

China's Rise and the US Leadership in Asia

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Chinese leaders have developed an increasingly moderate and flexible approach to China's Asian neighbours over the past decade, resulting in remarkable expansion of China's influence in the region backed by the dynamic Chinese economy and strengthened Chinese military power. Features of the Chinese efforts have included very active schedules of senior Chinese leaders interacting with Asian counterparts from small as well as large countries; attentive diplomacy by well trained and effective foreign, economic and military officers from China who seek to develop common ground with Asian neighbours while putting aside differences; an increasingly wide array of Chinese economic, political, security and cultural initiatives designed to foster closer bilateral and multilateral arrangements between China and its neighbours; and demonstrated Chinese flexibility on some territorial issues (eg Spratly Islands) that in the past prompted rigid and assertive postures from China.¹

The results have been more or less favourable for expanding Chinese influence throughout China's periphery, with the exceptions of Taiwan, and arguably, Japan. The greatest gains have come in South Korea and several countries in South East Asia.² The dynamic growth of the Chinese economy has attracted or compelled business people in these areas to seek closer relations with China, while Chinese attentive diplomacy and willingness to accommodate the concerns of South Korean and some South East Asian nations has won high marks from officials in those countries.

China relied on Russia for political support against the United States during the 1990s, as well as for the main source of modern weapons imports to China. Sino-Russian military cooperation has continued smoothly and trade relations have developed from a

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relatively low base. However, President Vladimir Putin by early 2001 saw Russian interests better served by constructive relations with the United States and de-emphasised anti-US themes.³

In South Asia, China and India pursued a slow process of reconciliation while China sustained active support for India's strategic opponent, Pakistan. The attractiveness and the competitiveness of the Chinese economy drew Indian business interest, and trade grew from relatively low levels.⁴

In Central Asia, the Chinese-backed Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) appeared at odds with the US and western influence in Central Asia, but it had to adjust to the US military power and deployments as a result of the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001-2002.⁵

China's approach to Taiwan mixed positive and negative incentives, but failed to halt the Taiwan leadership's increasingly assertive stance as a government independent of China, setting the stage for increased danger of conflict in the Taiwan Strait.⁶ Chinese and Japanese officials sought greater economic and regional cooperation but failed to bridge differences over historical issues, territorial claims, strategic concerns and other problems that resonated deeply in the domestic politics of both China and Japan.⁷

Still preoccupied with difficult economic and political issues at home, Chinese leaders seek a stable environment in Asia and focus on domestic Chinese concerns. Fearful that Asian neighbours worry about China's rising power, Chinese diplomacy seeks to offset the China "threat." The dynamic economies of Asia are a focal point of Chinese interest in seeking advantageous economic interchange. Chinese efforts to isolate Taiwan also focus on Asia.

It is unclear what China's objective to be a more influential regional power means for the US leadership in Asia. Some specialists conclude that China seeks to expand its influence, and weaken the US position in Asia.⁸ Others note Chinese efforts to seek cooperative relationships and partnership with the Americans in dealing with Asian affairs.⁹

China's "Peaceful Rise"— Implications for the US

The latest Chinese policy framework for Asia — emphasising China's "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" in Asia — seems to support the latter view.¹⁰ Officials interviewed in China noted that the main international uncertainty China faced involved the United States. They recognised that rising powers of the past, like imperial Germany and imperial Japan, rose to power challenging the prevailing international order. Other powers aligned against and destroyed them.

The United States is seen by Chinese officials as the dominant power in Asian and world affairs, and the main potential international danger to confront and complicate China's development and rising power and influence in Asian and world affairs. The US preoccupation in the Iraq quagmire has not fundamentally altered Chinese views of the US power as likely to remain predominant for many years to come. Under these circumstances, Chinese officials and specialists say they are determined that the United States not see China's rise as a challenge to the United States. To reduce the likelihood of this outcome, they have endeavoured to solidify trends evident since mid 2001 whereby Chinese commentary has curbed past attacks on a wide range of the US domestic and foreign policies and practices. In general, Chinese officials have endeavoured to focus criticism of the United States policies and behaviour to areas that relate to Taiwan. In addition, Chinese officials assert that they accept the US leadership in Asian and world affairs.

Chinese officials and specialists say that China's recent moderate approach is strategic, but also depends on circumstances, notably a constructive US response to the moderate Chinese approach. US-China differences over Taiwan represent an immediate challenge. Chinese officials want the United States to cut back military support for Taiwan. Chinese moderation toward Japan is much less than that shown toward the United States, India, or others that were attacked by Chinese officials and commentary in the past. The fundamental problem is said to be Chinese domestic politics, as well as Japanese domestic politics, which make it very difficult for China and Japan to moderate differences over history, territorial issues, and other disputes.

Chinese officials and specialists also recognise that the United States may not fully embrace and reciprocate China's moderate approach. Though China is no longer the prime target of the US foreign policy debate as it was prior to 11 September 2001, there remain wide ranging US differences with Chinese policies. American security planners are unlikely to fully embrace China's avowed peaceful intent until China reduces its strong military modernisation efforts targeted at Taiwan and the US forces that might intervene in a Taiwan contingency.¹¹

Challenges to the US Leadership in Asia

Chinese officials and specialists recognise that China's peaceful rise has benefits for China even if the US disappoints Chinese expectations. In particular, the Chinese approach to Asia has greatly expanded positive Chinese influence throughout China's periphery, particularly in South Korea and among some South East Asian countries, but also including among others Australia and India to some degree. Chinese specialists recognise that recent Chinese efforts have created a buffer around China that would make it difficult for the United States to gain the cooperation of Asian countries should the United States try to pressure or contain China. In addition, they advise, the expanding array of Chinese backed multilateral efforts and arrangements in Asia also have the effect of impeding possible future US attempts to pressure China, acting as a sort of "Gulliver strategy" tying a possible assertive US policy against China in a maze of multilateral restrictions and constraints.¹²

Thus, rising Chinese influence in Asia is seen to work in some ways against American influence and adds to difficulties the United States already faces in the region. The US preoccupations with protracted military and political difficulties in Iraq and South West Asia, and other US concerns regarding homeland security, and instability or uncertain cooperation in such frontline states in the war on terrorism as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Indonesia weaken overall US leadership in Asia. The US war and occupation of Iraq also caused Asian elite and public opinion to join worldwide complaints against these and other perceived US unilateral actions and dominance in international affairs.¹³ Meanwhile, salient issues

in the 2004 US Presidential election campaign included the Bush administration's approach to the war and occupation in Iraq, homeland security, and the US relations with allies and the United Nations.¹⁴

In this context, issues in other parts of Asia tended to receive lower US priority, amid an overall reactive and weakened US posture in the region. In 2002, North Korea broke declared non-proliferation commitments and reactivated nuclear facilities frozen under the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework accord. Deep divisions within the US government over how to deal with North Korea, and strong differences between Washington and Seoul over policy toward North Korea and broader alliance relations hampered an effective US response.¹⁵ China eventually agreed to play an intermediary role that was welcomed by the United States; it organised three party talks (US, North Korea, China) in 2003, that were followed by six party talks in 2003 and 2004 (adding Japan, South Korea, and Russia). Little progress ensued, although the Korean situation remained outwardly calm and all parties refrained from serious provocations. A similarly reactive US stance was seen when President Bush on 9 December 2003 rebuked efforts by the Taiwan government to take unilateral steps to alter the status quo in Taiwan-China relations.¹⁶

Challenges in Perspective—the US Strengths in Asia

The impact of China's rising influence and other recent challenges to the United States in Asia has had the effect of weakening and diverting the US leadership in the region. Nevertheless, such actual or potential challenges are balanced to a considerable degree by many continuing strengths and favourable trends in Asia for the US policy and interests. Overall, barring major catastrophe such as a nuclear terrorist attack on the United States or collapse of the US allies in the Middle East or South Asia, the situation shows a continued positive outlook for the US leadership in promoting stability, development, and the US values in the Asian region.

At a time of the US preoccupation with Iraq and other priorities, the Bush administration has adjusted in generally pragmatic ways

to unexpected Asian challenges, notably in the Korean peninsula — an area of much more salient concern than Iraq to many Asian governments. The Bush administration in practice sought to deal with the North Korean crisis and other issues in Asia through broad international consultation and engagement.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Bush administration's approach to Taiwan's recent assertiveness has broad support in Asia as a sensible approach designed to stabilise a difficult situation.¹⁸

Several key strengths in US-Asian relations sustain the US regional leadership.¹⁹ Government leaders on both sides of the Pacific support the the US security commitment and military presence in Asia.²⁰ A realignment of the US bases and forces abroad,²¹ did not appear to change the prevailing situation where possible enemies in Asia would remain reluctant to challenge the world's dominant power, with a leadership seemingly prepared to use that power against its enemies.²²

Under the Bush administration, the United States maintains open markets despite occasional aberrations. Though China is a new engine of regional growth, the US economic prospects remain much more important for Asian development. The United States in recent years has absorbed an increasing percentage (about 40 per cent, according to the US government figures) of the exports from China, which is emerging as the export-manufacturing base for investors from a wide range of advanced Asian economies.²³

Despite strong rhetorical emphasis, Bush administration policy has been pragmatic in promoting human rights, democracy and political values in Asia, an adjustment generally welcomed in Asia.²⁴ The major regional powers, including Japan and such rising powers as China and India, continued to be domestically preoccupied and are likely to remain so for some time to come.²⁵ Focused on internal issues, they seek support from the United States and other powers and do not seek difficulties in their foreign relations. Japan, China, India, and other Asian states are actively manoeuvring and hedging but the leading Asian powers reflect deep divisions and competition in Asian and world affairs. Their mutual suspicions and competing interests indicate that any meaningful cooperation among them seriously detrimental to the US interests remains unlikely.²⁶

Another recent strength in the US policy toward Asia has to do with the Bush administration's improved relations with all the great powers in Asia. This strengthens the US leadership in the region, and reinforces the US government's ability to deal with crises and regional difficulties. The United States having good relations with Japan and China at the same time is very rare. The United States being the dominant outside power in South Asia and having good relations with both India and Pakistan is unprecedented, as is the current US maintenance of good relations with both Beijing and Taipei.

Conclusion

On balance, the advantages of China's moderate approach toward the United States set forth in China's strategy of "peaceful rise" in Asia seem substantial for the US interests. China's moderation means little criticism from China over the US policy in Iraq, allows the Bush administration to highlight relations with China as a significant positive accomplishment, and sets a positive atmosphere for the US-China cooperation on North Korea and the war on terrorism. Any loss of the US ability to revert to a containment policy of pressure against China seems small in comparison. In the past, Asian countries were unlikely to side with the United States against China out of concern that China might react aggressively; now the Asian governments are loathe to do so for fear of jeopardising positive benefits they receive from China. In either case, the net effect is that it has long been true that a US containment policy against China would not win much support in Asia.

Since Asian countries have long been reluctant to choose between the United States and China, it would be foolish for the US policy to react to China's rise by trying to compete directly with China for influence in the region. A more effective approach would be to build on the US role as Asia's leading power and the region's economic and security partner of choice. More activism and greater sensitivity to the concerns of Asian states going through difficult transitions (South Korea is a good example) also would go far toward improving the US influence in this important part of the world.

Given all the difficulties facing the US policy makers at home and abroad, it appears likely that the US policy will remain somewhat reactive and unable to come up with as comprehensive and attractive approach to the region as that pursued by China. China's gains should not be exaggerated, however, as they appear even less than those achieved by Japan in the 1980s when many specialists predicted a US decline in the face of Japanese expanding economic and political influence in Asia.²⁷

The strengths of the United States in Asia remain formidable and will grow particularly as the US economy grows and as American military power remains formidable and continues to be seen as serving broad Asian interests in regional stability. Chinese leaders seem to understand this in their acceptance of the US leadership in Asian and world affairs as part of China's recent long-term strategy to develop "peacefully" without upsetting the United States. This represents a sharp reversal from China's post Cold War efforts to wear down the US superpower and seek to create a "multipolar" world. It reflects a clear-eyed adjustment to realities and asymmetries of power and influence between the United States and China prevailing in Asian and world affairs.

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