Toward Restraint in U.S. Policy toward China  
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There is much that both China and the United States can do to ease the cycle of deteriorating security relations in East Asia. The author has written much on China’s contribution to the deteriorated U.S.-China relations. This brief comment focuses on how the United States can improve its China policy.

While bolstering its alliances and strategic partnerships in maritime East Asia and strengthening the U.S. naval presence in maritime East Asia, thus maintaining the regional balance of power and sustain US security, the United States should refrain from policies that seek to establish US resolve to resist challenges to the regional order but that do not advance U.S. security and only aggravate U.S.-China conflict.

In South Korea, the United States should not seek a larger US military presence in South Korea that does not contribute to South Korean security, coercion against North Korean nuclear proliferation, deterrence of North Korean use of force, or U.S. security. US effort to deploy the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea is the most recent example of this policy toward South Korea. THAAD is an ineffective response to North Korean nuclear weapons, but contributes to Chinese perception of US containment of China in Northeast Asia and reduced Chinese cooperation vis-à-vis North Korea.

The U.S. should restrain its defense cooperation with Vietnam. Vietnamese vulnerability to the Chinese ground forces across the Sino-Vietnamese border means that Hanoi is deterred from offering the United States meaningful defense cooperation. Hence, recent U.S. initiatives that promote enhanced U.S.-Vietnam naval cooperation merely elicit Chinese perceptions of US containment of China in Southeast Asia and greater Chinese hostility toward the United States, without advancing US security.

The United States should restrain Japanese naval cooperation with US security partners in the South China Sea. Such Japanese activism cannot contribute to the security of the United States or of US allies. The Japanese Navy is already strained in managing Chinese and Russian pressure in the East China Sea, so that Japanese naval presence in the South China Sea is purely symbolic. Yet such symbolism stimulates Chinese nationalism and promotes greater Chinese belligerence toward Japan and greater Chinese military pressure on Japan in the East China Sea.

The U.S. should cease its efforts to use international law to isolate China and coerce Chinese compromises on the maritime disputes in the South China Sea. US and Philippine efforts to use the Law of the Sea to isolate China hardened Chinese policy and contributed to greater regional tension, without contributing to conflict resolution. In the aftermath of the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, both the Philippines and Vietnam have accommodated Chinese interest in bilateral discussions and in reduced salience of the dispute in their relations with China. The United States should encourage all parties to negotiate a mutually beneficial fishing agreement that will diminish the impact of fishing on regional tension and contribute to the replenishment of fishing stocks.