

Fears of “a new cold war” and conflict in Asia

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Having deliberately stoked up tensions and inflamed flashpoints throughout the Indo-Pacific region as part of its “pivot” against China, the Obama administration has unleashed forces outside its control and intensified the slide toward war. This increasingly volatile and dangerous situation is provoking a degree of nervousness in Washington, including among those who are directly responsible for creating it.

A comment featured in the *Financial Times* last week by former Obama official, Kurt Campbell, points to an increasingly polarised region, with the previous strategic relationship between the US and China, resting on the “American military presence and leadership role in Asia,” breaking down. “Indeed if countries were to begin to formally and fundamentally choose sides, Asia would rapidly descend into a new cold war,” he warns.

Like everything else in Campbell’s article, “Asia’s strategic choices: subtle or stark?” these remarks are laden with cynicism and hypocrisy. As Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, he was one of the chief architects of the “pivot to Asia”—a comprehensive strategy to ensure American dominance by undermining Chinese influence in the region and preparing militarily for war.

As Obama’s chief diplomat in the region, Campbell was responsible for much of the behind-the-scenes cajoling and bullying to compel governments to side with Washington, adopt a more aggressive anti-China stance and permit the expansion of US military bases. On his watch, the US inflamed disputes in the South China Sea between China and its neighbours, blocked any return to six-party talks to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula, promoted the Lower Mekong Initiative to drive a wedge between China and countries like Vietnam and Cambodia, and strengthened military alliances, partnerships and ties throughout the region.

Indeed, Campbell’s criticisms on this score are

directed at “louder voices across the region calling for an overall re-evaluation of longstanding strategic alignments,” by which he means those critical of the US “pivot.” He singles out “several prominent strategists and commentators—including former prime ministers—[who] argue that it is now time for Australia to undertake a fundamental re-orientation and reduce emphasis on political relations and ties with Washington.”

Campbell clearly has in mind former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser who has criticised the unequivocal commitment of the present Coalition government and the previous Labor government to the “pivot,” including the opening up of Australian bases to US Marines, warships and warplanes. In an Australian ABC interview on Saturday, Fraser warned: “If America goes to war with China because Japan does something stupid—which is the most likely scenario—Australia at the moment, on current policy settings, does not have the capacity to say ‘no’.”

Campbell’s primary concern, however, is not critics like Fraser, who have been largely politically marginalised. Rather it lies in his concluding paragraph, with a cautious but unmistakeable reference to the dangers of Japanese militarism as Tokyo “increasingly sheds its post-world war two inhibitions and embraces a sceptical stance towards China, and aligns with states increasingly aggrieved by Chinese assertiveness.” Campbell warns of an “increasingly bitter standoff between China and Japan [that] has all the trappings of an enduring competition in which others are expected to take sides.”

In reality, Campbell is hinting at what Fraser made explicit—the danger that the US, like Australia, will be drawn into a conflict with China provoked by Japan that is not in American interests. Yet it is precisely the Obama administration that has encouraged and pushed Tokyo to end its post-World War II “inhibitions”—that

is constitutional constraints on waging war—and take an aggressive stance toward China, especially over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

Campbell undoubtedly had a hand in the concerted US efforts to undermine Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama after his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won the 2009 election. The DPJ defeated the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had held power, virtually unbroken, for half a century.

Hatoyama was forced to resign in mid-2010 after the Obama administration blocked all attempts to renegotiate US basing arrangements on Okinawa—one of the DPJ's key election promises. Hatoyama had alienated the Obama administration not only over Okinawa, but because he promoted a more independent Japanese foreign policy and called for improved relations with China, precisely when Washington sought to confront Beijing.

Hatoyama's successors as head of the DPJ government did not make the same mistake. The little known dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands was thrust into prominence in September 2010 when Prime Minister Naoto Kan arrested and threatened to try the Chinese captain of a fishing boat over an incident in the disputed waters. In September 2012, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda “nationalised” the rocky outcrops, provoking an escalating confrontation between Japanese and Chinese ships and aircraft in the area. In both cases, Washington backed Tokyo to the hilt.

The DPJ's inflammatory actions opened the door for the return of the LDP in December 2012. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe immediately began the process of remilitarisation—increasing defence spending, revising constitutional restraints on the military, ruling out negotiation with China over the Senkukus and whitewashing past Japanese war crimes. While proclaiming his support for the US-Japan alliance, Abe has conducted his own diplomatic offensive to boost Japanese diplomatic and military ties in Asia and internationally.

Having encouraged Japan to play a “greater security role in Asia,” Campbell's comment reflects a certain apprehension in Washington about what has been unleashed. US calculations have all been premised on Japan remaining a useful subordinate partner in US efforts to maintain its dominance in Asia. Japan,

however, has its own independent economic and strategic interests, which Abe is determined to prosecute. As he declared during the 2012 election campaign, he wants “a strong Japan” with “a strong military.”

Amid the current, worsening global crisis of capitalism, the consequences of the revival of Japanese militarism are beginning to haunt the foreign policy establishment in Washington. No doubt some at least recall that just over 70 years ago, US and Japanese imperialism fought a bloody war in Asia, costing millions of lives, to determine which power would dominate the region.



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