



6th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS)

The U.S. and China in Regional Security *Implications for Asia and Europe*

Berlin, June 18-19, 2012

*A conference jointly organised by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin
and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Berlin*

Discussion Paper
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Session I: The U.S. and China in Asia's security – a debate

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A Growing Rivalry: The U.S. and China in Asia's Security

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In November 2011, on his third official trip to Asia, President Barak Obama announced a series of initiatives: a plan to station U.S. Marines in northern Australia, the first steps toward reopening long-suspended diplomatic relations with Burma, and the launch of negotiations for a new free trade area designed to strengthen ties between the United States and a group of Southeast Asian nations. The President also promised that, despite impending cuts in defense spending, the United States would not merely maintain but actually increase its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

While they declined publicly to describe them in this way, administration spokesmen did nothing to discourage the widespread perception that all of these measures were part of an effort to counter China's growing power. Observers in Beijing certainly saw U.S. actions in this light and were quick to express their displeasure. If "Australia uses its military bases to help the U.S. harm Chinese interests," warned one newspaper editorial, "then Australia itself will be caught in the crossfire." Cooperating too closely with the United States could carry steep costs: "any country which chooses to be a pawn in the U.S. chess game will lose the opportunity to benefit from China's economy."

These developments are the most recent manifestations of a struggle for power and influence between the United States and China that has been going on for the better part of two decades now. This contest first began to take shape in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it has accelerated markedly since the turn of the century. Despite what many earnest and well-intentioned commentators seem to believe, the burgeoning Sino-American rivalry is not the result of easily erased misperceptions or readily correctible policy errors; it is driven instead by forces that are deeply rooted in the shifting structure of the international system and in the divergent domestic political regimes of the two Pacific powers.

Throughout history, relations between dominant states and fast-rising challengers have been uneasy and often violent. It is not difficult to understand why. Established powers want to preserve their place at the top of the international pecking order and see emerging states as threatening to displace them. Those on the rise feel constrained, even cheated, by the status quo and struggle against it to take what they believe is rightfully theirs; they fear that the established powers want to block their ascent and perhaps even to crush them before they can grow too strong.

These age-old geopolitical dynamics are clearly visible today in the interactions between the United States and China. But there is more than power and prestige at stake; ideological differences add a crucial extra measure of mistrust to an already volatile mix. Many Americans see the current regime in Beijing as a one-party authoritarian dictatorship that represses dissent, forbids meaningful political competition, is secretive about its intentions and may be dangerously prone to aggression. While China's rulers no longer regard themselves as the leaders of a global revolutionary movement they nonetheless believe that they are engaged in an intense ideological struggle. While they dismiss Washington's professions of concern for human rights and individual freedom as cynical and opportunistic, China's leaders have no doubt that the United States is motivated by genuine ideological fervor. As seen from Beijing, America is a crusading, quasi-imperialist nation that will not rest until it has imposed its way of life on the entire planet.

Against this backdrop, since the end of the Cold War the two Pacific powers have pursued policies towards one another that are notable for their stability and persistence. America's strategy is a blend of two elements. Albeit with some shifts in rhetoric and emphasis, successive administrations have sought to engage China through trade and diplomacy while at the same time taking steps to maintain a favorable balance of "hard power" in East Asia. Towards this end, the United States has bolstered its own military capabilities in the region, strengthened strategic cooperation with its traditional treaty allies (especially Japan, South Korea and Australia) and built what might be called "quasi-alliance" partnerships with other countries (like Singapore and India) that share its concerns about China's growing power.

The goal of the balancing half of U.S. strategy is to deter aggression or attempts at coercion directed at America's Asian friends and allies. Meanwhile, through engagement, the United States aims to "tame" Beijing, encouraging it to become what the Bush administration termed a "responsible stakeholder" in the existing international system. In the long run, American policymakers hope that trade and dialogue will ultimately help to transform China, easing it along the path from authoritarianism towards liberal democracy.

Beijing's basic approach to dealing with the United States was put into place in the early 1990s, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square "incident," the first Persian Gulf War and the collapse and fragmentation of the Soviet Union. Although there are some signs that it may be starting to change, since that time China's America strategy has been comprised of three components. First, Beijing has generally sought to avoid confrontation with the United States or the other major Asian nations. Starting from a position of relative weakness and potential vulnerability, Deng Xiaoping and his

successors have believed that they needed time in which to build all the elements of China's "comprehensive national power," a composite of economic might, scientific and technological prowess, military strength, and diplomatic clout. Although they have usually preferred patience and caution, Chinese policymakers have hardly been passive. Instead, they have sought to advance incrementally, extending and strengthening their influence wherever possible, while working quietly to weaken the position of the United States.

China's rulers do not discuss their objectives openly but their top priority is clearly to preserve the Communist Party's exclusive grip on domestic political power. Believing that Washington aims both to contain their country's rise and to subvert its regime, Beijing in response seeks to constrict America's presence in East Asia, to diminish its influence, and eventually to displace it as the preponderant regional power. Acutely aware of the dangers that it would entail, Chinese planners are eager to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States and its allies and aim instead to "win without fighting," the outcome that the ancient philosopher Sun Tzu considered the acme of the strategist's art. Doing this will require that Beijing lull and reassure its opponents, dividing them from one another and discouraging them from joining forces to counter China's rise. In time the balance of power will shift so far in China's favor that resistance to its wishes will appear futile.

An assessment of the current state of the Sino-American competition yields a mixed and as yet incomplete verdict. As regards the domestic dimension of their rivalry, the United States has certainly not succeeded in transforming China, at least not yet. Despite many changes in Chinese society, and many challenges to internal order, the Communist Party remains firmly in control. By comparison, over the last twenty years, Beijing has been quite successful in shaping American perceptions and policies. It has done this in part by cultivating economic ties and other connections with influential players in business, academia and government. Taken together these groups and individuals form a loosely integrated pro-engagement "lobby" whose members favor preserving good relations with China at almost any price. Engagement's strongest proponents generally oppose military or diplomatic measures aimed at bolstering the balancing half of America's mixed strategy for fear that these might antagonize Beijing.

Turning to the external aspects of their competition, the extent to which the United States has, in fact, "tamed" China is open to serious question. In the past two decades Beijing has joined all manner of international institutions but, despite the predictions of the more optimistic advocates of engagement, there is little evidence that this experience has yet produced any fundamental shift in the way China's leaders think about and interact with the rest of the world. Where China has chosen to embrace

existing norms of international behavior it appears often to have done so, not out of conviction, but rather as the result of a cold-blooded calculation of the relationship between its interests and its relative power. Thus Beijing's defense of traditional concepts of sovereignty and its opposition to arguments in favor of "humanitarian intervention" are largely a product of its own feelings of relative weakness and vulnerability. As it becomes stronger and less fearful China will likely find justifications for interventions of its own.

The expectation that, in time, Beijing would come to see its interests on an array of important issues as convergent with those of the United States has yet to be borne out by events. As regards non-proliferation, for example, China has not proven to be nearly as helpful as many in Washington had hoped only a few years ago. In the face of repeated appeals, Beijing has declined to use even a fraction of the leverage at its disposal to try to persuade first North Korea and now Iran to abandon their nuclear weapons programs. This is not necessarily because China's leaders favor proliferation, but rather because they have other interests that they rank more highly: maintaining a friendly buffer state in the first instance and preserving access to energy in the latter.

After decades of engagement there is little reason to believe that China has become a status quo power, eager only to become a member in good standing of the contemporary, American-made international system. Indeed, to the contrary, it seems clear that, in some important respects, Beijing rejects the legitimacy and permanence of existing arrangements. China's leaders have long expressed the view that the U.S. alliance system in Asia is an obsolete relic of "Cold War thinking," and in recent years they have reiterated their claims to virtually all of the South China. As China's power grows it will feel freer to pursue more openly goals that are at odds with those of the United States and other Asian nations.

What of China's efforts to establish itself as the preponderant regional power? Here again the picture is mixed. For the past two decades Beijing has been engaged in a rapid, steady expansion of its military capabilities and in recent years that buildup has begun to bear deadly fruit. China's so-called "anti-access/area denial" capabilities (principally its expanding force of relatively inexpensive, increasingly accurate, conventionally armed cruise and ballistic missiles) pose a growing challenge to Washington's long-standing regional military preponderance. America's Asian alliances rest on the credibility of its defense commitments and this, in turn, depends on its ability to project and sustain overwhelming air and sea power into the Western Pacific. China's buildup has begun to call that capability into question.

Thanks in large part to the gravitational pull of its massive economy, China is already the strongest force in continental Southeast Asia and its influence in Central

Asia is growing. In recent years China has also become a leading trading partner of all the maritime states of Northeast and Southeast Asia. These countries are generally more prosperous and more democratic than their continental counterparts, and they are, in many cases, friends and allies of the United States. Nonetheless, Chinese strategists clearly hope that deepening economic ties will carry diplomatic benefits, at the very least complicating the calculations of governments that remain allied to the U.S., causing them at least to hesitate before taking actions that might offend Beijing.

Since the end of the Cold War observers have often praised the quality of China's diplomacy, noting the effectiveness of its "charm offensives" in winning favor across Asia. In the last three years, however, Beijing has suffered series setbacks in its efforts to draw other countries towards it and away from the United States. Instead, China's actions on a number of fronts have frightened its neighbors, driving them more deeply into America's arms.

President Obama administration came into office intending to maintain the basic approach of his predecessors of combining engagement with balancing, but planning to alter the mix of the two elements somewhat. The new administration hoped that it could enhance and expand engagement, broadening and deepening it to include issues like climate change, while minimizing perennial disagreements over human rights. Although they had no intention of abandoning efforts at balancing, administration spokesmen aimed to downplay this part of U.S. strategy. Towards this end they dropped the use of the term "hedging" to describe the purpose of America's Asian alliances and military deployments and spoke instead of the importance of mutual "reassurance."

Starting in the latter part of 2009 this approach encountered a series of setbacks. Throughout Asia, as well as in Washington, China was seen to be behaving in an assertive, even aggressive, fashion across a wide variety of fronts. When North Korea sank a South Korean naval vessel, Beijing shielded its long-time ally from punishment and instead criticized Washington and Seoul for conducting joint naval exercises aimed at deterring further aggression. After the Japanese authorities arrested a drunken Chinese fishing boat captain in waters near disputed islands in the East China Sea, Beijing chose to escalate what should have been a minor incident into a major diplomatic confrontation, going so far as to suspend exports of rare earth minerals vital to Japanese high-tech manufacturers. Further to the south, Beijing intensified its claims to virtually all of the water and resources of the South China Sea, at one point warning other claimants that "China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact." Chinese officials for the first time threatened to impose sanctions on American companies involved in possible arms sales to Taiwan and issued public warnings that they might stop buying U.S.

debt if the president met with the Dalai Lama. The year 2010 also saw a number of notable displays of China's growing military capabilities including the largest-ever naval exercises outside the so-called "first island chain," the roll-out of a prototype stealth fighter during a visit to Beijing by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and initial deployment of new anti-ship ballistic missiles evidently designed to target U.S. aircraft carriers.

After a brief period of hesitation, the Obama administration began to respond to China's actions by increasing its emphasis on the balancing half of its strategic portfolio. In 2010 the president visited the capitals of various Asian democracies while notably foregoing a stop in Beijing. Secretary of State Clinton responded to assertions that the South China Sea was a "core national interest" of China by declaring that the United States had a "vital interest" in maintaining freedom of navigation through its waters. In addition to strengthening its own alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines, the U.S. also took steps towards closer relations with Vietnam. Meanwhile, back in Washington, the Defense Department announced the formation of an "Air Sea Battle" office whose purpose was clearly to develop counters to China's growing anti-access capabilities.

The President's most recent trip to Asia is thus only the latest in a series of actions intended to reassure America's friends and allies by signaling its continuing commitment to the region. What happens next will depend in large part on how China responds and that, in turn, will depend on the forces driving Beijing's apparent increase in assertiveness.

There is a significant body of opinion among professional China watchers that regards the country's recent behavior as the result of transitory factors that have already begun to recede in significance. In this view, Beijing may have overreacted to a number of unanticipated events, but this does not imply that it has adopted a fundamentally new course. The inclination to take tougher positions on a number of issues perhaps had something to do with jockeying among candidates for elevation in the run-up to the impending 2012 leadership transition. The perception that China has adopted a more belligerent stance is largely the product of the unauthorized effusions of a few "rogue" military officers.

According to this interpretation China will learn from its mistakes, as it has done in the past, adjusting its policies and toning down its rhetoric so as not to provoke anxiety and hostility from its neighbors. In retrospect, the assertive behavior of the past few years will appear to have been an aberration rather than the wave of the future.

This view is reassuring, but there is another possibility that deserves serious consideration. It may be that recent shifts in China's external behavior are

manifestations of deeper and perhaps more long lasting changes within the country itself. Since the onset of the financial crisis a growing number of analysts and officials have evidently come to the conclusion that the United States has entered into a period of relative decline, permitting China to rise even more rapidly than many had expected. This perception appears to be feeding a sense of triumphalism in some quarters and encouraging the spread of an especially potent strain of assertive nationalism. The coming decade will see the emergence of a new generation of Chinese political elites who have known nothing but rapid growth and national success and who, as a result, may lack the patience and innate caution of their elders. The impending transition will likely see the further institutionalization of a system of comparatively weak collective leadership at the top of the Communist Party, one in which the safest option for all concerned may be to adopt a tough stance towards external enemies, real or imagined. Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that the military is playing an increasing role in shaping national policy, along with other groups (including state owned enterprises and lesser ministries) whose interests may best be served by initiatives that deviate from the kind of careful, incremental, strategically rational approach that until recently has characterized much of China's external behavior.

How will the United States respond to a more forceful, forward-leaning China? The answer will turn on whether Washington has the will, and the wallet, to follow through on the initiatives of the last several years. Although the shift in American policy towards a somewhat stiffer stance is likely to be sustained, there are already beginning to be counter-pressures. Some observers fear that the Obama administration has gone too far and warn that its recent moves may have been unnecessarily provocative. These arguments are likely to be bolstered by the belief that America simply does not have the resources necessary to compete with China. If it fails to back strong words with real capabilities the United States could find itself in the worst of all possible worlds: talking loudly while carrying a too-small stick.

Whoever is elected president in November 2012, the next administration will have to operate within tight fiscal constraints as it seeks to narrow annual budget deficits and reduce the level of national debt. Among other things, this will likely result in cuts in defense spending, making it more difficult to respond in an effective and timely way to China's continuing military buildup. The combination of increasing Chinese assertiveness and temporary, self-imposed American restraint could make the coming decade in the Asia-Pacific region more difficult and dangerous than the one just past.