



China's Rise in Asia - Are U.S. Interests in Jeopardy?

by Robert Sutter

The rapid rise of China's power and influence in world affairs, especially around China's periphery, prompts a steady stream of commentary warning of PRC efforts to push the United States out of Asia. China's enviable position as the locomotive of Asian economic growth, a growing web of China-centered trade and political arrangements with Asian partners, and the rapid buildup of Chinese military power reinforce these arguments. This line of thinking seizes on alleged Chinese foot-dragging in supporting U.S. pressure on Iraq and North Korea as indicative of Beijing's long-term strategy to weaken the U.S. and open the way for greater Chinese power and influence in Asian and world affairs.

In contrast, actual Chinese behavior in the region and in improving relations with the Bush administration seem to underscore strong awareness by Chinese leaders of the difficulties involved in China competing directly with the U.S. superpower. Beijing has worked to sustain regional stability and has sought greater economic advantage and political influence, without compromising core Chinese territorial, security, or other interests. Its efforts encountered difficulties, notably in the early 1990s, when China's assertiveness regarding disputed territories along its eastern and southern flanks and its bellicose posture during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996 alarmed its neighbors. Subsequently, Beijing has followed a long-term strategy to pursue a range of Chinese objectives that avoid direct confrontation and conflict with U.S. interests while they gradually broaden Chinese influence relative to that of the U.S. in the countries along China's periphery. Chinese objectives include:

- Securing China's foreign policy environment at a time when the PRC regime is focused on sustaining economic development and political stability;
- Promoting economic exchange that assists China's economic development;
- Calming regional fears and reassuring Asian neighbors about how China will use its rising power and influence; and,
- Boosting China's regional and international power and influence, and helping to secure an ambiguous world order.

Meanwhile, recently disclosed private deliberations of senior Chinese leaders revealed that Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Jintao recognized China's relative weakness in Asia in the face of U.S. global dominance and the "accelerated strategic eastward movement" of U.S. power, notably under the Bush administration. He and other senior leaders argued that U.S. power and the U.S. importance to China's

development required a flexible and accommodating Chinese posture that would keep China-U.S. relations on an even keel. Hu added: "[The United States has] strengthened its military deployments in the Asia-Pacific region, strengthened the U.S.-Japan military alliance, strengthened strategic cooperation with India, improved relations with Vietnam, inveigled Pakistan, established a pro-American government in Afghanistan, increased arms sales to Taiwan, and so on. They have extended outposts and placed pressure points on us from the east, south, and west. This makes a great change in our geopolitical environment."

Bush administration policies and China's response

The power and policies of the Bush administration indeed did change the Asian situation in important and sometimes negative respects for Chinese interests, especially after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attack on America. Chinese leaders nonetheless reacted with restraint and moderation, helping to set the stage for a significant upswing in U.S.-China relations over Asian and other issues. American specialists have different views about what factors were most important in causing the favorable turn in China-U.S. relations in 2001-2003, but they tend to agree that the improvement in U.S.-Chinese relations has reinforced Beijing's moderate trend in policy toward Asia.

Some specialists - including this writer - believe that the Bush administration's effective use of power and influence in Asia, its firmness on Taiwan and other disagreements, and an initial downgrading of China's priority in U.S. foreign policy prompted Beijing to reverse course and work assiduously in offering concessions and removing irritants to seek better U.S. ties.

A second view explains the improvement in U.S.-China relations in 2001-2003 largely on the basis of a change in Bush administration attitudes rather than a change in China's approach. These specialists argue that most U.S. governments enter office promising a hard-line policy toward China, only to adjust and moderate their policy in the face of realities involving China's importance for vital U.S. interests in Asian and world affairs. They aver that the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks added significantly to the Bush administration's imperative to work constructively with Chinese leaders in the global war against terrorism.

A third school of thought among specialists of U.S.-China relations acknowledges that Chinese moderation and accommodation in the face of Bush administration firmness played a key role in encouraging the upswing of relations in 2001-2003, but they aver that Chinese leaders came to the judgment largely on the basis of greater confidence in China's regional and international situation. Their concern over Bush

administration firmness and maneuvers was low while their moderation and accommodation came from a judgment that amid strong economic growth and unchallenged political dominance, the Chinese government was making significant gains in its global standing, notably around its periphery in Asia. Relations with Southeast Asia and South Korea were particular bright spots, while relations with Russia, Central Asian governments, and South Asia remained on a positive footing. Other sources of Chinese leadership satisfaction and confidence resulted from acceptance of Beijing as the site of the 2008 Olympics, China's relatively smooth entry into the World Trade Organization, and its status as the largest recipient of foreign direct investment in 2002.

These three different explanations - each in its own way - reinforce a common judgment that China will continue to follow a moderate and pragmatic approach toward its periphery, along with continued U.S.-China cooperation in Asia:

In the first instance, Chinese leaders see little to be gained from an assertive posture with pressure tactics directed against the United States and U.S. interests in Asia. Such an approach risks friction and worsened China-U.S. relations, calling negative attention to China at a time when the U.S. superpower seems prepared to confront its enemies in strong and concrete ways. A better path for China is to endeavor to try to cooperate with or wait out the United States.

In the second instance, the perceived positive Bush administration shift toward China seems to work to China's advantage. As the U.S. becomes more accommodating to Chinese interests, Chinese leaders presumably are in an ever more influential position in Asian and world affairs. The utility of a more assertive and potentially disruptive Chinese stance toward Asian affairs appears low in this context.

In the third instance, a Chinese leadership that is confident of China's power and influence in Asian affairs appears unlikely to resort to an assertive or aggressive stance that could disrupt recent gains in relations. It has taken the Chinese leadership several decades to come up with a seemingly winning strategy toward China's neighbors, and circumstances do not appear to warrant major change in the approach.

Outlook

Looking to the future, some optimists foresee a major breakthrough in China-U.S. cooperation in Asia, but skeptics take fuller account of the many deeply rooted differences that Chinese and U.S. leaders will continue to grapple with in the years ahead. Most immediately, China is widely seen in the United States as continuing to straddle the fence on Iraq, privately pledging not to block U.S. military action but siding publicly with France and others in calling for protracted inspections. Beijing's rhetorical criticism of North Korea's nuclear program rings hollow to U.S. officials seeking direct involvement by China and other concerned powers in negotiations dealing with Pyongyang. For their part, Chinese officials tell U.S. media of their impatience with U.S. demands for support on Iraq and North Korea, without any change in U.S. policy where it matters most to China - i.e. Taiwan.

More broadly, though the United States and China are developing more common ground in Asia, they differ strongly over Taiwan, how to secure stability in Korea, and ultimately which power will be paramount in Asia. The Chinese military buildup focused on Taiwan and U.S. forces that might assist Taiwan in a conflict is a major negative consideration that is little affected by Chinese leaders hinting at possible pullback of some missiles focused on Taiwan. China remains the sole large power today building an array of more modern military forces to attack Americans. Below the surface of amity also lie a wide range of contentious security, political, economic, and other difficult issues that make the U.S. bilateral relationship with China by far the most contentious and complicated U.S. relationship in Asian or world affairs.

If the Bush administration were to become bogged down in Iraq, the war on terrorism, or elsewhere, and/or it were to lose approval at home and abroad on account of Iraq or a major U.S. economic downturn, Chinese leaders would feel compelled to revive pressure tactics to walk back recent advances in U.S. policy in areas sensitive to Beijing, notably Taiwan. Not to seek gains over Taiwan at times of U.S. weakness or dependency on China would go against many decades of Chinese leadership practice in dealing with the U.S. over this issue.

Regarding U.S.-China relations over Korea, a more forceful U.S. stance on North Korea, perhaps following a successful U.S. assault toppling Saddam Hussein, would alarm China, which very likely would take strong measures to block the U.S. pressure. U.S. opinion leaders have come to see China's refusal to exert substantial pressure on North Korea as an obstacle to the outcome sought by these Americans.

Meanwhile, the day-to-day interaction of U.S. and Chinese military forces along China's periphery has not been without significant incident, even as the two powers endeavored to resume more normal ties after the April 1, 2001 EP-3 episode. An unarmed U.S. Navy surveillance ship was harassed and rammed by Chinese boats in waters off the Chinese coast in 2002. U.S. surveillance aircraft along China's periphery routinely encounter Chinese fighters, sometimes at close quarters.

In sum, the balance of considerations argues for a Chinese posture in Asia that will give more emphasis to the positive than the negative in China-U.S. relations. Growing China-U.S. common ground in Asian affairs will help U.S.-China relations develop in agreeable ways and reinforce China's overall moderate approach to the region. But the continuing clash of long term U.S.-China interests in the region are reflected in current U.S.-China differences over North Korea and Iraq, and particularly in the continued PLA buildup targeted at Taiwan and U.S. forces that might help Taiwan. They suggest that a major breakthrough toward strategic cooperation is unlikely.

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