This month, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced that by 2020, 60 percent of the U.S. Navy will be deployed in the Pacific. Last November, in Australia, President Obama announced the establishment of a U.S. military base in that country, and threw down an ideological gauntlet to China with his statement that the United States will "continue to speak candidly to Beijing about the importance of upholding international norms and respecting the universal human rights of the Chinese people."
The dangers inherent in present developments in American, Chinese and regional policies are set out in "The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power," an important forthcoming book by the Australian international affairs expert Hugh White. This review by Prof Anatol Lieven first appeared in the Herald Tribune

As he writes, "Washington and Beijing are already sliding toward rivalry by default." To escape this, White makes a strong argument for a "concert of powers" in Asia, as the best — and perhaps only — way that this looming confrontation can be avoided. The economic basis of such a U.S.-China agreement is indeed already in place.
The danger of conflict does not stem from a Chinese desire for global leadership. Outside East Asia, Beijing is sticking to a very cautious policy, centered on commercial advantage without military components, in part because Chinese leaders realize that it would take decades and colossal naval expenditure to allow them to mount a global challenge to the United States, and that even then they would almost certainly fail.

In East Asia, things are very different. For most of its history, China has dominated the region. When it becomes the largest economy on earth, it will certainly seek to do so. While China cannot build up naval forces to challenge the United States in distant oceans, it would be very surprising if in future it will not be able to generate missile and air forces sufficient to deny the U.S. Navy access to the seas around China. Moreover, China is engaged in territorial disputes with other states in the region over island groups — disputes in which Chinese popular nationalist sentiments have become heavily engaged.

With communism dead, the Chinese administration has relied very heavily — and successfully — on nationalism as an ideological support for its rule. The problem is that if clashes erupt over these islands, Beijing may find itself in a position where it cannot compromise without severe damage to its domestic legitimacy — very much the position of the European great powers in 1914.

In these disputes, Chinese nationalism collides with other nationalisms — particularly that of Vietnam, which embodies strong historical resentments. The hostility to China of Vietnam and most of the other regional states is at once America's greatest asset and greatest danger. It means that most of China's neighbors want the United States to remain militarily present in the region. As White argues, even if the United States were to withdraw, it is highly unlikely that these countries would submit meekly to Chinese hegemony.

But if the United States were to commit itself to a military alliance with these countries against China, Washington would risk embroiling America in their territorial disputes. In the event of a military clash between Vietnam and China, Washington would be faced with the choice of either holding aloof and seeing its credibility as an ally destroyed, or fighting China.

Neither the United States nor China would "win" the resulting war outright, but they would certainly inflict catastrophic damage on each other and on the world economy. If the conflict escalated into a nuclear exchange, modern civilization would be wrecked. Even a prolonged period of military and strategic rivalry with an economically mighty China will gravely weaken America's global position. Indeed, U.S. overstretch is already apparent — for example in Washington's neglect of the crumbling states of Central America.

To avoid this, White's suggested East Asian order would establish red lines that the United States and China would both agree not to cross — most notably a guarantee not to use force without the other's permission, or in clear self-defence. Most sensitively of all, while China would have to renounce the use of force against Taiwan, Washington would most probably have to publicly commit itself to the reunification of Taiwan with China.

Equally important, China would have to acknowledge the legitimacy of the U.S. presence in East Asia, since this is desired by other East Asian states, and the United States would have to acknowledge the legitimacy of China's existing political order, since it has brought economic breakthrough and greatly enhanced real freedoms to the people of China. Under such a concert, U.S. statements like those of President Obama in support of China's democratization would have to be jettisoned.

As White argues, such a concert of power between the United States, China and regional states would be so difficult to arrange that "it would hardly be worth considering if the alternatives were not so bad." But as his book brings out with chilling force, the alternatives may well be catastrophic.

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