John Kerry's Pacific Dream

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ZACHARY KECK, APR 25 2013

On Monday, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry delivered what the State Department had billed as an important speech at Tokyo Tech in Japan.

The core of the speech— which at times lacked focus and was short on specifics— was devoted to the Pacific Dream, a new concept which Kerry framed as a response to President Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream.

Throughout the speech, it became clear that the Pacific Dream concept sought to advance two central U.S. foreign policy goals in the Asia-Pacific: expanding the scope of the U.S. pivot beyond defense, and isolating China without singling it out.

Kerry explained the Pacific Dream as having four components: strong growth, fair growth, smart growth, and just growth. Although "strong growth" was subsequently revealed to basically mean America's security vision for the region, the use of the word *growth*— which is typically associated with economics— was emblematic of the United States' desire to downplay the military part of Washington's pivot to Asia.

The Obama administration has been trying to counter the impression of observers at home and in the region that the U.S. pivot is wholly a military strategy. This is a wise move for three reasons.

First, the defense aspect of the pivot is the most controversial in the region. Asian nations genuinely do not want a militarized Sino-U.S. rivalry, especially one in which they are pressured to take sides, and China has repeatedly played to these fears by frequently accusing the U.S. of trying to export a Cold War mentality to the Asia-Pacific, among other charges.

Secondly, America's military is actually the least in need of a rebalance to Asia than other aspects of U.S foreign policy. Although the Pentagon will be shifting a greater share of its resources to Asia through 2020, the military has remained heavily involved in Asia since at least the end of WWII. The areas of U.S. foreign policy most in need of a rebalance, then, are diplomatic, economic, and cultural, which continue to be oriented toward the Middle East and Europe.

For instance, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped the ASEAN Regional Forum, one of the region's most important conferences, in both 2005 and 2007. Although she went in 2006, she later complained bitterly of having done so, and being "nearly five thousand miles from where I should have been" in the Middle East, where the 34 Day War between Israel and Hezbollah was going on.

Despite the administration's rollout of the Asia pivot, the Middle East has continued to dominate U.S. foreign policy circles. For instance, during Chuck Hagel's Senate confirmation hearing Iran was mentioned 170 times and Israel was mentioned even more. By contrast, China was mentioned just five times, with most of those being in relation to Iran.This is particularly remarkable when one considers that Hagel was being confirmed as secretary of defense, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated that China's military spending in 2011 was more than the entire Middle East combined.[i]

Thirdly, America's security interests in the Asia-Pacific are really subordinate to economics. The United States' growing economic interests in the region necessitate an Asia that is peaceful and free from Chinese hegemony. It is these economic interests that drive the need for security, and Washington must be vigilant in maintaining this hierarchy. A failure to do so risks creating a situation in which the U.S. provides the bulk of regional security, while China reaps the economic benefits of peace.

The second aspect of Kerry's Pacific Dream was isolating China without explicitly doing so. Owing to the sensitivities of regional states, which do not want to be seen as helping to contain China, as well as Washington's own interests in maintaining a relationship with China, the U.S. has carefully devised ways to critique and isolate Beijing without naming it.

One aspect of this has been Washington's emphasis on the importance of freedom of navigation and the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas. Although America does have a genuine interest in freedom of navigation globally, framing itself as the ultimate guarantor of navigational rights in the Asia-Pacific is clearly directed at China, the only state which potentially threatens them.

The same has been true with the Obama administration's push for greater institutionalization in the Asia-Pacific. Although Washington usually favors multilateralism globally, the Obama administration's efforts to strengthen institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are clearly aimed, at least in part, at undermining Beijing. This stems from China's long-standing strategy of trying to divide Southeast Asia in order to deal with each state on a bilateral basis, where China's relative power would allow it to dominate the relationship.[ii]

Through various means the Obama administration has been pushing ASEAN member states to deal with China collectively as an organization, particularly on crucial issues like the South China Sea. Achieving this has proven difficult because of ASEAN's weak institutional framework, where one or two outlier states can prevent ASEAN from taking action as a group. Thus, by fostering dependence from one or two states like Laos and Cambodia, China has managed to prevent ASEAN from forcing Beijing to deal with it as a single entity.

The Obama administration has also cleverly sought to isolate China economically through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Although the TPP does not actually prohibit Beijing from participating, it sets free trade barriers that China cannot realistically meet.

Kerry's Pacific Dream appears to be the TPP's political counterpart. In the speech, Kerry defined the "just growth" component of the Pacific Dream as trying "to build a region whose people can enjoy the full benefits of democracy, the rule of law, universal human rights, including the freedom of expression, freedom of association, and peaceful assembly, freedom of religion, conscience and belief."

Although Kerry awkwardly avoided discussing what this meant for China, the implications are clear: the U.S. will portray itself as the champion of democracies in the region. It can afford to do this because almost all of its major allies and partners in the region are democracies themselves, while the countries that lean towards China, such as North Korea, Pakistan, Cambodia, and Russia, are non-democratic states.

There are a few exceptions to this of course, like Singapore, Vietnam, and Myanmar, which seem inclined to align closely to the U.S. but are not democratic. The U.S. will try to minimize this fact by portraying them as democratizing, and therefore needing continued support to facilitate their transitions. The Obama administration has already been doing this in some cases, most notably with Myanmar but also to a lesser extent with Vietnam, with which it recently held a human rights dialogue.

From America's perspective, democracy encapsulates the dividing lines of the Asia-Pacific better than any alternative concept, except an explicit containment strategy towards China. For this reason, Washington is likely to continue espousing this dream in the years ahead.

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[i] SIPRI estimates military expenditures in the Middle East in 2011 as $123 billion in 2011 U.S. dollars. By contrast it estimates China's military expenditures during the same time period as $143 billion (2011 U.S. dollars). SIPRI defines the Middle East as: Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

[ii] This has been true through much of China's history as it is rooted in enduring realities. Specifically since ancient times, Chinese leaders have always tried to keep its neighbors divided and, when possible, focused on containing each other instead of China. Similarly, Chinese leaders throughout history have seen the country's primary strategic threat as becoming encircled by a group of states aligned against it. This reflects the reality that China's size and demography relative to its neighbors ensure that under normal circumstances it is stronger than any one or possibly two neighboring countries, but not strong enough to overcome the unified resistance of a larger coalition of East Asian nations, particularly if they have the strong backing of a non-regional power. In this regard, Chinese leaders face the same dilemma as French and German leaders hoping to dominate Europe in the 19th and 20th Century.

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