

China's Rise, the United States, and Asia's Angst

by Robert Sutter

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Americans interacting with officials and other experts in the Asia-Pacific region in recent weeks would be reassured that official and other expert opinion among US allies and associates seems to disagree with prevailing media commentary in these countries depicting the United States in decline and China emerging to challenge the US leadership in the region.

The officials and nongovernment experts recognize that China has a long way to go to emerge as Asia's leader. China has a hard job to reassure its neighbors as a result of over four decades of often very negative and disruptive behavior by the PRC in Asia from 1949 until the end of the Cold War.

China's record in the region since then has sometimes lapsed into episodes of coercion and intimidation that remind neighbors of the negative past. Patriotism and nationalism in China make compromise difficult with other equally patriotic and nationalistic Asian countries over salient territorial, economic, or other disputes.

China's win-win diplomacy is reassuring on the one hand but it also makes clear that China will do little for the Asia-Pacific region that does not benefit China in direct and concrete ways. (China's recent initial pledge of only \$10 million to help longstanding Chinese associate Pakistan deal with massive flood damage underlines continued Chinese unwillingness to undertake the risks, costs, and commitments of regional leadership.)

Asian neighbors are often suspicious of China's military buildup and longer term intentions. As a result they have a tendency to engage in contingency plans while they try to benefit from economic and other exchanges with rising China. They often build up their military forces, endeavor to enmesh China into regional organizations, and encourage the United States to remain deeply involved with them and the region.

By contrast, the United States is seen to be in a unique position in providing security and economic public goods essential for Asian governments seeking legitimacy through development. Development requires stability and because Asian governments tend not to trust one another very well, they have come to rely on the very expensive and often quite risky US commitment of military forces in the region to preserve stability.

The governments recognize that no other Asian government or coalition of forces will undertake these costs, risks and commitments. They also recognize that much of the processing trade that makes up half of China's trade and much of the regional trade depends on exports out of the region, and that the United States annually absorbs several hundreds of billions of dollars of Asian goods, running a massive trade deficit that neither China nor any other Asian power would endure.

Other US strengths welcomed by China's neighbors include the active role of the US military, intelligence, and other security organizations play in interaction with almost all countries in the region; and the broad webs of longstanding positive US relations with the region developed by the uniquely active nongovernment sector in the US, including the role of millions of Asian immigrants since the change in US immigration policy in 1965.

Asia's angst—uncertainty about the future

Officials and experts in regional countries allied and associated with the United States on the one hand have tended to welcome the recent US activism in regional groups and US public postures countering unilateral Chinese claims to territorial, resource, and navigation rights in nearby international waters. On the other hand, they are anxious about a possible escalation of tensions between the United States and China that might be hard to manage and could prove to be detrimental to their concerns about preserving regional stability. They look to the US to manage differences with China in ways that off-set perceived Chinese coercion and expansionism but avoid confrontation and tension.

For now, many are preoccupied with what kind of reaction China will have in response to Secretary of State Clinton's intervention regarding stability and navigation rights in the South China Sea at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi in July, and to the presence of a US aircraft carrier and other advanced ships off the coast of Vietnam in celebration of a recent US-Vietnamese anniversary. They also question what plans the United States has to manage China's possible responses in ways that do not undermine regional stability.

Meanwhile, many officials and nongovernment experts have strong concerns about the longer term future. They wonder whether the United States can sustain its military and economic commitments to the region. The global economic crisis and US recession have resulted in massive government debt that raises questions about future US military spending. The crisis and recession also challenge US free trade policies and the sustainability of the US asymmetrical trade relationships with Asia.

China, for its part, seems positioned to continue economic, military, and political advances. China's military buildup has

already raised serious questions about US ability to come to Taiwan's defense in the event of a Chinese attack against the island. Chinese anti-access efforts might hamper US abilities to protect its interests in other areas along the Chinese periphery.

Challenges for the US

Somewhat nervous allies and associates are likely to pose special challenges for US diplomacy. As the government deepens its involvement in sensitive regional issues, Asian friends and others will be watching carefully how well the US balances efforts to off-set Chinese unilateralism and intimidation while avoiding serious and disruptive confrontation or conflict. They also will be watching how well the US sustains its military leadership and open markets for Asian trade.

US handling of sensitive issues like Taiwan are complicated as some friends in the Asia-Pacific aver privately that Taiwan's perceived gravitation into China's orbit, even with the acquiescence of the Taiwan administration, would make it more difficult for the US to reassure Japan, Australia, and other allies of its staying power as China rises. Many US friends and associates want to know what will characterize the new Asian order and how they can best position their governments in the order. Since prevailing circumstances argue for considerable flux in the Asian order for some time to come, the United States likely will be called upon repeatedly to reassure, stabilize, and avoid actions seen as disruptive or confrontational.