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China's dual response to the US 'pivot'

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Two years after the United States announced its rebalancing towards the Pacific, China seems to have delineated a two-pronged strategy in response that became more apparent recently.

On the one hand, it has approached Southeast Asian and Central Asian states, proposing the establishment of two "Silk Roads" through the signing of investment, infrastructure-building and free-trade agreements. On the other, it has reinforced an assertive posture against the Philippines and Japan, countries which are more aligned to a strategy for containing China in the region. By the end of 2011, the Barack Obama government started announcing, through high level official declarations, its strategy of balancing towards the Asia-Pacific. Also called the "strategic pivot to Asia", such strategic guidance affirmed that the US would direct the center of its foreign and security policies to the area around Asia's Pacific coast, from the Indian subcontinent to Northeast Asia.

This way, the diplomatic, military, and economic presence of the United States in the region would be enhanced. This reorientation was adopted based on the assumption that Asia's economic growth, China's in particular, and the Chinese military modernization process make the region critical for United States interests, especially in the context of a US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.

This pivot to the Asia-Pacific potentially has a dual character: it can be part of an engagement strategy with the region and increase of its presence, as well as be part of a China containment strategy. However, what has fundamentally been put into practice is a containment strategy, exemplified by a more flexible and distributed military presence in the region, with the allocation of troops to the Philippines, Australia, and Singapore.

A military strategy aimed at a future conflict with China has been adopted, which is anchored in the Air-Sea Battle operational concept. In addition to that, negotiations have been stepped up on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (a free-trade agreement that would exclude China). This agreement was proposed by the United States during the Bush administration, and it has clauses that include relaxation of labor legislation and liberalization of services, and strong protection to intellectual property; it has been negotiated by eleven countries on both sides of the Pacific.

In response to that, China seems to have adopted a dual approach as well: It demonstrates that it will firmly respond to a containment strategy at the same time that it welcomes an engagement strategy. China demonstrates the potential benefits of cooperation by proposing commercial agreements and a "Silk Road economic belt". But the establishment of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) overlapping its Japanese counterpart and the insignificant assistance provided to Philippines after the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan, indicates that China will not tolerate provocations in disputed territories.

The dual response: military deterrence and two Silk Roads

The establishment of the ADIZ in the East China Sea is a response to the increasingly aggressive posture of Japan, which welcomes the United States' project of rebalancing towards the Pacific in its most evident containment character: economically by adhering to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and militarily by being favorable to the Pentagon's aggressive Air-Sea Battle concept, besides by having significantly raised its defense budget.

The military exercises conducted by China and Malaysia may represent this same course of action. It remains to be seen what Chinese reaction to the rapprochement between Japan and India will be, relevant countries in terms of military capabilities and economic power.

As part of a broader diplomatic offensive, characterized by analysts as a "charm offensive", three high-level government trips were made by the China to several countries in Southeast and Central Asia in September and October 2013. In Central Asia, President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. An important oil supply agreement with Turkmenistan and a strategic partnership with Kyrgyzstan were then signed.

Afterwards, in October, almost simultaneous visits by Xi and Premier Li Keqiang were made to Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Brunei. On that occasion, a US\$25 billion agreement was offered to Malaysia, as well as a treaty about the disputes in the South China Sea. Obama's absence at the summits of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Asia-Pacific Cooperation grouping due to domestic issues with the US Congress gives even more weight to such facts.

In their Southeast and Central Asia tours, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang proposed the establishment of two new "Silk Roads": one by land in Central Asia and a maritime one through Southeast Asia. Such concepts echo the commercial routes by which spices and other goods were commercialized in the Middle Ages. The land version connected the Chinese civilization to the West through Central Asia, reaching its height during the Mongol Empire. The maritime version had the Indic Ocean as its main section.

China's economic rise and the subsequent raise in its demand for energy and consumption of goods revitalized (the need for) such routes. Though most of the Chinese energy supply is transported by sea, this new Silk Road would encompass a series of energy and transportation infrastructure projects which would connect East Asia to Europe by Eurasia. The maritime route, announced in the East Asia Summit, would be materialized through the increase of maritime flows and building of seaports in Southeast Asia.

Yet, it was actually the United States that has first proposed the construction of a "new Silk Road" in Eurasia as a means to stabilize Afghanistan after its withdrawal of the country, by transforming it into regional hub for commerce and energy. While there have been advances in this sense, it is China who is leading the investments in infrastructure. In its speech in Kazakhstan, Xi proposed the New Silk Road to be not only a transit route, but a "Prosperity Belt" extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea.

At Bali's APEC summit, Xi has also defended that "any arrangement should lead to a cooperative relationship, not a confrontational one; an open mindset, not an exclusive one; win-win results, not a zero-sum outcome; and integration, not fragmentation", in a clear reference to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Although the negotiations have recently progressed, some issues, such as restrictions to the action of state-owned enterprises, have met resistance from Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei.

On the same occasion, the Chinese president established the goal of elevating bilateral commerce between China and ASEAN to \$1 trillion until 2020. In Brunei, at the China-ASEAN summit, Li reaffirmed the intention of establishing a free-trade area - known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) - between ASEAN and the five countries with which the regional organization at present maintains free-trade agreements (China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand).

Both leaders highlighted the current Chinese role in the foreign trade of every country visited by them, and they established ambitious foreign trade and infrastructure building aims, demonstrating China's importance to any economic project in the region.

China initiated this reconciliation with ASEAN in June 2013, when it signed a 10-point cooperation program with Vietnam which covered issues from security cooperation agreements to joint gas prospecting in the Gulf of Tonkin. Although the disputes between these two countries in that area were resolved in 2005, such an agreement may serve as a basis for solving the Spratlys and Paracel territorial disputes.

This acquires notable relevance due to the fact that Vietnam was, along with the Philippines, one of the leaders of the opposition to China within ASEAN, whose multilateral forums were used to tackle Chinese claims in the South China Sea. By demonstrating the advantages of a major ties with China, ASEAN countries as a whole have become more cohesive and predisposed to improve relations with China, thereby isolating the Philippines in its systematic opposition to its largest neighbor.

The 'march to the west'

China's increasing attention to Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East has been identified with a strategy of "march to the west", as proposed by the Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, Wang Jisi. Its central idea is to project China diplomatically and economically in areas where the country has common interests with the United States, such as Afghan stabilization and securing oil supply flows. Its aims are the diversification of energy supply lines, the stabilization of its western border region, and the demonstration of the cooperation potential with the United States.

Other indicators of this march are the construction of transportation and energy infrastructure in Central Asia; the increasing Chinese investments in Afghanistan; the visit of a PCC Politburo Standing Committee member to Afghanistan; the Chinese-promoted China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral consultations; the rapprochement with Pakistan; and the Turkish decision to acquire the Chinese HQ-9 air-defense system.

Although most of the initiatives does not collide directly with US interests, frequently even accommodating them, some movements can be interpreted as expansionist. The sale of the air-defense systems to Turkey and the US protests regarding the Turkish decision illustrate this point.

The growing Chinese presence in this region, associated with the challenges the United States faces in the Middle East, also demonstrates the necessity for the US to remain attached to the region as part of its strategy towards China.

The argument that the difficulties in the Middle East would make pivoting to Asia impossible seems to be fading. Despite Obama's absence from the Asian summits and the Chinese diplomatic and economic offensives, the US defense budget and doctrine documents are still directed towards the development of Air-Sea Battle capabilities, the military branch of the US pivot to Asia.

While the containment of China is the center of the current strategy of rebalancing to the Pacific, the dual character of the Chinese response seems to leave the door open for more cooperative relations in the region as well as with the US. On the other side, actions such as the establishment of the ADIZ may be perceived in the United States as an indicative of a more aggressive and assertive China when it comes to the defense of its interests.

In the epilogue of *On China*, Henry Kissinger delineated the vision of a different perspective on

the United States rebalance to Asia. He proposed the building of a "Pacific Community", a sort of multilateral environment in which the United States, China and the rest of the Asian-Pacific countries could develop strategic trust instead of elevating tensions and increasing competition. That is an engagement-biased view on the pivot to the Pacific, as opposed to the containment option currently being put into practice.

The dual character of the US pivot, as well as China's dual response, express the programmatic and ideological division of both countries strategic planners and correspond to the dilemma that China and the US face right now: accepting the possibility of mutual engagement and cooperation or freezing their relations and turning foreign policy into a zero-sum game, possibly leading to a conflict.