



FOUR KEY QUESTIONS FOR US CHINA POLICY

BY DENNY ROY

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Harvard University Professor Stephen M. Walt asserts in a recent [article](#) in *Foreign Policy* that five key questions should guide US policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC). Walt's key questions involve China's future economic strength; the impact of US attempts to deny China access to advanced technologies; Xi Jinping's leadership competence; the "effectiveness" of balancing against China by other countries; and the outcome of the Sino-US contest to attract coalition members.

I am inspired by Walt's basic idea, but I would phrase those key questions differently. Therefore I offer my own (shorter) list.

1. Is there room for a demarcation of regional influence and commitments that both Beijing and Washington could accept? By "accept," I mean there is no longer a significant danger of war breaking out. China and the United States have conflicting agendas for the region, including demands for freedom of maneuver, special relationships, and preferences for how specific strategic questions are resolved.

It is possible that the US and PRC governments' respective vital interests, those they would go to war over, are actually limited enough that Beijing and Washington could agree to stay out of each other's way and make the agreement work—something like the [1814-1914 Concert of Europe](#).

Conversely, the clashing US and PRC agendas might be overlapping and irreconcilable, with too many issues on which neither country would accept a compromise and both are willing to fight over.

One example would be [Chinese inability to tolerate](#) the United States being the strongest strategic actor in the region, combined with the US government being determined to hang onto this role. Another example would be Beijing deciding that a war to immediately enforce claimed PRC sovereignty over Taiwan or the South China Sea is better than tolerating perceived US obstruction.

The answer to this question determines whether the US government should focus its effort on reaching a lasting détente with China or on preparing for an expected war.

2. How likely is a Chinese hegemony over the Indo-Pacific region? This incorporates Walt's question about China's future economic strength into a bigger question. Xi's assertive foreign policy has been built on [expectations of China surpassing](#) the United States as the world's pre-eminent power. China's military power and global political influence rest on continued high economic growth and escape from the "middle-income trap." If, however, China cannot maintain the extraordinarily rapid economic growth it has enjoyed for four decades, Beijing must adjust its regional and global aspirations downward.

There are increasing indications that the PRC economy is hitting a wall. In addition to long-anticipated structural problems such as a decrease in the cohort of factory [working-age people](#) relative to retirees and over-reliance on [exports](#) and [building infrastructure](#) versus domestic consumption for growth, [more issues](#) have emerged recently: the Xi regime's [prioritization](#) of [political correctness](#) over economic vitality, local government [debt](#), a [faltering property market](#), [youth unemployment](#), and diminishing [foreign investment](#).

There is, however, at least one other major variable besides China's economic strength that bears on the prospect of China establishing regional dominance: pushback from the region (similar to Walt's question

of whether balancing would be effective). Even if China surpassed the United States to become the world's top economy, the United States would remain a close second. If the United States cooperated with a few equally determined regional states, this coalition might successfully oppose PRC expansionism and bullying and preclude a Chinese hegemony. A more interesting question, and one that goes beyond Walt's analysis, is whether enough regional states might band together in the *absence* of continued US leadership to prevent China from dominating the region. This possibility isn't tested while the US remains forward deployed in strength because regional states have an incentive to let Washington take the lead in confronting aggressive PRC behavior. Rather than accommodating China, these states might be willing to devote more resources to their own defense and incur more risk if left on the front lines by a retrenching United States.

Asking this question, then, leads to the conclusion that with little or no additional US effort, China faces two very large obstacles to achieving regional hegemony. Its own economy may weaken to the point where it cannot support a push for domination. Or regional resistance, with or without the United States, may be robust enough to block China from dictating regional affairs.

Whether the United States and regional countries determine it is worthwhile to resist Chinese domination depends on their answer to the third key question.

3. How would your national interests fare under a PRC hegemony? If it could, China would replace the system of rules and norms supported by Washington with a different system. Support for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” would be out, replaced by respect for PRC “core interests.”

For Americans, the issue is as follows. A regionally dominant China—facilitated by a withdrawal of forward-deployed US military forces and abrogation of US alliances—might cause a net increase in American security and a reduction of US defense costs (by practically eliminating the risk of a US-PRC war, and by China taking over the responsibility of

policing transnational threats such as terrorist activity), while generally not obstructing US businesses from continued access to the region. The benefits might be sufficient to assuage US guilt over abandoning regional allies to life in a Sino-centric order. Having allies, after all, is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Alternatively, however, Americans might expect that a Chinese hegemony would be intolerable because China-US tensions would remain high over other strategic issues, and because China would seek changes to global arrangements that would make the United States less safe and prosperous, including Beijing using its influence to greatly constrain US trade and investment opportunities in the region.

4. Is a gentler Chinese foreign policy possible in the foreseeable future? Xi Jinping has pursued a [foreign policy](#) that features more intimidation and less cooperation. But is this a permanent end-state for China, establishing an endlessly antagonistic relationship between China and the US bloc? Xi Jinping has made a lot of mistakes and enemies during his rule. The current lack of dissent in China does not mean there is not a large wellspring of desire for a less oppressive government, one that might implement a more [Deng Xiaoping-like foreign policy](#). Or perhaps Xi himself may decide to moderate his own foreign policy, either because of international blowback or because China gets through what turns out to be a temporary phase of [great power immaturity](#).

If the character of China's external posture is changeable, and important foreign relationships might be at least a factor in that change, Washington should consider whether policies crafted to meet the immediate perceived challenges posed by a hostile China support or unintentionally work against the realization of what Americans would consider positive changes in future Chinese foreign policy.

These four questions invite a re-examination of the foundational assumptions of policy-making. The importance of the US-China relationship, the global ramifications of the current bilateral crisis, and the fact that there are plausible competing answers to each of these questions all demonstrate the need for our

best collective intellectual effort to avoid the bad outcomes that are all too possible.

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