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Abandon Hegemony in Asia-Pacific, Or Risk Catastrophic War

By John Glaser

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US Navy fleet in Asia-Pacific

Denny Roy, a Senior Fellow at the East-West Center, writes at *The Diplomat*^[1] that the crux of the tensions between the U.S. and China is a contest for power in the Asia-Pacific region. The squabbling over competing sovereignty claims of this or that island chain in the East and South China Seas, he writes, is peripheral to the real battle for regional hegemony.

A Chinese sphere of influence here would require the eviction of American strategic leadership, including U.S. military bases and alliances in Japan and South Korea, U.S. “regional policeman” duties, and most of the security cooperation between America and friends in the region that now occurs. Washington is not ready to give up this role, seeing a strong presence in the western Pacific rim and the ability to shape regional affairs as crucial to American security.

A basic problem, then, is that Beijing wants a sphere of influence, while Washington is not willing to accede to it.

I’m reminded of the stark choice put forth in Noam Chomsky’s 2003 book *Hegemony or Survival*. Relying on official documents, Chomsky warned that it is dangerous that “the declared intention of the most powerful state in history [is] to maintain its hegemony through the threat or use of military force, the dimension of power in which it reigns supreme.”

In the official rhetoric of the National Security Strategy, “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.

One well-known international affairs specialist, John Ikenberry, describes the declaration as a “grand strategy [that] begins with a fundamental commitment to maintaining a unipolar world in which the United States has no peer competitor,” a condition that is to be “permanent [so] that no state or coalition could ever challenge [the U.S.] as global leader, protector, and enforcer.”

Ikenberry went on to say this quest for permanent hegemony threatens to “leave the world more dangerous and divided – and the United States less secure.” America’s current defense posture in Asia – to back all of China’s neighboring rivals in an attempt to curb China’s regional ambitions – is at once an attempt to implement this hegemonic grand strategy and a threat to peace.

“My biggest fear is that a small mishap is going to blow up into something much bigger,” says Elizabeth C. Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations^[2]. “If there is a use of force between Japan and China,” warns her colleague Sheila A. Smith, “this could be all-out conflict between these two Asian giants. And as a treaty ally of Japan, it will automatically involve the United States.”

As I’ve written^[3], maintaining global hegemony does ordinary Americans little good. Such an exclusive hold on power in the sphere of international relations is greatly beneficial to political elites and the wealthy entities to which they are closely tied, but not much for the general

population. Given this, the question of whether we prefer maintaining hegemony to “all-out conflict” in the Asia-Pacific is pertinent. We can either continue to risk catastrophic conflict between two of the world’s most powerful states, or, as Roy puts it, “accede” to China’s regional ambitions which, after all, mirror America’s own regional ambitions ^[4] when it was a rising power.