

US foreign strategy needs to change

Written by Tu Ho-ting 涂何庭

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Facing an economically and militarily stronger and more powerful China, US President Barak Obama in 2011 announced a “Pivot to Asia” strategy to keep US primacy in this region.

However, the issue of what role the US should play — whether it should be less engaged in world affairs or continue as it has over the past half century — is not only hotly debated in the US, but is also consequential to the security of East Asia and Taiwan.

In the latest issue (January/February) of Foreign Affairs, Barry Posen’s “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy” argues that since the final years of the Cold War, US strategy is no longer suitable for its future foreign affairs needs. Rather, the present “hegemonic strategy” is jeopardizing its interests, wasting resources and making enemies.

According to Posen, US activism, including sprawling security commitments that consume its debt-stricken economy, adopts unnecessarily militarized and forward-leaning foreign policy which generates “soft-balancing” — low grade diplomatic opposition — which Russia and China use to delegitimize the US’ actions in the UN.

Posen adds that the US’ open-ended confrontation with nationalism and other forms of identity politics vitiates its efforts in Iraq to bring democracy, and in Afghanistan to eliminate the Taliban, and nurtures and boosts anti-US sentiment.

Importantly, Posen points out that the US’ current security guarantees encourage allies to challenge more powerful states, potentially dragging Washington into unnecessary wars, and that Taiwan is a case in point.

He says that from 2000 to 2008, then-president Chen Shui-bian’s (陳水扁) pro-independent intentions, which defied US policy, gratuitously provoked the Chinese government. Without the long-standing support of the US government Chen “would never have entertained such reckless rhetoric,” Posen writes.

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However, in the same Foreign Affairs issue, Steven Brooks, John Ikenberry and William Wohlforth's "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement" puts forward a different view. It argues that the grand strategy of deep-engagement pursued by the US since the end of World War II is still the best way to protect US security and prosperity.

The article states that by deeply engaging the world during the Cold War the US helped to protect Europe, East Asia and the Middle East from Soviet Union invasion. Also, since the collapse of the Soviet Union this strategy has served well in making the same regions more stable, helped contribute to cooperation within these nations, stabilized international order and maintained an open world economy, which has conferred enormous benefits on the US.

The article adds that there is no sufficient evidence to support the view that an internationally engaged US provokes other countries to balance against it (the US more often uses soft-balancing against other countries), will become overstretched and decline like past hegemons (the US spent just 4.5 percent of GDP on defense last year, compared to an average of 7.6 percent during the Cold War), or gets dragged into unnecessary wars (Historically, it is nearly impossible to find a clear case of a smaller power luring a reluctant greater power into war).

As for US-Taiwan relations, the article states that after cross-strait tensions in the 1990s and the first decade of this century, US officials learned that ambiguous support for Taiwan would expose them to the risk of entrapment. The administration of then US president George W. Bush therefore adjusted its policy, making clear that it opposed any unprovoked attack from China and unilateral moves toward independence from Taiwan.

The Obama administration currently adopts a grand strategy tending toward deep engagement, and security and economy cooperation between Taiwan and the US is expected to deepen when both are facing an assertive China that seeks more resources to sustain its economic growth.

However, Taiwan's economy has become more dependent on China in recent years. The increasingly close financial ties and discrepancy of military power across the Taiwan Strait constitutes an unavoidable challenge to the US' grand strategy.

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Since September last year, Japan nationalized the Diaoyutai Islands (釣台), known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan — with intimidating rhetoric.

China has dispatched ships and airplanes to the disputed waters almost daily, precipitating Japan to strengthen its armed forces and adopt an alerted posture to protect its “sovereignty.”

The escalating tensions of this territorial dispute are increasing the risk of armed conflict between Japan and China, and will likely end up with the US involved.

Although it is hard to imagine that the US will go to war with China, the world may soon see the US’ deep engagement strategy put to the test.

Tu Ho-ting is a Taiwan-based journalist and analyst.

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