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US Meddling Is Making China More Aggressive

By John Glaser

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A lengthy report in the Spring 2012 issue of the *Washington Quarterly*, the journal published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, reiterates the argument I have repeatedly put forth, that the U.S.'s pivot to Asia is exacerbating tensions in the region by emboldening China's neighboring rivals and putting Beijing on the alert.

“As China rises in economic power,” Leszek Buszynski writes, “its maritime interests similarly expand (and with it its naval power), bringing it into conflict with the dominant naval power in the Western Pacific – the United States.”

To counter this, the U.S. “has been searching for positions from which forces may be surged forward into conflict zones in the Western Pacific,” and “has moved to strengthen defense ties with ASEAN states that share concerns about China.”

I cover these issues often here at the blog, but I also published two pieces this month, one at *The American Conservative* and another at *The Washington Times*, reviewing these kinds of arguments. The tensions between China and its smaller neighbors like Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and others are intensified by the U.S.-China fight for geopolitical supremacy in the Asia Pacific. I've argued that if the U.S. backed off of trying to dominate the region, problems may be mitigated.

“From the Chinese perspective,” the report explains, “the U.S. naval presence in the Western Pacific prevents the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland and emboldens the ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea to oppose Chinese claims.”

And this: “As the United States strengthens its role in the region, ASEAN claimants would become more emboldened to resist Chinese pressure, which has increased over the past two years. If these trends continue, the region would become polarized between the United States and China, and tensions would increase particularly in the South China Sea.”

Here is one explanatory anecdote of this phenomenon:

ASEAN has engaged China in regular dialogue hoping that its leaders could be convinced of the value of a regime of norms which would govern behavior in the South China Sea. ASEAN was habitually careful to avoid in any way provoking China expecting that China would in time reciprocate, and that the ASEAN way of encouraging agreement by consensus would in time be embraced by Beijing. Had the issue involved only competing claims to energy and fisheries, an agreement which would specify the rules of interaction and dispute management (otherwise called a maritime regime) might have been possible in the way that ASEAN policymakers have argued. Strategic rivalry with the United States, however, reshapes the dispute in a way that reduces the role of ASEAN and its ability to negotiate a resolution of the issue with China. It makes China unresponsive to ASEAN apprehensions and more concerned about U.S. moves outside the area and U.S. naval activity. It imparts a particular assertiveness to Chinese behavior as greater control over the South China Sea is a necessary accompaniment to its extended naval strategy and deployments.