

The United States and China in East Asia: Dynamics of A Volatile Competition

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Speaking geopolitically rather than in terms of broader political economy, the most important aspects of China's contemporary foreign policy are necessarily those dealing with the United States on the one hand and with the immediate Asian neighbouring countries on the other, and moreover in combination, with the United States' influences upon the latter. Bearing this third aspect in mind, the most relevant neighbouring countries of China are those in Northeast Asia, stretching from China's Taiwan area which is so important to China and to the claimed interests of the United States, to those in Southeast Asia, and further to India as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Together with the closely related maritime areas (mainly the East and South China Seas and the western Pacific), they constitute the East Asia broadly defined for our purposes here.

One can survey in breadth and depth the volatility of the China-U.S. competition for influence in East Asia, broadly defined as the larger part of China's immediate periphery with closely related maritime areas (primarily the East and South China Seas). In contrast to the state of the game a few years ago, China's diplomatic influence has now shrunk remarkably, while the United States has won many new advantages. In a sense, China's diplomatic/strategic position has not been so troubled since the early 1990s in its immediate surrounding periphery, or so feeble in its relations with the U.S. in the same region.

China in the Lead: Former State of the Game

Less than five years ago in a few published articles written in Chinese, this author expressed an observation on "the cardinal strategic 'secret' embedded in

the fundamental situation of the China-U.S. Relationship." The measured optimistic words in one of them read as follows: "China's rise has relied overwhelmingly upon its peaceful 'soft power' broadly defined (power exercised uncoercively), including that of economic exchange, foreign trade, 'smile diplomacy,' etc., while the United States in the region has mainly put emphasis upon the deployment and reinforcing of its armed forces as well as the strengthening of U.S.-led military alliances and partnerships.... In the context of China's behaviour, this strategy on the part of United States is quite irrelevant....Since the New Guideline for U.S.-Japan Defence Cooperation in 1996, is there any year or even month passed without efforts by Washington to strengthen its armed deployment and military alliances in the East Asia and the western Pacific? But meanwhile, is there any time passed without Beijing's successful increasing of its national strength and international influence in the economic, political, and diplomatic fields? So in a certain sense, China and the United States are in general involved in a sort of 'asymmetrical competition'....Now almost the whole world feels that China is gradually approaching the lead, in an overall balanced assessment of these separate games." ¹

The world felt that, and many people keenly. More than seven years ago, an experienced journalist of The New York Times pointed out in an analytical report "the broad new influence Beijing has accumulated across the Asian Pacific". "Beijing is pushing for regional political and economic groupings it can dominate....It is dispersing aid and, in ways not seen before...." In contrast, "Washington's preoccupation with Iraq and terrorism has left it seemingly disengaged from the region....American military supremacy remains unquestioned, regional officials say. But the United States appears to be on the losing side of trade patterns." The conclusion was without much reservation: "Many here (in Asia) already contend the future belongs to China. A new generation of political and business leaders is placing its bets now on what is nearly universally seen as China's rise--and hedging against a possible waning of American influence." ²

¹ See mainly Shi Yinhong, "The War in Iraq and the China-U.S. Relationship" Contemporary International Relations, No. 5, 2007; Shi Yinhong, "The Strategic Situation and Prospects of China-U.S. Relations," China and World Affairs, No. 2, 2007.

² Jane Perlez, "Across Asia, Beijing's Star Is in Ascendance," The New York Times, August 28, 2004.

Picture Reversed: The Game's New Round

Human affairs are dynamic, even occasionally full of surprise. The picture presented above was indeed generally valid, but the situation now has already been partly reversed because of volatile changes affecting several aspects of the game.

How has it been reversed since then, after less than three years, leaving China much less strong in the game even during a time characterized by the global financial crisis and recession that have so damaged American economic prowess but only complicated China's continued vigorous growth? China still has its soft power broadly defined in the fields of economic exchange, foreign trade, and some other fields, and in fact the larger part of the broad region we are talking about (including the U.S. itself) has even become remarkably more dependent on China economically, while China's human and commercial presence has also grown throughout the region. Yet China's diplomatic influence and effectiveness have been remarkably diminished or discounted in comparison with the past.

Generally speaking, in its immediate surrounding periphery China's diplomatic position has never been so troubled since the early 1990s. With regard to diplomatic influence, the most recent drama occurred on November 19, 2011, when at the East Asian Summit held in Indonesia, "President Obama and nearly all the (attending) leaders....directly confronted China....for its expansive claims to the resource-rich South China Sea, putting the Chinese premier on the defensive in the long-festered dispute". This "represented a tactical defeat in a struggle that has become a focal point in the larger tug-of-war with the United States over influence in the region."¹ As to diplomatic effectiveness, China's "backlash" in response to the Obama Administration's dazzling fortnight-long series of diplomatic, military, and economic actions (including at the East Asia Summit) has been recently described as "relatively muted, at least compared to the past." Kenneth G. Lieberthal, a top China adviser in the Clinton administration who is also closely connected to that of Obama, has defined Obama's initiatives as "a very significant new phase in U.S. policy toward

¹ Jackie Calmes, "Obama and Asian Leaders Confront China's Premier," The New York Times, November 19, 2011.

China....a much more active, integrated, assertive U.S. posture in Asia than anyone expected six months ago.”¹

The reality is that since Barack Obama took power in the White House the United States has developed, in Dr. Lieberthal's words, "a much more active, integrated, assertive" diplomatic posture in East Asia broadly defined, with its military/strategic power even further strengthened in the region but now balanced and supported by American political and diplomatic efforts (although US economic, financial, and trade influences in the region continue to decline gradually). Besides this balance so consciously sought by policy-makers in Washington, what the word "integrated" chiefly refers to is the unifying theme of competition with Beijing to defend American "leadership" and increase its multi-dimensional influence in China's surrounding periphery. The practical result is now so favorable to the U.S. that, remarkably, the volatile regional superiority in diplomatic soft power has shifted from Beijing to Washington: this is the most prominent feature of regional international politics in the past three years.

Foreign Policy Dynamics during the Reversal

Because of the relative familiarity with recent developments amongst professional observers and even interested laymen, we need not list here the details of the American "rollback" in Southeast Asia in terms of its diplomatic and even strategic clout, its fresh assertiveness in regional multilateralism, or its "opportunistic" consolidation of power and influence in Northeast Asia as well as India ("opportunistic" in the sense that achievements were to a great extent due to "local" conditions or contingencies not created, but readily exploited, by policy makers in Washington). More profound are the dynamics that brought about the change.

On the American side, these were primarily the actions of the U.S. government under Barack Obama, whose achievements are partly based on those of his immediate predecessor. The Obama Administration, especially the President himself and his Secretary of State, have spared no effort and missed no opportunity to strive for diplomatic gains in East and Southeast Asia. They have been driven on the one hand by their urgent desire to maintain American "world

¹ Thomas Fuller and Mark Landler, "As Myanmar Eases Controls, U.S. Sees Diplomatic Opening," The New York Times, November 18, 2011.

leadership" during its low period in economics, geo-strategy, and historic power-transition, and on the other, by their foreign policy "philosophy" which puts much emphasis on "soft" and "smart power" (or, in other words, compensating for the decline of economic, financial, and even military capabilities through the exercise of a form of influence wonderful in its relative cost-effectiveness). This has been allied to their prominent sense of grand strategy integrating interests, long-term priorities, multiplicity of means, and cost-effectiveness of action.

Along with all the above, US achievements in East Asia broadly defined have benefited much from "local" contingencies, primarily: major political and psychological changes in countries like Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), and Burma; the apprehension, suspicion, and discontent directed against the Chinese behemoth in neighbouring countries brought about by its rapid and continuous rise, including the vigorous buildup of its longer-range military strength and the extension of its naval activity; the widespread territorial and maritime disputes between China and various neighbouring countries, all staked on mutually conflicting claims of sovereignty, which are becoming more multiple and flammable because of increased mass participation in politics, energy-hungry dispositions, and a sense of strategic insecurity in every disputant nation; the expectation of some governments in the region that they will be rewarded by the United States and their own domestic constituencies for confronting China; and China's own problems of foreign policy orientation, diplomatic manner, and mechanisms of decision-making.

For the sake of brevity, only China's problem of foreign policy orientation will be expounded here, with those of its diplomatic manner and decision-making left perhaps to a separate discussion. There has been an element of Chinese "triumphalism" in its behaviour towards some East Asian neighbouring countries in recent years, with its most important and most general cause lying in "G2 the Chinese version," a really untraditional concept in China's contemporary foreign policy orientation.

Since the latter years of George W. Bush's second administration, one idea had increasingly beguiled the minds and expectations of more and more Chinese foreign policy elites, the idea that the overwhelming priority of the foreign policy of China, as the promising No. 2 great power, should be devoted to all-important efforts for a stable and largely cooperative relationship with the Superpower United States. Though relations between Beijing and Washington

have undergone three major phases of deterioration since the last month of 2009, subsequent periods of improvement, and the assertion of American 'smart power' among other things, largely maintained the "G2 the Chinese version" concept in China, explicitly or potentially.

It could be observed that, besides the "positive" desire for Washington's accommodation of or even indispensable contribution to the No. 2 status to be held by China, with all of its anticipated benefits to China's interests and honour, there was also a conscious or subconscious "negative" hope related to smaller "trouble-makers" around China: that, from China's position of strength deriving both from its own much increased prowess as well as its new bipolar great power relationship with the US, China could dispose of them more harshly, and with greater ease. In some cases, according to this kind of conception, the "trouble-makers" would even be "co-managed" by Beijing and Washington, bringing to mind the joint response to the danger of Taiwanese independence under Chen Shui-bian's regime, and the joint efforts for denuclearization of North Korea before 2009. At least, it seemed a simple matter of economics: to manage the greatest but single "trouble-maker" the United States should have been easier, and more achievable in view of the US's more reasonable attitude toward China, than to manage the smaller but much more numerous "trouble-makers" in China's periphery.

Perhaps, these perceived effects of "G2 the Chinese version" may seem somewhat to twist my analysis, making it depend so much on observation and speculation, but one of "G2's" casualties has been indisputably clear and sufficiently understandable: namely, the relative inattention paid to China's relationship with its East Asian neighbours when that with the United States was given overwhelming priority and consumed most of the limited time for foreign policy available to the "domestic-obsessed" Chinese leaders. The crisis with Japan in autumn 2010, the high tension in the South China Sea disputes, and the almost perennially troublesome North Korea problem were the only major exceptions to this rule for the Asian region in Beijing's foreign policy agenda. Hence the lack of one indispensable condition for a better state of relations with China's neighbours, contributing greatly to a situation in which "the simultaneous backlash [in the relations with Japan, ROK, and Southeast Asian countries] suggests a broad failure of diplomacy from China".¹

¹ "U.S., Asean to Push Back against China," The Wall Street Journal, September 23, 2010.

One point of major significance emerges from all the above: the vital importance of the political leadership, and their vision, aspiration, will-power, and political/strategic skill. The Chinese leadership can learn certain things from their U.S. counterpart, which has won the current major round of competition for influence in East Asia broadly defined. China has its own enormous assets in the region, especially economic vigour, geographical adjacency, and somewhat traditional concepts of diplomatic patience and amiability. Better qualities in political leadership could help it win the next major round, or even more.