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United States in Need of a Cohesive China Strategy, Experts Agree

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Four top China analysts testifying this month before a key US congressional subcommittee (<http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2013/12/u-s-asia-pacific-strategic-considerations-related-to-p-l-a-naval-forces-modernization/>) were clear in their response to a straightforward question on whether Washington has a strategy for dealing with China's rise. No, each said in turn, there is no strategy.

The four experts are Seth Cropsey of the Hudson Institute, Andrew Erickson of the US Naval War College, Ronald O'Rourke of the Congressional Research Service and Jim Thomas of the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. They presented their views before the subcommittee convened to consider strategic issues tied to China's modernisation of its naval forces.

Washington's broad strategic aim, since the presidency of George H. W. Bush, centres on persuading China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. Where this stumbles is in Beijing's notion that some of the attendant "norms" were established without its input, while others may be interpreted to its perceived disadvantage.

"Ultimately," Thomas argued in his testimony, "we need a grand strategy that thinks about the problem from an inter-agency perspective using all instruments of national power."

There is a military subset to this diplomatic challenge, prompted partly by concerns that Beijing may be threatening stability in seeking regional hegemony. This is particularly evident in a drive to establish greater control over the maritime domain encompassed by its near seas, and most recently over the skies above it.

There is no sense in mainstream American thinking that China is an inevitable enemy, though the Pentagon will certainly have prepared contingency war plans cloaked from the public domain. O'Rourke pointed out that this alone was not enough.

"You [in the House Armed Services Committee] have the option of examining classified war plans that we have for that part of the world, and you can decide whether those war plans reflect a strategy for conducting an upper-level war," he said. "But it's not just a matter of war at the high level. It's a matter of what's happening for the days we're not at war, in situations short of war that we're currently in for the East China Sea and South China Sea. And it's not clear to me that we have a strategy for that."

Making much the same point at the operational level, Thomas advised: "We should think about presenting China with a multiplicity of problems that it would have to contemplate before it tried to undertake any form of coercion or aggression."