

June 8-10, 2014



נס הרצליה ה-14
ע"ש אדמונד בנימין דה רוטשילד
THE EDMOND BENJAMIN de ROTHSCHILD
HERZLIYA CONFERENCE 2014
IPS Institute for Policy and Strategy | Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy

CHINA and its alarmed neighbors: some strategic considerations

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June 2014

14th Herzliya Conference

SUMMARY:

An India-Japan coalition to resist China's territorial demands has been emerging for more than five years , but the process has been greatly accelerated by the advent of exceptionally energetic new leaders in both Tokyo and New Delhi, who have already entered in a personal strategic dialogue, in the first instance to find ways of supporting the Philippines and Vietnam now under severe Chinese pressure.

There are direct implications for Israel at both ends of this coalition. For different reasons both the Indian and Japanese governments have decided to upgrade relations with Israel, both symbolically and substantively --although there is much more room for that at the Japanese end, because of the breath and intensity of India-Israel relations.

BACKGROUND :

1.

To resist China is rather easier, probably less dangerous, but much more complicated than resistance to the USSR ever was, because China cannot simply be opposed in almost all things. With it, there is still much more cooperation and healthy commercial competition than confrontation—though the confrontation quotient has certainly been increasing.

Anything that made the USSR poorer was a gain because its military potential was thereby reduced, but to impoverish China would impoverish the entire world.

2.

Why is China easier to resist ? Because the Chinese leadership has not been implementing an optimum strategy, or even a moderately effective strategy. Instead it is pursuing a counter-productive strategy.

The optimum strategy for China would be to revert to the very successful “Peaceful Rise” strategy 中國和平崛起 that threatened nobody and made no territorial demands, thus attracting investments and goodwill from everybody, notably including Japan and the United States; this facilitated both China’s overall development , and the *unresisted* growth of its global influence.

The second-best strategy for China would be to continue with “Peaceful Rise” globally, but to make an exception of Japan, seeking to isolate it as the evil power of Asia, demanding the Senkakus and maybe the Ryukyus -- while continuing to smile at all other neighboring countries , and the US. This second-best strategy would still have allowed a lot of nationalist propaganda while ruining relations only with Japan, and it would even have put some pressure on the US-Japan alliance, by portraying Japan as the only obstacle to otherwise excellent China-US relations.

But instead of the optimum or at least the second-best strategy, China’s leaders have *simultaneously* activated territorial quarrels with India over Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh , with Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines over the South China Sea as well as with Japan over the Senkakus, and thus also with the allies of some of those seven countries, chiefly the US and Australia. (NB: “Divide and Rule” was not part of China’s historical experience ; it never faced multiple powers until the Nineteenth century, when the Imperial government notably failed to play them off against each other, as the equally decrepit Ottomans successfully did).

3.

Only one reason can explain the deliberate choice of an inferior strategy: a lack of cohesion within the top leadership perhaps, and/or within the entire civil/military party/state apparatus certainly. Power is mass multiplied by cohesion. China has plenty of mass and its mass is growing every day. But it evidently lacks cohesion, because otherwise the leadership would not engage in so much nationalistic flag-waving, anti-Japan propaganda and “strong China” posturing; nor would it allocate ever great resources to the PLA and allow its forces ever more ambitious roles.

4.

Perhaps there are better explanations for the choice of an inferior strategy, but claims that XJP and China are actually pursuing some sort of ultra-sophisticated 孫子兵法 *Sūnzǐ Bīngfǎ* strategy are not supported by any plausible chain of reasoning. (If the Chinese aim is to make G-2 attractive by making the Japan alliance a burden to the US, they are misreading the US—as Kissinger did long ago in proposing “*Détente*”).

5.

As it is, the seven countries threatened by Chinese territorial demands are making increasing efforts to strengthen themselves, militarily as well; they are increasing strategic cooperation bilaterally for the most

part, in increasingly practical ways e.g. Indian training support for the new Vietnamese submarine fleet, more intense Intelligence cooperation, some diplomatic coordination, a greater number of military visits, and more.

This tacit but real coalition-building process is still very new but it has already started to deny access, influence and goodwill to China in a vast arc from India to Japan. Key people in India have made a collective-security connection with Japan (to protect the countries in the middle) their foreign-policy priority. Only South Korea is a candidate to join China's sphere, the "all under heaven" *Tian Xia* 天下.

6.

Nor can China overcome this coalition with its sheer mass: just India, Japan and Vietnam jointly have more population, more economic capacity, and –arguably- more technology than China; and the US and Australia & the other four countries also have some population, some money and technology, while the US also contributes its extended nuclear deterrence for Japan.

If China keeps growing at twice or three times the rate of everybody else in the decades ahead (unlikely but not impossible) this would change of course, but for the time being China's mass *and* its (relative, not absolute) cohesion advantage as a unitary power cannot keep up with the coalition-building process underway, even allowing for a reduced US military effort. A tranquil China with modest military forces and quietly opportunistic policies would be a greater long-term threat to Japan's independence.

7.

China's weakness in strategy, shown by the elementary error of provoking so many countries *at the same time*, is still not widely recognized by many. In spite of China's history of defeats and century-long conquests by enemies more backward in every way but for their superior Steppe-empire strategy, a belief somehow persists that the Chinese are as good in strategy as in everything else.

Therefore many are impressed by China's "long-term" strategic plans ("first island chain, second island chain, etc.) and fail to recognize that *all* long-term strategic plans are symptoms of strategic incompetence, because they contain the "fallacy of the first move" –the most elementary error in strategy. A bridge over a river can be built systematically –but rivers do not actively resist being bridged. China's *declared* ambitions are already evoking increasing resistance from individual countries, and their coalescence, as noted.

8.

There is no necessary correlation between the levels of strategy, no natural harmony between the tactical level of unit combat, the operational level that determines battle outcomes, the theater strategy that governs campaigns, and the final level of results: the level of grand strategy.

Therefore competence or incompetence at the strategic level says nothing about Operational-level or Tactical-level competence.

On the contrary, operational competence in fighting battles is the frequent companion of strategic incompetence. The Germans famously won almost all their battles and lost all their wars –Pearl Harbor was brilliant operationally, but so wrong strategically that Japan would have been much better served by a total failure.

9.

Nothing prevents the PLA from increasing its Tactical-level and Operational-level competence by training more intensively, exercising its forces more often and more realistically, and by deploying them more widely, ever further from their home bases .

Nothing prevents the Chinese from acquiring formidable new capabilities, e.g. anti-ship ballistic missiles with maneuvering re-entry warheads that might sink an aircraft carrier with one hit. Therefore, the physical growth of China's military strength must be taken seriously and requires a serious response, regardless of the incompetence of China's strategy. END