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Managing U.S.-China Relations by Wu Xinbo

The U.S. faces a most daunting foreign policy task in managing its relations with a rising China. Only by adapting themselves to a changing regional political and security landscape will the U.S. and China be able to peacefully coexist. Given the relative power imbalance, Washington has far greater leeway to adjust its security policy in Asia. The Taiwan question lies at the crux of U.S.-China security entanglements. It is probably the only issue that can ignite a major military conflict between Beijing and Washington. To untie this knot, the United States should take a fresh look at the issue. It has to understand that this is basically a matter of nation-building for China, not an American geopolitical or ideological issue.

Much has been said about China's budding nationalism, which is actually a rediscovery and ardent pursuit of China's national interests, developing alongside a decline in ideological attraction. If there is any issue that can fan the tinder of China's nationalism into raging flames, it is the Taiwan question. The past has shown that when the United States confronts nationalism in other countries, it seldom succeeds. For Taiwan to gain security, international space and more economic opportunities, it has to accept some form of association with the mainland while preserving the greatest possible political autonomy. If Taiwan seeks formal independence, it is almost certain that Beijing will have to resort to the use of force. Even if the PRC is not able to take over Taiwan, it certainly can throw the island into chaos. Compared with such a horrible scenario, peaceful unification across the Taiwan Strait is in the best interests of Beijing, Taipei and Washington.

As long as its current U.S. Taiwan policy continues, Washington will remain unable to stabilize its relations with a rising China. Beijing will remain suspicious of the U.S. security presence in East Asia, and U.S. leadership and strategic initiatives in both regional and global affairs will not receive Beijing's due endorsement. If the Taiwan issue can be resolved peacefully, however, then China will become a status quo power in the political-security sense and Sino-U.S. relations will be far more stable, healthy and constructive. China-U.S. cooperation would thus stand as a strong force for regional security and prosperity. As Mao Zedong told Richard Nixon in 1972, "the world is a big thing, and Taiwan is a small thing." The U.S. must thus take a broader strategic view of the Taiwan issue.

Based on such an understanding, Washington should encourage Taipei to sit down and negotiate with Beijing about a reasonable unification arrangement. On the issue of arms sales to Taiwan, the U.S. should adopt a more sensible and responsible approach, taking into account the negative impact on Taiwan's political dynamics, and should avoid either focusing on the military balance across the Strait or being tempted by commercial incentives. Instead, Washington can play an honest broker role by coming up with some useful and creative ideas about Cross-Strait reconciliation.

As to U.S. alliances, it is understood that this arrangement has awarded the U.S. unparalleled strategic influence in the region. However, the rationale for maintaining a substantive military deployment in Northeast Asia is fading away. With the forthcoming reconciliation and ultimate unification of the Korean peninsula and resumption of "normal state" status for Japan, U.S. military presence on a large scale will not be politically sustainable either domestically or in Asia.

As the international environment changes, Washington should try to find new ways to bolster its influence. Base-access arrangements will be more sustainable politically and less expensive financially. Also, the revolution in military affairs and improvement of rapid-reaction capability will make it unnecessary for the U.S. to retain current deployment levels abroad. In this era of growing economic interdependence and deepening regional integration, it is more sensible for the U.S. to lead by shaping the rules of the game and building security communities rather than seeking influence via its military muscle.

As Washington redefines its security ties with Japan and others, it has alarmed and alienated those like China who have become very suspicious of U.S. strategic intentions. Threatened countries naturally respond by aligning with each other. The China-Russian partnership, although still far from an alliance, has become more substantive over the past several years in response to U.S. security policy in Asia and Europe. Washington should lay more stress on the political rather than the military function of its alliance structure; it should seek closer diplomatic consultation and coordination among allies in dealing with regional issues and abstain from rattling the alliance saber.

Foresight is needed here. Given the evolving political, security and economic trends in East Asia, ten years from now, U.S. security involvement in the region will have to be transformed both in form and substance. Forward military presence will decline, security alliances will become less, and a pluralistic security community will very likely emerge.

The establishment of an Asia-Pacific security community is possible because states in the region have shared interests in a peaceful and stable security environment, and because they increasingly benefit from growing economic interactions. This nascent mechanism for regional security will evolve over time into a more effective means for

promoting regional cooperation on security issues. In this context, the United States will still play a significant role, not as a hegemon, but as a key player.

Regarding Japan's future development, although it is mainly Japan's internal dynamics that propel it toward a normal major power status, outsiders, particularly the U.S., have a role to play in shaping Japan's future security policy. It is in the interests of both the region and Japan that it remains a civilian power rather than a traditional political-military power. However, in recent years, Japan has remarkably increased its military capacity. Revision of the Peace Constitution, particularly article nine, has received growing endorsement among Japanese political and intellectual elite and may occur within the next five years. Washington should urge Japan to deal with its wartime legacy, preserve its Peace Constitution, and remain a pacifist country.

On the issue of ballistic missile defense deployments in East Asia, Washington should realize that there is no such thing as "absolute security" While technological progress may improve defense, it also enhances offensive capabilities. As a responsible power, the U.S. should avoid altering the existing strategic stability and causing an arms race. In fact, with the reduction of tensions following the intra-Korean summit and the gradual improvement of U.S.-DPRK relations, the ostensible reason for deploying TMD in East Asia — coping with Pyongyang's missile threat — is no longer sustainable. As long as Pyongyang maintains a moratorium on its long-range missile program, Washington should reciprocate with a freezing of its missile defense program, while at the same time making diplomatic efforts to promote arms control in Northeast Asia.

Then what should China do? To be sure, China is far inferior to the U.S. in the regional and bilateral balance of power. This means Beijing does not have much leeway to adjust its posture. However, as a rising power, China needs to assure the U.S. (and others) that it has no intention to upset the existing regional order, and that as long as its legitimate security interests are accommodated, it can live with a regional security structure in which the U.S. plays a leading role.

Beijing can also take the following steps as an adjustment of its policy. First, it should give due credit to Washington for its role in regional peace and stability. In the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. played a significant role in resisting Soviet expansion in Asia. In the post-Cold War era, it is still an important force for stability. Due to ideological constraints and suspicion of U.S. strategic intentions, Beijing does not want to overtly give credit to U.S. influence in Asian security. However, acknowledgement of the positive aspect of the U.S. role will help dispel Washington's concern that China's long-term strategy is to drive the U.S. out of East Asia. It will also give more weight to Beijing's criticism of the downsides of U.S. policy and make Beijing's position on regional security more reasonable.

Second, China should promote security community-building in the Asia-Pacific and encourage the U.S., along with some other countries, to take a leading role in such an endeavor. As a major power, China has a predictable preference for self-help in its security practice. However, evolving political and economic trends in the point toward greater regional integration. Although Beijing may be afraid of getting constrained in such a community, its experience with the ASEAN Regional Forum and security cooperation with Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan should provide it with adequate confidence. The past several years have witnessed a positive change in Beijing's attitude toward multilateral security. Yet Beijing has to make substantive efforts, both conceptually and practically, to advance security community-building and bring the U.S. along.

Third, because Washington will continue to rely on its alliance structure, Beijing can take a more pragmatic and differentiated stance. For instance, on the condition that U.S. security arrangements are not targeted on China and will not intervene in the Taiwan issue, China would not challenge U.S. efforts in preserving those strategic assets. While conceptually Beijing can keep arguing that security alliances are relics of the Cold War, as long as they serve to promote regional stability in practice, China can adopt a bandwagoning approach. This will reassure the U.S. and other regional states regarding China's intentions in Asia.

[Editor's note: This article provides a Chinese perspective on managing U.S.-China relations. Reader's comments and contrasting views are welcome in response to any article appearing in PacNet*.]*

Wu Xinbo is a Professor of International Politics Department at Fudan University in Shanghai, China. This article draws from "U.S. Security Policy in Asia: Implications for China-U.S. Relations" prepared while he was a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Center for Northeast Asian Studies Institution Website [www.brook.edu/fp/cnaps/papers/index.htm].