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U.S.-China Relations and the Western Pacific

Maritime assertiveness in 2013 appears to have dashed hopes for a “new kind of great power relations.”

By Denny Roy
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The middle of 2013 brought the possibility of a reset in U.S.-China relations, as new Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke of his desire for a “new kind of great power relations” as he enjoyed relaxed, heart-to-heart talks with U.S. President Barack Obama at a California resort. The year ended, however, with further evidence that strategic friction between Beijing and Washington is serious and long-term. The Chinese declaration of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, a new demand that foreigners get China’s permission before fishing in the South China Sea, and the incident involving the U.S. Navy cruiser *Cowpens* and a Chinese naval vessel reinforced the suspicion that despite explicit denials, Beijing intends to impose a sphere of influence over the seas off the Chinese coast.

That intention is not surprising; it is typical behavior for a great power, and China sees itself as a rising great power in a region where the long-dominant power, the United States, is declining. Furthermore, China is a returning great power that for centuries dominated or attempted to dominate its periphery. This sets expectations and provides a familiar pattern for modern-day Chinese, who view the Sinocentric tributary system of the past as a confirmation that China’s destiny is to lead the region in the future.

Neither, however, is China's apparent intention a cause for celebration for most of the region. Most Chinese have a sanitized view of China's historical leadership in the region: that China exercised influence through cultural, scientific and economic prowess rather than through coercion or expansionism. Neighboring states – like Vietnam, forcibly occupied for a thousand years by the Chinese – often have a different, darker view of historical Chinese pre-eminence.

The promise that China will never seek hegemony or a sphere of influence has become a mantra of PRC leaders and diplomats. Hegemony means domination: a strong country forcing weaker countries to do what is in the strong country's interest, as the Chinese often accused the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. of doing during the Cold War. A sphere of influence means a strong country has exclusive supervisory and veto power over international affairs in the areas near its borders.

China's declaration of an ADIZ in the airspace near its territory followed precedents set by many other countries, including the U.S., Japan and South Korea. Thus it could be seen as China trying to keep up with the Japanese. But the ADIZ also reinforces China's claim to some level of ownership over the East China Sea, as the ADIZ roughly encompasses the area of sea that China demarcates as its exclusive economic zone, a claim that cuts deeply into the half of the East China Sea bordered by Japanese territory. It is unfortunate that China chose to announce its ADIZ at a time of high tensions with Japan caused by the ongoing standoff over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. China's act might have created a permanent new source of regional conflict. As the U.S. immediately signaled by flying two B-52 bombers into the zone without China's approval, foreign governments predictably feel compelled to demonstrate non-compliance by violating the ban, which in turn humiliates Beijing and creates pressure for the Chinese to retaliate.

Effective January 1, Beijing is demanding that foreign vessels obtain prior permission from the Chinese government before fishing in the South China Sea. A PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson said on January 9 that the purpose of the new regulation is “to strengthen the operation, development and rational utilization of fishery resources to protect fishery workers.” It sounds like another effort by Beijing to demonstrate administration and control as a basis for claiming ownership of disputed territory. As with the ADIZ, how strictly the Chinese attempt to enforce this unilateral law remains to be seen, but the PRC already has plans to greatly step up patrols of the South China Sea over the next few years.

In November, the Cowpens was observing China's Liaoning aircraft carrier battle group while in international waters. According to a Chinese media report, the Cowpens was 30 miles away from the Liaoning. The Chinese position is that the presence of the U.S. vessel violated a prior Chinese government declaration that foreign ships were not allowed in the sector where the Liaoning group was exercising. As was well reported, the Chinese responded with the familiar tactic of intentionally placing one of their ships on a collision course with the U.S. ship. This was disturbing beyond the immediate issue of the Chinese using dangerous seamanship to make a political point.

Beijing and Washington have a long-standing disagreement over the surveillance of China by U.S. aircraft and ships outside China's territorial waters and airspace, which ends 12 nautical miles off the Chinese coast. China opposes such surveillance even though it is allowed by the International Law of the Sea Treaty, of which China is a signatory. This dispute led to the aerial collision near Hainan Island in 2001 that resulted in a Chinese fighter pilot losing his life and China holding a U.S. aircrew hostage for 10 days while the two governments negotiated a U.S. apology. The dispute resurfaced with the media reports of Chinese ships harassing the U.S. Navy's surveillance ships *Victorious* and *Impeccable* in 2009. During the May 2013 Shangri-La international defense dialogue, a PLA officer revealed that Chinese ships had recently surveilled U.S. Navy vessels near the American coast, raising hopes that the Chinese had accepted the American view that both sides should tolerate surveillance as a normal part of great-power relations. With the *Cowpens* incident, the Chinese position seems to have retrogressed, opening the possibility of continued incidents at sea as well as in the air.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the *Cowpens* incident is what it says about China's long-term expectations. Beijing unilaterally declares a section of international waters in the East China Sea to be off-limits to foreigners, then physically enforces this ban – evidently successfully – against a warship of the U.S. Navy. This parallels a ban on foreign fishing activity that China tries to enforce every year in the northern part of the South China Sea. The unilateral exclusion of foreign military vessels is a direct challenge to what could be called an American “core interest”: unhindered transit by U.S. vessels through the world's international waterways, or what the Navy calls “freedom of navigation.”

The December 21, 2013 edition of the *Global Times*, a Chinese Communist Party newspaper, obliquely asserted a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine based on deference to Chinese “feelings” rather than international law: “the South China Sea will never be the same as the Caribbean, thus the U.S. navy will have to consider the national interests and the feelings of China while cruising in the South China Sea.” Other Chinese media outlets have made similar demands – that Americans must respect Chinese feelings now that China is a strong country – in reaction to reported plans of U.S.-South Korea naval drills in the Yellow Sea after the lethal North Korean provocations of 2010. The Chinese government has similarly complained about Japanese surveillance of Chinese fleets sailing in seas far from China but close to Japan.

After the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, the other maritime region on China's periphery is the South China Sea. The Chinese claim to at least partial ownership over the South China Sea is even stronger. To date Beijing refuses to clarify or disavow the infamous “9-dashed line” that on Chinese maps marks a boundary encompassing most of the South China, or the sea within the “first island chain” south of Taiwan. Beijing demonstrated that this claim is not merely symbolic when in 2012 it dispatched government ships to blockade Philippine fishermen from entering Scarborough Shoal, which is over 600 miles from the nearest Chinese coast but is within the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines.

Thus, if we disregard the claim of Chinese officials that China doesn't want a sphere of influence, what we are left with is a growing pile of indications that China does indeed intend to

establish a maritime sphere of influence, with exclusive rights to resources. This is not to say that China's desire for a sphere of influence is limited to the oceans. Beijing also has or is trying to cultivate disproportionate influence in the capitals of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Central Asian states, Burma and North Korea. But it is in the maritime Asia-Pacific region that the clash of U.S. and Chinese designs is most serious. 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 it. Unfortunately, therefore, U.S.-China relations are not poised for a breakthrough that could be achieved with a few concessions. American abandonment of Taiwan will not solve this basic dispute over influence in the region. Nor will it go away if Americans stop complaining about human rights abuses in China or the Chinese government's involvement in organizing cyber attacks against U.S. corporate and government computer systems. The booming bilateral trade relationship and other ties create reasons to avoid war, but these have not solved the security problems that can independently drag the two countries into conflict.