



## Responding to China's Rising Sea Power

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*Abstract: America's next president must embrace risk to cope with rising Chinese sea power. The incoming administration should pivot to the Asia-Pacific more boldly than the Obama administration has. As it does so, Washington must accept risk to its interests and forces to uphold freedom of the sea, and it must impress upon Beijing that infringing on freedom of the sea in the South China Sea or elsewhere carries unacceptable risks for China's interests and forces. Rediscovering the art of imposing risk will let the incoming administration hold that which China treasures at risk, should China persist with its belligerence.*



“America’s Pacific Century,” as articulated on U.S. State Department.gov in 2011, accompanied by this map.

How to cope with Chinese sea power? Here is our top advice to the incoming administration. Persevere with the “pivot,” or “rebalance,” to the Pacific Theater, but execute the pivot more swiftly and steadfastly than the Obama Administration did.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, admit the obvious: the pivot *is* about China. China is mounting a challenge to the international system over which America has presided for 70 years—a system that commands the utmost value for the United States.

### **Prolonged Strategic Competition Awaits**

Let us drop the boilerplate disavowals of strategic competition with China. They make America look timid and, thus, embolden prospective foes while disheartening allies and friends that depend on U.S. support. Better to state forthrightly that the stakes warrant an open-ended investment of the new administration’s time and policy energy, not to mention lives, treasure, and military hardware. And the rebalance commands bipartisan support.<sup>2</sup>

Candid diplomatic talk backed by force will grant the U.S. and its allies their best chance to uphold the freedom of the seas—the principle on which the U.S.-led system is founded—in the Far East. It behooves the incoming administration to recognize how high the stakes are. Bear in mind that the lesser power need not defeat a stronger antagonist militarily to win in political terms, the only terms that matter. It can dishearten the foe or drive the costs of competition so high that the foe cuts its losses—retiring from the field and leaving the weak as the victor.

China can win in these terms even if it remains militarily weaker and, therefore, the United States must take seriously the threat and reinforce—and perhaps reconfigure—the U.S. Pacific Fleet and associated joint forces in East Asia. The United States must approach this dilemma with sobriety and candor to rebuild its military capabilities, therefore, leaving no doubt in Chinese minds who would win a military engagement. Prospects for deterrence will brighten as the American margin of supremacy grows. Speak softly and flourish the big stick!

The next administration must acknowledge that the stakes are high and that, based on both nations’ respective interest, there is little room for compromise. What part of freedom of the seas would Washington barter away for the sake of amity with China? What part of national sovereignty and dignity would Beijing relinquish for the sake of regional concord? One contender will yield on a stance that verges on nonnegotiable or a prolonged stalemate will ensue.

The masters of strategy can help U.S. officials think through such matters and, perhaps, catch sight of Asia’s future. Prussian soldier Carl von Clausewitz prescribes a workmanlike formula for cost-benefit analysis. Clausewitz writes in his

<sup>1</sup> For pivot, see *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 10, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>, and rebalance, [www.archivedefense.gov](http://www.archivedefense.gov).

<sup>2</sup> See Breaking Dense, May 2015, <http://breakingdefense.com/2015/05/sasc-moves-to-put-meat-on-pacific-pivots-bones-up-to-100m-annually-for-partners/>.

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