The dangers of mounting US-China rivalry

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Over the past month, the Obama administration has resumed and escalated its confrontational stance towards China. After a brief hiatus in May and June, during which Washington sought to secure Beijing's support for a new round of UN sanctions against Iran, the US has deliberately inflamed tensions with China in a series of aggressive moves in East and South East Asia.

Speaking at an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) security forum on July 23, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provocatively sided with Vietnam and other ASEAN countries in their territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea. Beijing told two senior American officials in March that it regarded the South China Sea as one of its "core interests". Yet Clinton ignored the message and called for "open access" to waters claimed by China—an action described by China's foreign minister Yang Jichi as "virtually an attack on China".

Several days later, the US began a major joint naval exercise with South Korea in the Sea of Japan, despite Chinese objections. The war games, which were nominally a response to the alleged North Korean sinking of a South Korean naval vessel in March, involved 20 South Korean and American warships, including a huge aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington. The Pentagon has now announced another naval exercise will be conducted with South Korea later this year in the Yellow Sea—even closer to the Chinese mainland.

Last week, the Obama administration leaked details of a nuclear pact being negotiated with Vietnam that would pave the way for the sale of US nuclear reactor technology to Hanoi. Having already backed the Vietnamese regime over the South China Sea, the nuclear deal was another sign of a closer strategic alignment between the two countries directed against China. Predictably the move angered Beijing, which accused Washington of "double standards" that "challenged the present international order".

Behind these tensions lie profound shifts in the global balance of forces. The rapid economic rise of China over the past two decades, which has seen it become, this year, the world's second largest economy, behind the US and ahead of Japan, is disrupting relations within Asia and around the world. The US has responded to its own historic economic decline by using its military might to try to secure domination in the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East, and to counter China through alliances and partnerships stretching from Japan and South Korea through South East Asia to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The global economic crisis that erupted in 2007-08 has greatly exacerbated the rivalries between the two powers. Initially, faced with the danger of a financial meltdown, the Obama administration sought assistance from Beijing. As the world's largest debtor, the US is heavily dependent on the inflow of funds from China. But as the financial turmoil temporarily eased, Washington began to press Beijing on a range of issues, including the revaluation of the Chinese currency, trade and climate change initiatives. At the same time it started to actively intervene within the Asia Pacific region.

Last July, US Secretary of State Clinton bluntly told an ASEAN summit in Thailand that the US was "back in Asia"—a reference to criticisms of the previous Bush administration for its neglect of Asia. Clinton signalled a new diplomatic offensive, telling reporters: "I know that a lot of China's neighbours have expressed concerns [over its rise], so we want to strengthen our relationships with a lot of the countries that are in East and South East Asia."

The dangerous implications of escalating US-China frictions were outlined in a lecture in Sydney on August 4, by John Mearsheimer, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, entitled "China's Challenge to US power in Asia". Invited to Australia by the Centre for International Security Studies at the University of Sydney, Mearsheimer, an astute and perceptive foreign policy analyst, painted a bleak picture of the prospects for peace in Asia and, by extension, the world. He told a packed audience of students, foreign policy officials and diplomats that as a result of its staggering economic expansion, China would seek to become a regional power and to exclude potential rivals from Asia, utilising the same ruthless methods that the US had employed to secure its predominance in the Western Hemisphere—North, Central and South America.

"Australians should be worried about China's rise,"

Mearsheimer declared, “because it is likely to lead to intense security competition with China and the United States, with considerable potential for war. Moreover, most of China’s neighbours, to include India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam, and yes Australia, will join the United States to contain China’s power. To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully.”

Mearsheimer ruled out any role for peaceful intentions and expressions of goodwill in avoiding conflict. Inevitably, what one country regarded as a defensive military buildup was viewed by its rivals as a dangerous capability for aggression. From the standpoint of the Chinese leadership, he explained, it was completely rational to expand the country’s military forces to defend its global interests. Based on recent experience, Mearsheimer declared, Chinese leaders “will almost certainly conclude that it [the US] is a war-like and dangerous country. After all, America has been at war for 14 of the 21 years since the Cold War ended. That is, 2 out of every 3 years. And remember that the Obama administration is apparently contemplating a new war against Iran.”

China’s economic rise as the world’s largest cheap labour platform has necessitated a vast expansion of its imports of raw materials from all corners of the globe. More than half its vital oil and gas is imported, mostly from the Middle East and Africa. For this reason, China is determined to secure its sea routes across the Indian Ocean through the South China Sea by building a blue water navy. The US is just as determined to prevent this happening, and to maintain its own naval predominance.

Mearsheimer explained that Australia—which has attempted so far to balance between its economic interests as a major exporter of minerals to China, and its longstanding military alliance with the US—would inevitably be drawn into the US-China conflict. To pass from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, he said, Chinese shipping only had three options: the Straits of Malacca, effectively controlled by Singapore, a close American ally, or the Lombok and Sunda Straits through the Indonesian archipelago—both of which lie immediately to the north of Australia. “The steps that China takes to neutralise the threat that Australia poses to its sea lanes… will surely push Canberra to work closely with Washington to contain China.”

Mearsheimer candidly admitted that he found his own conclusions “downright depressing”. Moreover, even though he was speaking about the impact of China’s rise two decades from now, there are immediate consequences. The US has already demonstrated, over the past twenty years, its willingness to launch aggressive military action—in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular—to prosecute its interests against its rivals. The Pentagon’s entire strategic outlook is premised on preventing the emergence of any power—friend or foe—capable of challenging US military supremacy. The Obama administration’s latest steps in Asia are part of a strategy aimed precisely at preempting China’s rise by countering its regional influence and creating major impediments to its military expansion.

The US-China conflict has significant historical parallels. At the turn of the twentieth century, the emergence of Germany as a dynamic capitalist power fuelled deepening competition and rivalry with imperial Britain and other major powers that produced two devastating World Wars. In the 1930s and 40s, the rise of Japan and its need for markets and raw materials brought it into collision with the United States and the expanding interests of US imperialism in Asia. Significantly, the extension of World War II to the Pacific in 1941 was triggered when the US imposed an oil blockade that threatened to bring Japan to its knees. Since the end of World War II, as Beijing is well aware, the American military has sought to maintain its ability to choke off energy supplies to current and potential rivals.

As global capitalism descends into its worst economic crisis since the 1930s, the danger looms of major power rivalry over markets, raw materials and strategic position, once again threatening a catastrophic global conflagration—this time involving nuclear-armed nations. The only social force capable of preventing such a war is the international working class, by mobilising on a unified, global scale to abolish the profit system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states, and replacing it with a democratically organised and rationally planned world economy. That is the socialist and internationalist perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections around the world.

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