

The Paradox of Blinking

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SINGAPORE – The world has recently witnessed two major diplomatic blinks. Japan, facing mounting pressure from China, unconditionally released a Chinese trawler captain whose ship had rammed a Japanese naval patrol boat. And US President Barack Obama did nothing when Israel refused to extend its freeze on new building construction in the West Bank, causing Israeli West Bank settlers to rejoice.

In the short run, it is clear who lost. In the long run, however, the outcome of backing down may not be so clear. China, in particular, should weigh carefully the long-term political price of celebrating its supposed victory over Japan.

According to Newton's third law of motion, "for every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction." Geopolitics has a similar law: whenever the world sees a new emerging power, the world's greatest existing power tries, directly or indirectly, to block its rise. Today, the world's greatest power is the US, and the greatest emerging power is China. So far, surprisingly, the US has not forged a strategy to thwart China's rise.



The reasons for this geopolitical aberration are complex. But a key factor is that, until recently, China's leaders have abided by the wise counsel of Deng Xiaoping: *taoguang yanghui* (conceal [our] capabilities and avoid the limelight), and *shanyu shouzhuo* (be good at keeping a low profile). China's decision to browbeat the Japanese into submission over the fishing trawler, suggests that China may be throwing Deng's geopolitical caution out the window.

More recklessly, after securing the release of the trawler, China demanded an apology from Japan. A major rule in international relations is never to make a demand that cannot be met. Having already been humiliated by China, such an apology would be politically suicidal for the Japanese government.

In fact, China should hope that no such apology is forthcoming. In the past few decades, Japan has become a sleeping tiger. Having outperformed the rest of Asia for more than a century, the Japanese have decided to slow down. Japan has lost its drive to remain one of the world's greatest powers, and it may never regain it.

But, given Japan's history, one would be foolish to underestimate the country. While the world frets about North Korean and Iranian nuclear weapons, it is useful to remind ourselves that Japan, should it choose, could become a nuclear power in a matter of weeks. It has all the ingredients, though painful memories of World War II and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have so far kept its leaders well away from developing a nuclear stockpile.

Moreover, if Japan needs allies to balance the rise of China, it could easily turn not only to the US, but also to Russia and India. In short, the geopolitical cards could turn out in Japan's favor if China overplays its hand.

Similarly, geopolitics does not work in Israel's favor on the West Bank issue. When US global dominance was unquestioned, as in the 1990's, it made sense for Israel to secure its long-term future by maintaining a stranglehold over the US Congress. But American power has peaked. At its high water mark, the US, with 5% of the world's population, accounted for close to 30% of global GDP. Given this spectacular economic performance, Americans could spend more on defense than the rest of the world combined. All this, quite naturally, led to geopolitical hubris, in Washington and in Tel Aviv.

While US power will inevitably decline in relative terms, that of the 1.3 billion people who live in the Islamic world – the vast majority of them in Asia – will inevitably increase. The rising economic tide that is lifting China and India will lift them as well. Asian Muslims have the same mentality as the Chinese and Indians. What China and India are doing today, Asia's Muslim societies will do tomorrow. As a result, the combined GDP of the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference nations – now only about 13% of global output – will easily double in the coming decades.

So time is no longer on Israel's side. The security fostered by America's unchallenged global power has been shown to be an illusion. Soon America will have to make major geopolitical adjustments, especially if its economy underperforms in the coming decade or two. Like the former Soviet Union, the US will have to carry out *perestroika* and cut defense spending.

As a friend of Israel, I am surprised that more of us are not calling on the country's leaders to seize the brief geopolitical opportunity of a viable two-state solution, while the offer remains on the table. Israel's continued humiliation of the Palestinians, now telecast live into hundreds of millions of Muslim homes, is generating unnecessary reservoirs of hate. The scenes of exultant West Bank settlers only aggravate this.

Israel's recent falling out with its best friend in the Islamic world, Turkey, should have provided its leaders a premonition of the new world that is coming. The fallout with Turkey was a minor tremor. With larger geopolitical earthquakes coming, the time for Israel to act is now.

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