

**Assessing China's Rise and U.S. Leadership in Asia – Growing Maturity and Balance** by Robert Sutter

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The international economic crisis of 2008-2009 will have lasting impact on world affairs, including the balance of power and influence in Asia. At this initial stage in examining the fallout from the crisis, we are in a poor position to offer definitive assessment of its overall consequences. Nonetheless, commentators and specialists venture forth with predictions. In particular, following past practice, self-identified “declinists” like Paul Kennedy and other commentators have forecast an Asian and world order with U.S. power and influence in decline, replaced by others, most notably a rising China.

Long-time observers of Asian affairs have seen this tendency before. After the U.S. failure in the war in Vietnam, it was widely held that the Soviet Union would replace the United States as Asia's leader; throughout much of the 1980s, Japan was seen as Number 1 and the United States was viewed in decline; and over the past decade, China's rise was portrayed as creating a new Sino-centric order in Asia that would increasingly marginalize the role of the U.S.

Fortunately, a review of reports of changing power relationships in Asia in recent years shows clearer awareness of the varied elements of power and influence in the region and the need for comprehensive treatment in order to come up with realistic and well-balanced assessments. These accounts reflect growth and maturity in analysis that avoid sometimes simplistic and one-dimensional views seen in publications earlier in the decade.

In the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998, media commentators and many specialists began to focus on the rise of Chinese trade and Asian investment in China and growing Chinese bilateral and multilateral diplomatic activism. These Chinese strengths coincided with weaknesses in U.S. standing in the region in terms of image and diplomacy in particular. This basic equation of Chinese strengths and U.S. weaknesses became standard fare in mainstream Asian and Western media. It was the focus of findings of many books and reports of government departments, international study groups, and think tanks, authored often by respected officials and specialists. The common prediction was that Asia was adjusting to an emerging China-centered order and U.S. influence was in decline.

Over time, developments showed reality in the region was more complex. Japan clearly was not in China's orbit; India's interest in accommodation with China was mixed and overshadowed by a remarkable upswing in strategic cooperation with the United States; Russian and Chinese interest in close alignment waxed and waned and appeared to remain secondary to their respective relationships with the West; and South Korea – arguably the area of greatest advance in Chinese influence at a time of major tensions in the U.S.-ROK relationship earlier in the decade – changed markedly beginning in 2004 and evolved to a situation of often wary and suspicious South Korean relations with China seen today.

Former U.S. officials pushed back against prevailing assessments of decline with a variety of tracts underlining Washington's carefully considered judgment that China's rise actually was not having a substantial negative effect on U.S. leadership in Asia, which remained healthy and strong. They joined a growing contingent of scholars and specialists who looked beyond accounts that inventoried China's strengths and U.S. weaknesses and carefully considered other factors including Chinese limitations and U.S. strengths before making their overall judgments.

Several commentators and think tanks that had been prominent in warning of U.S. decline as China rose in Asia revised their calculus to focus more on Chinese weaknesses and U.S. strengths. Most dramatically, Joshua Kurlantzick, among the most prolific and prominent of commentators forecasting U.S. decline as China rose in Asia earlier in the decade, seemed to reverse his views in 2008 with public warnings of weak leadership in Asia and Chinese fragility and possible collapse. Think tanks and study groups including the Congressional Research Service, the Stanley Foundation, and the Institute for National Security Studies, reflected in recent publications greater awareness of resilient U.S. power and influence in Asia and less of the focus in earlier publications and pronouncements on how Chinese advances were supplanting the United States in the region.

What has emerged is a broad-based and mature effort on the part of a wide range of specialists and commentators to more carefully assess China's strengths and weaknesses along with those of the United States and other powers in the region. This will not prevent the declinists and others from having their say about the end of U.S. regional and world leadership as a result of current economic crisis. But it assures that one-sided assessments focused on U.S. weaknesses and the strengths of a rising China will not go unchallenged.