

IISS-JIIA CONFERENCE, TOKYO, JUNE 3-4 2008

SPEAKING NOTES
FIFTH SESSION
9 – 10.30 Wed 4 June

CONFLICT IN ASIA

WHY WAR IN ASIA REMAINS THINKABLE

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May I join other speakers in thanking IISS and JIIA for organizing this wonderful conference and inviting me to take part in it, and especially to speak in this very interesting session. The structure of the session invites us - my old friend and much-respected colleague Barry Desker and I - to debate opposing views. But that would be a very un-ASEAN thing to do, so we have deftly sidestepped the trap with a little bilateral consultation in the margins of the meeting, in which we readily concluded that we both agree with each others' positions. I think war is unlikely and he thinks it is thinkable. So far peace reigns.

But while I agree that war in Asia is unlikely, it does seem to me to be 'thinkable'. Moreover I will suggest that there is a real risk that war will become *more* thinkable in Asia over coming years and decades. And by 'war' I mean not just the kinds of small wars that have sadly always remained quite common in global and regional affairs. I mean big wars: wars between major powers that can kill millions, disrupt the lives of billions and wreck the international system. I mean the kind of wars that the founders of the IISS worried about fifty years ago when this great institution was founded, and which they and their successors have done so much to study, understand and prevent.

I should explain that am going to focus my remarks here on East and especially Northeast Asia. By doing that I do not by any means intend to suggest that India's rise is not central to the long-term development of Asia's strategic future. On the contrary I think it most certainly is central. Nor do I think there are not grave problems for peace in South Asia; there clearly are, including a strong risk of major [and even nuclear] war. But nonetheless I believe that challenges to the future peace of the wider Asia-Pacific are much more likely to come from Northeast Asia than from South Asia, and that is where I will focus.

Of course the risk of big wars in Northeast Asia has never completely disappeared. The Taiwan and North Korean situations have clearly posed a threat of major conflict in Asia. But many have tended to see these flashpoints as residual risks from an earlier age – throwbacks to the Cold War. The question I want to raise is whether they are not better seen as premonitions of a darker future in which Asia becomes more systemically dangerous, and if so what we can do about it.

The question arises because of the tension between two contradictory but co-existing realities which we could see here in our conference yesterday as the sessions developed. On the one hand, we saw the reality of a region characterised by cooperation, integration and growth, in which shared interests predominate, and in which there is real hope of close regional cooperation to address a range of newer security threats such as those we were discussing for most of yesterday – energy security, environmental challenges and the proliferation of WMD to 'rogue states'. In this reality, major war is indeed unthinkable. On the other hand we saw in the last session yesterday a quite different reality - the reality of active and intensifying military and strategic competition fuelled by suspicion, distrust and even hostility, in which major war is clearly not unthinkable, for the simple reason that some of the major powers in Asia are clearly building their forces with exactly that possibility in mind..

At one level w should not be surprised that these two realities co-exist, because they are connected. Cooperation has encouraged and facilitated economic growth, which has seen major increases in power,

which in turn generates competition and anxiety. But that does still leave a big question: which of these two realities represents Asia's future? We all know which future we all *want* but that does not unfortunately make it inevitable which one we will *get*, nor make the other, darker future 'unthinkable'. How come? Jackie Fisher knew. He was the Admiral who built the Royal Navy before the First World War, and who thus knew a thing or two about the kinds of arms races we were talking about yesterday. He said – before 1914 – that all countries want peace, but they want the peace that suits them. They want a peace that maximises their security, status and power. And as his generation discovered, nations can end up going to war for a peace like that. Are we so sure we are so different today?

The fact is that each of us – each of Asia's major powers especially - have different models of 'peace' in Asian in the Asian Century. This is not surprising, but to make major war unthinkable we do need to recognise those differences and reconcile them. And that is easy to say, but hard to do.

We need to start by recognising that the existence of these different views of Asia's future is not any one country's 'fault'. It is not China's fault that its remarkable growth is changing regional power relativities and raising questions about Asia's future order. It is not America's fault that it has been the dominant power in Asia for decades and its primacy defines the current order which China's rise challenges.

Secondly, we need to raise our level of analysis. Adm. Mike McDevitt yesterday made an excellent point when he said that the military postures of the US and China re destined to compete directly because their operational objectives are directly competitive: the US wants to secure assured access to the Western Pacific, and China is dedicated to denying that access. Jim Seinberg asked whether there was any way we could step back from that competition: I would argue that the only way is to step up a level from the military and operational to the strategic and political level, because the military and operational competition is driven by incompatible political and strategic aims. That is where we need to focus.

It can help to start by thinking about the sources of the remarkable peace that has characterised East Asia in recent decades. As Rich Armitage said over lunch yesterday, it has been the best thirty to thirty-five years in Asia's long history. The foundation of that peace has been a remarkable set of relationships between the US, China and Japan that arose at the end of the Vietnam War, and which I call the Post-Vietnam Order. The heart of that order was a posture of *double assurance* provided by the US to the other two powers. The US has simultaneously assured China about its security from Japan, and Japan about its security from China. Obviously, but crucially, US primacy was the absolute core of this order.

We have all lived with this order for so long, and benefited from it so much, that it is easy to take it for granted as something inevitable. But to build the Post-Vietnam Order in Asia required real and difficult compromises from all of the key players. The US had to accept the legitimacy and permanency of China's Communist government – a huge step. China had to forgo her ambitions to build a new socialist order in Asia under her leadership and accept US primacy – also a huge step. And Japan had to put on hold indefinitely her aspiration to return to normalcy, and accept instead the self-imposed of her post-war status.

For each of the three, these sacrifices turned out to be very worthwhile. They have all done well. The US emerged from its Vietnam tragedy, when many thought the US was finished in Asia, as the clear leading power, immensely reinforced in its struggle with the Soviets and set to go on to win the Cold War. Japan was able to enjoy decades of remarkable growth, rising to become the second largest economy in the world and to win respect as a new kind of power. And China of course gained the strategic and political space to launch reforms, open its economy and begin its 'rise'. Not al of this was expected by those who built the new order, but nor was it simply accidental. The Post-Vietnam order merged through the deliberate efforts of some remarkable statesmen in each country – and I would say especially by Nixon and Kissinger.

We face questions about Asia's future peace today because the order they built is under pressure from its own success. It is being undermined by the economic growth which it has so successfully fostered. Any order like this is based on the power relativities between the parties, and as those relativities change the order must eventually change too, or it will collapse. So let me be blunt here and state a central reality which is obvious but sometimes evaded: China's rise challenges the post-Vietnam order because the US primacy on which that order is ultimately based is not military or moral, but economic, and that economic

primacy is waning, and perhaps even passing. I think Rich said yesterday that he expected US economic primacy to last only about another 15 years. I think it may be a little longer than that, but the trend is clear. The relative economic weight of the two countries has already shifted way beyond the point at which China accepted US primacy in 1972, and the prospect that China may one day equal and even overtake the US as the world's biggest economy cast a long shadow forward to today.

And let me go on to state the obvious corollary: to make war unthinkable in the new Asia which is emerging as a result of this power-shift, we need to build a new order to replace the Post-Vietnam Order. This is not just a question for the US and China themselves, but for everyone, and especially Japan. We all have huge incentives to make the new order as peaceful and stable as the old one, because we have all benefited from the old order so handsomely. But we lack a shared vision of what that new order might look like, and it is high time we started trying to build such a vision.

We can imagine four models for what that might look like. First, we might hope to move to a future in Asia like Europe's today – a kind of post-strategic order in which the use of force becomes indeed almost unthinkable. That is an appealing image, but it seems way too optimistic to be realistic.

Second, we might envisage US strategic primacy continuing even as its economic primacy wanes. That would be, to me at least, a great outcome if it could be made to work. But it seems fraught with difficulties. Americans themselves would see the foundations of such sustained primacy being the moral example of the US, but for the rest of us the reality would be that it would rely on American military power. That would be unsustainable: authority sustained by military power soon loses its moral force, and military primacy unsustained by economic primacy becomes unsupportable. The fear is that for many Americans primacy has become, not (as it was) a means to the end of peace and stability, but an end in itself. That raises the real risk that Americans will find themselves undermining stability in Asia in order to preserve their primacy.

In fact that may already be happening, with the beginnings of a slide in Asia towards the third model we can identify for Asia's future order – that of a balance of power system. In this model, Asia starts to fall into opposing camps, as two sides build coalitions against one another. We can already see the start of this process in some aspects of US and Japanese diplomacy in Asia, such as the Quadrilateral idea of an alignment between the US, Japan, India and Australia. Denials notwithstanding, this is [or was] really nothing other than an attempt to build a coalition in Asia to resist China's challenge to US primacy. A balance of power system would succeed in preventing the rise of a Chinese hegemony, but at a big cost – an erosion of cooperation and economic integration in the region, slowing economic growth, and an increased level of strategic competition and military confrontation. As Hedley Bull – one of those present at IISS's creation – once wrote, balance of power systems are not designed to prevent war, but to prevent hegemony, which they do at the cost of occasional, big wars. The risk is that this is the default opposition into which, if we are not careful, Asia will find itself slipping. And this would make war a lot more thinkable.

There is an alternative – a fourth position – which we might liken to the Concert of Power that emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century. In a concert the major powers – US, China, Japan and India – would need to share leadership. That is not easy: it requires mutual recognition and acceptance of one another's political systems, international interests and – with broad limits – military capabilities. Above all it requires all major powers to agree that peace between them is more important to all of them than anything else. By definition, a concert system is not perfect for anyone, but it is best for everyone. But for that reason it is hard to build and hard to sustain. But if the EU model is unattainable, and US primacy is unsustainable, and the balance of power is undesirable, then the Concert is our best bet for keeping war unthinkable in the Asian century.

But it is a long-shot. To see just how hard it would be to build a concert of Asia in the Asian century, it helps to look at what the US, China and Japan would each have to accept to do it. America would have to accept loss of primacy. It would have to be prepared to treat China as an equal, and that means treating it as much more than a 'responsible stakeholder'. It would need to accept not just the legitimacy of China's political system, but the legitimacy of its international interests even where these differed from America's,

even on core issues like Iran. It would need to accept clear limits to US military preponderance as China built forces which would limit American military options, and sustained a robust nuclear deterrent against the US. All this seems very onerous, but the alternative is also tough: to accept China as a strategic adversary, in a competition which the US could no doubt win, but at great cost to itself, because China is not the Soviet Union. And the concert model is not that bad for America: it remains an indispensable power in Asia, staying engaged to balance but not to dominate. This will give it huge influence, and help keep America strong by sustaining Asia's growth. And only America can do it.

China would also have to give up a lot to build a Concert of Asia. It must forego its hopes to establish a kind of Monroe Doctrine of its own in Asia as the sole and leading power there. Even tougher, it would have to accept India and Japan as equal partners in Asia's future. India may not be too hard, but Japan looks tough. The fact is that a concert of power in Asia can only be built if Japan is a full partner in it, playing the role of a normal major power, and respected as such by all the others. Just as the US would need to treat China as an equal, China would need to treat Japan as an equal. That is a big ask, but for China too the alternative is not attractive – accepting Japan as a strategic competitor.

Finally, building a concert would be tough for Japan. It would have to relinquish something of its close relationship with the US, and accept that the US and China would in turn move closer together so that the triangular relationship was more equilateral. It would have to accept and exercise responsibly the role of a major power in its own right. And it would have to spend more on defence. But for it too the alternatives are not attractive. Japan today is in a tough position. It is anxious about China's rise, and wary of the possibility of closer US-China cooperation. It fears that the US will sell out Japan's interests in pursuit of a closer relationship with China. So it seeks security in a level of US-China animosity. In the long term, however, this is untenable, because the US and China are Japan's two biggest trading partners, and a stable relationship between them is essential to Japan's future. But moving beyond the familiar patterns of recent decades will be very hard for Japan.

When we see how much each of the three major powers in Northeast Asia will need to move to build a stable order in which war remains unthinkable, it is easy to become a little pessimistic that they can do it. Unfortunately the most likely outlook is that we will move towards balance of power structure, in which war is more thinkable, economic integration goes into reverse, growth slows and cooperation on urgent issues like the environment becomes much harder. We all end up poorer and less secure. So it seems worth taking some decisive steps in the other direction. What might they be? Well here are a few preliminary thoughts.

First, we need to reinforce recent positive moves in Taiwan. We could do this if everyone, especially the US and Japan, moved their policy to one of actively welcoming and promoting the prospect of eventual, peaceful, consensual reunification with the mainland. All of those adjectives are important, of course, but adopting this kind of position would be a very positive step towards China, because it would be a strong symbolic acknowledgement of the legitimacy of China's political system, which is essential. This may sound rather Westphalian, but it is worth recalling that the treaty of Westphalia was all about placing peace ahead of 'values', which is what we need to do.

Second, the US and China should move to defuse one element of their emerging strategic competition by negotiating a bilateral arms control agreement which would protect China's minimum deterrent posture against the US but inhibit it from building a more ambitious nuclear posture. This could be both directly stabilizing and also indirectly contribute to the development of habits of mature strategic management between them.¹

Third, the US should stop objecting the Chinese military developments on the grounds that they are 'destabilising', and in return China should stop its similar complaints about BMD program in Asia. This would be a step towards recognising the legitimacy of the strategic interests and military postures of all the major powers.

None of these is easy, or course. They may be too much for the G8 to swallow. But they are the kind of ideas that the IISS was always been happy to deal with, and we need that kind of thinking as much over the next fifty years as we did over the half century.

¹ A fuller treatment of this idea can be found here: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=654>