



Competition and Consensus: China's "New Concept of Security" and the United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region

by David Finkelstein and Michael McDevitt

In a fascinating coincidence of timing both the People's Republic of China and the United States have within the last six months published official documents that spell out the security strategy that each country believes will bring lasting peace and stability to East Asia – a shared objective. It may come as a surprise to many that both countries share many common elements in their respective strategies particularly a belief in the importance of multilateral mechanisms. But it will come as no surprise that these respective visions also differ in how to achieve the objective of peace and stability.

One fundamental reason why the view from Beijing and from Washington is different is because of geography. China is territorially in Asia; the United States is not. Separated by the Pacific Ocean from its Asian interests and friends the United States must depend on bi-lateral military alliances and the forward military presence they enable to execute its avowed strategy. China on the other hand sees U.S. bilateral military alliances as destabilizing and anachronistic. It believes they are latent threats.

United States East Asian Security Strategy

The recently published 1998 version of America's Security Strategy for East Asia contains no surprises. It is a statement of continuity. The main message in the document is a reaffirmation that the heart of United States strategy will remain, as it has for over 40 years, bilateral security alliances with Japan, Korea, Australia and to a lesser extent Thailand and the Philippines. The strategy also reaffirms that the United States remains committed to improving regional security through multilateral fora. Enthusiasm for multi-lateralism in all of its guises, including small groups of like-minded countries pursuing specific objectives, characterized as "mini-lateralism", is more pronounced in this report than in similar reports issued earlier in the decade.

Nonetheless, the strategy is quite clear in the belief that stability can only be preserved if multilateral initiatives rest firmly on a foundation of U.S. bilateral alliances. This is fundamental, and as mentioned, is the main point of contention between the respective strategic views of China and the U.S.

China's "New Concept of Security"

In July 1998 China issued a Defense White Paper which authoritatively outlined China's vision of a post-Cold War Asia security order. It calls this a "new concept of security" and it includes the following elements:

- The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence. (These are not new. Chou Enlai originally articulated them in 1954.)

- In the economic field, all countries should open their markets to one another, eliminate inequalities and discriminatory policies in trade and strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation.

- In the area of multilateralism, in a reversal of its position earlier in a decade, China espouses the promotion of mutual trust and understanding through dialogue and cooperation. Settle disputes peacefully, and engage in security dialogues and cooperation that is aimed at promoting trust (read confidence building measures CBMs). Since security is "mutual" these dialogues should not be confrontational or aimed against another country or infringe upon the security interests of any other nation.

- A fourth element, although it is not clearly spelled out in the White Paper, is China's growing collection of "strategic partnerships" with key nations and political-economic organizations such as the European Union and ASEAN. These bilateral relationships apparently are China's alternative to bilateral alliances. According to Chinese spokesmen these partnerships *are not* formal alliances and are "not aimed at third parties." While some are more symbolic than real, they are the bilateral vehicles the Chinese use to settle disagreements or reach agreement on common interests. The Chinese claim their "strategic partnership" with Russia is the model.

Assessment

Both concepts of security reflect a relatively recently acquired enthusiasm for multilateralism in Asia. It was only with the Clinton Administration in 1992 that official U.S. policy was willing to acknowledge a security role for multi-lateralism in Asia. Doubters remain, citing the absence of a commonly perceived threat and cultural and historic animosities as fundamental impediments. The fraying of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the only real multilateral security forum in Asia, under the weight of the economic crisis highlights the fragility of these institutions.

China's endorsement of multilateral fora is also a relatively new development. The onset of public discussion of China as a threat to the stability of the region in the early to mid 1990's and ASEAN's united stand against Chinese activities on Mischief Reef in the Spratley Islands in 1995 were probably decisive in changing Beijing's views regarding the utility of multilateral security dialogue. Previously such venues were viewed with suspicion as another opportunity for others to attack China's policies. Clearly, however, Beijing

came to the realization that China could no longer afford to isolate itself from regional meetings if it was to argue its own case.

China prefers a multilateral approach that is oriented toward discussion without commitment. It prescribes a non-binding approach in which all participants have the opportunity to air views, but absent consensus, does not bind the participants to a specific course of action. The United States on the other hand, is frequently impatient with venues that some derisively term “talk shops” and would prefer a more issue-oriented problem-solving approach.

In broad terms, both China and the U.S. also believe that CBMs reduce uncertainty, misperception and suspicion and reduce the possibility of incidental or accidental war. From the U.S. point of view, transparency is the concept behind most CBMs. While China is suspicious that transparency is an attempt by others to expose their military capabilities, as a general proposition they support CBMs that are voluntary and facilitate dialogue.

As alluded to, the most fundamental disagreement in concepts of security between the Chinese and U.S. is the area of bilateral military alliances. China is very clear that it is against military alliances. These alliances are characterized as Cold War relics, and China asserts that the U.S. initiatives over the past few years to reinvigorate and strengthen bilateral alliances has actually added to instability. To cite China’s White Paper:

“...Hegemonism and power politics remain the main source of threats to world peace and stability; Cold War mentality and ... the enlargement of military blocs and the strengthening of military alliances have added factors of instability to international security....”

Why is China promoting a “New Concept of Security”?

- China has long been dissatisfied with the current international system. The much hoped for “multipolar” world, with China as one of the poles, has not transpired. But they continue to work toward that end, and the new concept provides a framework for political, economic and security relationships in that future world.

- The concept suggests that China may be beginning to see its security in global rather than regional terms. A mere 20 years after China under Deng decided to open itself to the outside world China is able to espouse a vision of how *all* nations should interact. It also suggests that China is prepared to become more proactive in trying to shape the international environment in ways that are congenial to its security interests.

- The concept is also an attempt to present a more benign and less threatening face in East Asia. Beijing wants to debunk the China threat theory and be perceived as a responsible actor in Asia.

- Finally, the concept is a reaction to the United States and its declared role as the regional stabilizing presence. Conceptually, the U.S. has set the security stage for East Asia. For China, it is no longer enough to simply be opposed to U.S. regional “hegemonism.” An alternative vision for the region is required as tangible evidence of China’s ability to articulate

a security system that would continue to provide peace and stability if the U.S. approach is to be replaced.

Conclusion

Almost 50 years ago China and the United States embarked upon a competition of ideas and ideologies for the future of Asia. Those competing ideas resulted in war and instability for almost 25 years.

This is not the likely outcome today. It needs to be emphasized that the differing, or competing, visions of Asian security that the United States and China hold are not inherently destabilizing provided that serious efforts to undermine the foundation of America’s security posture in Asia do not become the focus of China’s efforts.

In this regard, it is mildly unsettling that China has so far chosen to “market” their concept by attacking the security strategy just recently reaffirmed by the United States. This is a strategy which also has the virtue of being widely supported throughout East Asia.

Beijing surely realizes that its security concept is an aspiration for the future while the U.S. strategy is a reality that will endure for the indeterminate future. We can only hope that China will become content to argue for their approach on the merits of its principles, while making positive contributions to regional peace within the framework at hand.

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