asia, popular nationalism is likely to prove particularly important in shaping national strategies. It would be a mistake to assume, as so much of the political science literature does, that international behavior is produced by rational deliberation and calculation. To the contrary, collective pride and deep-seated animosity, fear, and resentment can play critical roles in shaping national strategy, even when the end results seem obviously counterproductive.

To take one notable example, if Beijing wants to become the dominant power in East Asia once again, it would do well to seek better relations with Tokyo to weaken Japanese ties with Washington. Instead, China has threatened and bullied Japan, driving it further into the arms of the United States. The Chinese Communist Party is promoting anti-Japanese sentiment to bolster its domestic legitimacy, and that complicates efforts to achieve regional hegemony. For their part, Japan and South Korea would be better positioned to cope with the rise of China through closer cooperation. However, passions aroused by the unhappy history of relations between these two countries still make this extremely difficult.

Beyond current national interests and memories of the past are deeper patterns of thought that influence policy makers. China, India, Japan, and other nations have undergone centuries of internal and external conflicts and competition. As a result, they have developed characteristic ways of think-

ing about politics, diplomacy, and war that differ from those of the West. In their initial interaction with outside powers, Asian societies' obvious material weakness overshadowed their unique strategic cultures. Whatever advantage they might have enjoyed from the subtlety of their statecraft or skill at employing deception in time of war was overwhelmed by the superior strength of their enemies.

The current situation is different, but it is not entirely without precedent. The first wave of scholarly interest in strategic culture in the 1970s coincided with a growing recognition that the United States no longer had a massive edge in military power over the Soviet Union. Albeit belatedly, some American and other Western strategists began to realize their counterparts were not simply laggards who needed to be schooled in the revolutionary effects of nuclear weapons and the virtues of stability. The Soviets had their own approach to warfare, which if put to the test, might have proved superior. In any event, the obvious erosion of previous American advantages made it clear that bolstering deterrence required gaining a better understanding of Soviet thinking. Similarly, the growing strength of China, India, and other Asian nations is kindling a resurgence of interest in their distinctive strategic cultures.

PATTERNS OF STRATEGIC INTERACTION

After examining the board and exploring the plans and goals of key players, students of strategy in Asia will want to stand back and contemplate the evolving pattern of interaction among them. The broadest questions concern the structure of the emerging Asian system and its major axes of antagonism and alignment. Will Asia become really multipolar, with several independent centers of power, including China, India, Japan, Korea, Russia, and perhaps Indonesia, maneuvering with and against one another? Or will the regional system become increasingly bipolar, with a line drawn between China and the United States and like-minded powers, including allies such as Japan and quasi allies like India? Or is Asia—at least East Asia—moving toward a hierarchical order, with China at the center, resembling the premodern tribute system?

These broad structural questions can be broken into two sets of practical, policy-relevant issues. The first involves the management and future of alliances and the possible formation of new, looser groupings of nations that share security concerns even if they do not enter into mutual defense agreements. Established US relationships with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South

Korea are all in flux, with a trend toward even closer ties. Nevertheless, the combination of growing concern over Chinese power and the likelihood of persistent downward pressure on US defense budgets means that burden sharing is regaining salience and could become a source of controversy. Efforts by Washington to increase the efficiency of the hub-and-spoke alliance system by promoting greater cooperation among partners also face difficulties, especially in the case of Japan and South Korea. Moreover, the United States is seeking ways to use commercial policy as an instrument of national strategy, proposing free-trade agreements as an alternative to friends and allies being drawn into the orbit of the massive Chinese economy. At the same time, Beijing is attempting to promote alternative regional institutions of its own design that exclude or marginalize Washington.

In addition to transpacific ties, many Asian nations are seeking to forge stronger strategic relationships within their region. The linkages take different forms, including bilateral and multilateral dialogues among participants such as Australia, India, Japan, and Vietnam. Military exercises, intelligence exchanges, and arms sales are also increasing in frequency and volume. Whatever the United States does, Asian nations are seeking ways to work together to shore up their positions in relation to an increasingly powerful China.

Enhanced cooperation in some relationships is being accompanied by intensified military competition in others. Although it has taken time for US officials to acknowledge the obvious, Beijing and Washington have been competing for the better part of two decades. Strategists on both sides regard the other as a potential enemy, which influences deployments, exercises, war plans, research and development, and procurement. While China and the United States are not engaged in a simple action-reaction arms race, each is increasingly focused on the other and their plans are becoming more tightly linked. Each aims to deter the other from taking actions that it opposes and seeks to improve the chances to achieve its military objectives if deterrence fails.

China in particular appears to have adopted a competitive-strategies approach, developing weapons and operational concepts that target US vulnerabilities and will be disproportionately expensive to counter, such as using comparatively inexpensive cruise and ballistic missiles to attack multibillion-dollar aircraft carriers. The irony is that competitive strategies originated in the latter part of the Cold War, and they were intended for use against a

Soviet Union that appeared to be gaining some military advantages. Now the tables have been turned, and it remains to be seen whether, and if so how, the Pentagon can regain those advantages.¹⁰

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Military competition between China and the United States will not be the only struggle in Asia. China and India observe each other warily across the Himalayas and in the Indian Ocean. China and Japan are not only planning for conflict but maneuvering their forces against one another in the Western Pacific. Additionally, Japan and South Korea are developing capabilities to project power in response to other contingencies, which can possibly be seen as mutually threatening. The nations bordering the South China Sea are enhancing their ability to defend their maritime claims against China, but some have long histories of mutual mistrust. Military interaction in the Asia-Pacific region is complex, multifaceted, and dynamic—and likely to intensify. For better or worse, the study of strategy in Asia will keep scholars and analysts busy for many years to come.

NOTES

1. Henry A. Kissinger, “China: Containment Won’t Work,” *Washington Post*, June 13, 2005.

2. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the aggregate military spending by nations of the region began to exceed Europe’s in 2012. International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Military Balance 2012: Press Statement,” March 7, 2012.

3. Regarding the naval dimension, see Geoffrey Till, *Asia’s Naval Expansion: An Arms Race in the Making?* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012).

4. Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security* 18 (Winter 1993–1994): 5–33.

5. *Strategic Asia* refers to the eastern half of the Eurasian landmass and arc of offshore islands in the Western Pacific. This expanse is centered on China and surrounded by four subregions arrayed clockwise around it: Central Asia, Northeast Asia (the Russian Far East, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and Taiwan), Southeast Asia (continental and maritime domains), and the South Asian subcontinent. See Aaron L. Friedberg, “Introduction,” in *Strategic Asia, 2001–02: Power and Purpose*, ed. Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), 4–7.

6. Choe Sang-hun, “Computer Networks in South Korea Are Paralyzed in Cyberattacks,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2013.

7. Mure Dickie, "Japan Relaxes Weapons Export Ban," *Financial Times*, December 27, 2011.

8. For what stimulated the debate, see Hugh White, *The China Choice* (Collingwood, Australia: Black, 2012).

9. Kelsey Davenport, "South Korea Extends Missile Range," *Arms Control Today* 42 (November 2012), http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012_11/South-Korea-Extends-Missile-Range. In a poll conducted in February 2013, 66 percent of South Koreans favored developing nuclear weapons, while 31 percent were opposed. Jiyeon Kim, Karl Friedhoff, and Chungku Kang, "The Fallout: South Korean Public Opinion Following North Korea's Third Nuclear Test," Asian Institute for Policy Studies, 2013, p. 8.

10. For an introduction, see Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).