



The Implications of China's Active Defense Strategy

By Balbina Y. Hwang

Dr. Balbina Y. Hwang [hwangb@georgetown.edu] is Visiting Professor at Georgetown University. From 2007-2009, she served as Senior Special Advisor to Ambassador Christopher Hill, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, at the State Department. This essay is derived from testimony to the US-China Economic & Security Review Commission on "China's Active Defense Strategy: Impact on Regional Neighbors," on Jan. 27, 2011. The full transcript is at http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/hearing_schedule.php.

It seems axiomatic that the East Asian regional dynamic is dominated by the rise of Chinese power and the relative decline of US influence, although this perception may be stronger than the reality. Nevertheless, this dominant view was reinforced – probably inadvertently – by the Obama administration early in its tenure when it triumphantly declared that “America has returned to Asia.” While it is the right of any new administration to differentiate itself from its predecessor through policy and tone, the framing of US strategy in Asia as a “return” to the region reinforced unjustified criticism among many Asian nations that the United States had somehow retreated or withdrawn its interests and presence in this critical region.

Moreover, framing US regional interests in this manner has ceded control of the rhetorical narrative about shifting dynamics in the region to China. Because the world seems to have accepted the inevitability of a rising China, and China has done a remarkable marketing job in categorizing this rise as “peaceful,” uncertainties resulting from changes to the regional status quo are now assigned to the “reassertion” of US interests or “US reactions” in the region, rather than as a result of changes wrought by China itself. For example, a recent Chinese editorial on Washington’s recent efforts at closer regional engagement argues that “Since the United States declared its return to Asia, the frequency of clashes in the Korean Peninsula has accelerated. Instead of reflecting on this, South Korea became more obsessed with its military alliance with the United States.”

China’s rapid growth and development alone do not account for the depth of uncertainty and anxiety about the future direction of the region; after all, countries throughout Asia such as Japan, South Korea, and the “Little Dragons” of East Asia have achieved spectacular economic prosperity without engendering commensurate concerns about their wealth being translated into aggressive military might and ambition. China’s rise seems to be different not just due to the sheer magnitude of its size and breadth but because it has been accompanied by a shift in its foreign policy.

After decades of abiding Deng Xiaoping’s admonition to restrain its foreign policy in order to advance a peaceful rise, a

more confident Beijing now seems to relish exerting its strength and displaying its achievements. Thus it is not just the increase in Chinese capabilities, but rising uncertainty about Beijing’s intentions that is cause for uneasiness. And regardless of disagreements over responsibility for shifting regional dynamics, relative changes in the regional and global status of the United States and China and their interaction is of great concern to every nation in Asia, perhaps none more so than to US allies: Japan and South Korea.

At the core of Japanese and South Korean anxieties (arguably of North Korea too) are fears that China is challenging the US-centric order in Northeast Asia, and that increased capabilities will lead Beijing to re-establish a version of the ancient Sino-tributary system. This Sino-centric order is more sophisticated than cursory Western analyses allow, for under this system hegemonic power is wielded through nominal equality but substantive hierarchy. Historically, China was at the apex of a hierarchical tributary relationship with “lesser” powers that retained their “sovereignty” and territorial integrity within a stratified order.

Thus the Chinese preference for exerting influence in regional multilateral organizations could be fraught with danger for the United States *if* Washington cedes its robust presence and interaction with individual Asian nations in favor of direct participation solely or primarily through regional arrangements. A withdrawal of US leadership may achieve superficial cooperation but would lead to a dependence on the exertion of Chinese influence, a dynamic that the region as a whole is neither ready for, nor eager to embrace.

Indeed, China’s recent assertive maritime behavior may be part of a broader strategy to exercise authority over smaller neighbors in the near term by pushing US forces away from its maritime borders to demonstrate rights over the entire South and East China Seas. Under such Chinese dominance, “lesser” powers will not necessarily have to give up their independence or even have to emulate China ideologically, but they will have to show due respect, and if necessary provide appropriate concessions. One necessary concession in China’s view will most certainly be the reduction of US influence in the region.

Thus, it is unsurprising to hear Chinese admonishments that the United States should “abandon old alliance ties directed at third parties” as outdated relics of the Cold War. Labeling Northeast Asian security dynamics as a by-product of the Cold War makes convincing rhetoric and the line is dismayingly echoed by Western analysts, but they miss the mark in reflecting contemporary conditions. It may be true that “the Asia-Pacific region can no longer be understood in simplistic zero-sum calculations in which states threaten one another with military conquest.” But the notion that regional interdependence and economic competition has trumped military competition as the means to power in the region is

premature at best. If anything, increased economic, social, and even political interaction in East Asia have reinforced the continued preeminence of traditional measures of hard power, even while expanding an additional role for soft power.

In the face of such changes – and made even more important given the *lack* of fundamental changes in basic regional security dynamics – US bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan remain the pillars of stability. Yet, even though the stark lines of contrasting Cold War security interests remain intact, the blurring of economic interests has amplified the twin fears of entrapment and abandonment that have plagued America’s junior allies. The two countries’ worst fear – like many other nations in East Asia – is to be caught in the middle of a US-China battle for regional supremacy.

The ROK and Japan have made bold strides toward cooperation and coordination with each other and the United States in recent months. While they serve as an anchor for future strategies to address shifting regional dynamics, these were a direct result of the proximate source of threat in the region: North Korea. The true test of strength for US alliances will be their ability to incorporate Asian anxieties into shared strategic interests. As the United States refines and articulates its strategy in the region, the US should remain mindful of the concerns of its allies and acknowledge their crucial contribution in efforts to proactively and peacefully meet the challenges presented by an evolving China.

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