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## STRATEGIC TRADITIONS FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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*Stephen Peter Rosen*

**W**hat are strategic traditions? Why should we be concerned with them when we think about American strategic behavior in the Asia-Pacific region? Why should we not concentrate on the material factors, the “hard” data that will determine what nations will do?

Traditions are usually thought of as past patterns of behavior that affect, in some way, current and future behavior. Traditions may be familiar and comfortable, and for a social and political conservative, they are to be observed because they embody the collective experience and wisdom of a society. But in the field of military studies, tradition has both positive and negative implications. Tradition may reflect the habits of the last war, vividly imprinted on the minds of the men who waged it—valuable lessons learned, lessons paid for with blood. Tradition may also be habits of the last war that make it difficult to see and react to change.

A strategic tradition can also be thought of as a variation of “strategic culture,” the cognitive lens through which we view the world, the lens that focuses our attention on the policy options that are worth taking seriously, and away from the frivolous options, the “nonstarters.” Strategic culture also tells us what we should expect in terms of the reactions of other players, and what the most important forms of interaction are. Because it is often difficult to get good information on these issues in a timely way, strategic culture helps us make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Academics may recommend that under conditions of uncertainty one ought to wait until the necessary information has been collected, but policy makers often do not have that luxury, and at such times strategic culture or tradition is an invaluable decision aid.

Why do people have the strategic cultures or traditions that they do? Their cultures emerge from the intense emotional experiences through which they have passed, experiences that created vivid and enduring memories that readily spring to mind. Munich, Pearl Harbor, the Cuban missile crisis, and the war in Vietnam were such experiences. When future, or even present, conditions are difficult to discern, people make decisions based on what they see, and what they see is influenced by their memories of what has happened in the past. Sometimes these are personal memories; sometimes they are organizational or national memories. For example, when confronted with Ho Chi Minh, about whose ulti-

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mate intentions there was some doubt, Americans tended to observe that he was an ideological dictator.

He was, but memory then added statements about what ideological dictators were likely to do and what this nation needed to do in anticipation: “We know what ideological dictators are like, because we faced them in the past, and we know that we need to stop them with military power.” That was not objective reality, but it was the way Americans decided what reality meant in terms of what they had to do. These sets of interpreted memories can be thought of as part of our culture, our tradition.

When a nation is confronted with complex, ambiguous situations that are difficult to understand, its cultural perspective may affect how it reacts. Peter Schwartz is an expert in helping business executives realize, by means of discussions and interviews, what their assumptions are about how the world works and what factors drive developments in the marketplace. It is important for executives to understand how they look at the world, because they may not fully realize what is driving their decisions and what factors they may be paying too little attention to.

Iain Johnston analyzes the same kind of issues with regard to the Chinese national security elite, not by means of direct discussions and interviews but by reading the texts that members of the elite study and discuss. This is a useful technique—though not without problems, since what people read and study does not always reflect the ideas inside their heads. It is a particularly problematic technique when the books that people read say contradictory things or include passages that can be interpreted in contradictory ways. The technique works better for people who are told explicitly how they should read the relevant texts and are punished if they deviate from the correct interpretation. The cadres of the communist parties of the world constitute such groups, as do, to a lesser extent, the officer corps of military organizations that have officially approved

doctrines and training materials. Members of hierarchical, disciplined organizations are especially likely to have meaningful, shared strategic traditions.

That said, what can we say about the American perspective on Asia and the Pacific? There are all kinds of Americans; they have had different experiences and have read different books. It is next to impossible to point to a particular American tradition that says anything useful or specific about the shared mental perspectives of nearly three hundred million rather individualistic people. Let us, instead, talk about four smaller groups of people, about whom we may be able to say something a bit more specific, because they share experiences and belong to disciplined organizations. Then we will suggest how and why objective reality may cause problems for people who have these mental images of Asia and the Pacific.

What are the strategic traditions and perspectives of the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, Army, and Air Force with regard to this region? What have these services experienced there over the last fifty years? How might those experiences have created memories that affect their outlooks? It may be objected that services do not have genuinely national strategic perspectives, that they concern themselves with military operations, not the general relationship of political goals to military means. Yet services do have strategic perspectives that relate military means to military goals, and their views on what a future war would be like and how it would be fought often have a powerful impact on higher-level policy. For these reasons, service perspectives matter.

When speaking of the Pacific, it is natural to begin with the U.S. Navy. Let us simplify matters: what would senior naval officers say if asked how they thought about the Pacific? The response of a representative officer might be as follows:

*The Pacific belongs to us. The most important experiences my organization has lived through over the last fifty years demonstrated over and over again that we can dominate the Pacific and so enable the United States to project power and influence to the periphery of the Asian landmass. After the defeat of Japan and withdrawal of the British, we were the only major naval power left in the region. As the Japanese navy revived, it did so under our tutelage, in cooperation with us, and in ways that did not challenge us. The United States was able to fight a major war in Korea utilizing our unchallenged command of the sea for aircraft carrier operations, amphibious landings, and logistical support of ground and air forces in Korea and Japan. We were able to use carrier aviation in the Vietnam War unopposed by naval forces or significant land-based antiship weapons systems. We had a problem with air-to-air combat in Vietnam, but specialized training, the Top Gun program, fixed that.*

*The Soviets were a problem, but we dominated the strategic antisubmarine-warfare world, and they never really learned how to do blue-water naval operations: the Soviets had severe problems up to the end of the Cold War with at-sea replenishment, for example. They never mastered even the rudiments of carrier aviation. The Backfire bombers could have been a problem, particularly if they had used nuclear antiship weapons, but we never really believed, in our heart of hearts, that the Soviets would go nuclear at sea early in a war. If we had believed that, we would have had to acknowledge that we had a big problem for which we had no solution.*

*The Chinese navy is not in the same league with the Soviets, let alone us. The one or two advanced destroyers and antiship missile systems they have do not fundamentally change that picture. When we sent two carrier battle groups to the waters near Taiwan in 1996, we showed everybody that we still rule the Pacific and can influence events on the Asian periphery.*

*Today and for the future, we can operate in the Pacific by means of a network of bases and ports on foreign soil. This way of conducting operations began with the island-hopping campaign across the Central Pacific in 1943–45 against Japan. It*

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*continued through the Cold War with bases in Japan itself, Okinawa, the Philippines, and elsewhere. We have had some problems with the Philippines*

*and in Okinawa, but we can manage them. In any case, other people, like the Singaporeans or the Indians, would open their doors to us if and when a serious Chinese naval force emerged.*

What about the Marine Corps? A senior officer from that service might give this kind of response:

*We have fought many times in the Pacific-Asia theater, and it has been a deadly place for us. From the Boxer Rebellion to Tarawa and Iwo Jima, from the Chosin reservoir to Khe Sanh and Hue, a lot of Marines have died there. As amphibious forces, as straight-leg infantry, as urban warriors, we have taken very heavy casualties in Asia. We do not take this part of the world lightly, and we do not assume that we would be able to execute our missions there easily, even with all the high-tech weapons in the world—and which we, as Marines, get only the leftovers. We think very hard about what to do there, militarily, and we are not sure what the answer is. Why else would you think that we are engaged in the most serious set of military experiments of any of the services to explore the future?*

An Army officer might reply to our question in this way:

*We cannot trust American politicians when they talk about war in Asia. They keep saying that the Army will not fight ground wars in Asia. But if you look back, after World War II we never fought in Europe; all we did was fight ground wars in Asia. First we excluded Korea from our defense perimeter in 1950, then Lyndon Johnson said he would not send American boys to Vietnam to fight battles that Asian boys should fight, and look what happened. Ground wars in Asia are like other dirty, nasty things: they happen.*

*Asia is a big headache for the Army. When we fight in Asia, we compromise and degrade our core skills in the conduct of high-intensity, combined-arms maneuver warfare. Sure, we used a lot of helicopters in Vietnam, but that was still nothing like going up against the Soviets. What we would like is a big, friendly Asian land power on our side so we do not have to send hundreds of thousands of our soldiers into battle. General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell had it right, in the Second World War: train the Nationalist Chinese and let them fight the Japanese. We did it right in Korea by building up the South Korean army so we could go home. If Creighton Abrams had been in charge earlier in Vietnam, Vietnamization would have started earlier, and we would all have been better off.*

And the Air Force:

*We have air supremacy in Asia, and air supremacy is good. Strategic bombardment works, it can win wars, and it has. Look at Japan in 1945: eighty Japanese cities on the target list, eighty Japanese cities destroyed, and the war was over with no need to invade Japan. Nukes were nice but not essential. In Korea, airpower was the war winner. After the Army and Marine Corps had fixed the Chinese, we could plaster them and their supply lines, human waves or not.*

*The problem in Vietnam was that bastard Robert McNamara. When he became secretary of defense, he crippled us with an incremental, politically micromanaged air campaign. When Richard Nixon authorized LINEBACKER II, we showed what we could do with a real air campaign. We got the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table with the Christmas bombing of 1972. It was the Strategic Air Command that deserved the Nobel Peace Prize, not Henry Kissinger.*

*Like the Navy, we can operate in this region by means of a network of bases on foreign soil. Air-to-air refueling means we can use fighters with ranges that work very nicely in the European theater as bombers in Asia. That is a good thing, because it means that fighters can remain the dominant platforms in our service.*

Putting words into the mouths of service officers is presumptuous. Drawing out implications from the remarks we put into their mouths is even more

presumptuous. Nevertheless, there seem to be common elements implicit in what the services had to say.

- Nuclear weapons have not mattered very much in practice in the Asia-Pacific region. We can still bomb and fight in Asia the way we would in the “pre-nuke” environment, except for strategic sanctuaries in China and the Soviet Union or Russia, since our wartime enemies have been small, nonnuclear powers.
- Offensive forces, not defensive systems, have been dominant in this region.
- We have had, and will have, allies who give us bases and help when we need them.
- Finally, getting to Asia from the United States is not a problem for warfighters, however large a problem it is for the logisticians. We do not have to worry about military opposition as we move our supplies across the Pacific.

The exercise becomes interesting at this point. Will future conditions in the region be consistent with what our traditions tell us we can expect? There is

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good reason to think not. First and foremost, the assumption of the irrelevance of nuclear weapons for warfighting will clearly

be called into question. All of the potentially hostile nations with whom we may have military problems are nuclear powers or nearly so: China, North Korea, Pakistan, India, Russia, a unified Korea in the future, maybe Taiwan. How would we use American military power against targets in the homelands of nuclear powers? Would we attack the naval vessels of nuclear powers in wars about issues less weighty than saving the world from military domination? Nuclear weapons will matter a great deal; they create large areas that are off limits to American offensive military power.

American ports and air bases on foreign soil will be increasingly vulnerable to precision, nonnuclear attack. How will host nations that do not have nuclear weapons with which to deter attacks against them feel about this? How will we operate in the region if theater ballistic missile defense turns out not to be the answer to our prayers? Defensive systems to protect and reassure our allies may become the dominating factor, for American political purposes.

The availability of American allies is by no means assured. If there is a military crisis involving China, Taiwan, and the United States, and if Japan does not help, many Americans will ask why we are doing so much to help Japan. Trends are already visible in Japanese politics that advocate security policies that are less

closely tied to the United States. There could be significant anti-American sentiments in a unified Korea, since there would be no North Korean threat to justify our presence. It will be many decades before India offers us bases, if it ever does.

It is hard to see how we will use significant amounts of conventional ground forces in Asia. This has been said before. In the past, however, we went to war to deal with what American political leaders perceived to be military aggression across international boundaries. We would fight to help Taiwan for that reason, but that would not involve ground forces. We really do not want to go to war with China on the mainland of Asia. North Korea will not last forever. For what will we use ground forces in this theater?

Over time, China will probably be able to make it harder for the United States to intervene militarily in political crises near China. The question will not be whether Chinese military forces are better or worse than ours but whether they could increase the risks of American operations near them in diplomatic crises. Even getting to Asia will not be as simple as it used to be, because the Chinese will have information warfare techniques that can slow us down; they could “hack” into civilian air traffic control networks, for example, as James Mulvenon of the RAND Corporation has pointed out. Other forms of attack on our trans-Pacific logistics train are not too difficult to imagine, including the use of biological agents.

What, then, is the point? We have drawn an overly simple picture for the purpose of suggesting that the experiences of the American military over the last fifty years have, in different ways, given the services collectively a perspective on this theater that may make it difficult for them to perceive the emergence of a probable future. If so, there may be subtle lags in this nation’s adjustment to the future. Of course, things could work out differently. China could become completely democratic and peaceful, or it could fall apart. Asia could become like Europe—rich, democratic, and peaceful. It may be that we suffer from the habits of thought acquired during the Cold War: we have been thinking here about this region as a theater of war, but perhaps it will not be a theater of war at all, actual or potential, for decades. If that is the case, however, the United States will have an even larger process of adjustment to manage. But if interstate war remains possible in this region, the American military’s strategic traditions may not be good guides to action.

