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## The Next Phase of the “Contest for Supremacy” in Asia

*Aaron L. Friedberg*

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has pursued a persistent, reasonably coherent, two-part strategy toward China. Albeit with some shifts in rhetoric and emphasis, successive administrations have sought to engage China through trade and diplomacy while at the same time taking steps to maintain a favorable balance of hard power in East Asia. To this latter end, the United States has bolstered its own military capabilities in the region, strengthened strategic cooperation with traditional treaty allies (especially Japan, South Korea, and Australia), and built what might be called “quasi-alliance” partnerships with other countries (such as Singapore and India) that share its concerns about China’s growing power.

The goal of the balancing half of U.S. strategy is to deter aggression or attempts at coercion directed at the United States’ Asian allies. Meanwhile, through engagement, Washington aims to “tame” Beijing, encouraging it to become what the George W. Bush administration termed a “responsible stakeholder” in the existing international system. While they do not always say so in as many words, U.S. policymakers hope that in the long run trade and dialogue will help transform China, easing it along the path from authoritarianism toward liberal democracy.

The Obama administration came into office intending to maintain the basic approach of its predecessors but believing that it could enhance and expand engagement—broadening and deepening it to include issues such as climate change, while minimizing perennial disagreements over human rights. Although they had no intention of abandoning efforts at balancing, administration officials downplayed this part of U.S. strategy. Among other gestures, they dropped the term “hedging” to describe the purpose of the United States’ Asian alliances and military deployments for fear that it conveyed a sense of mistrust, and instead began speaking of the importance of mutual “reassurance.”

Starting in the latter part of 2009, however, this soft-edged approach encountered a series of setbacks as China began to behave more assertively across a variety of fronts. When North Korea sank a South Korean naval vessel in March 2010, Beijing shielded its long-time ally from punishment

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and instead criticized Washington and Seoul for conducting joint naval exercises meant to warn Pyongyang against further aggression. After Japanese authorities arrested a drunken Chinese fishing boat captain in waters near disputed islands in the East China Sea in September of the same year, Beijing chose to escalate what should have been a minor incident into a major diplomatic confrontation, eventually going so far as to suspend exports of rare earth minerals vital to Japanese high-tech manufacturers. Further to the south, Beijing intensified its long-standing claims to virtually all the waters and resources of the South China Sea. Faced with mounting opposition, in July 2010 Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi warned other claimants, with uncharacteristic bluntness, that “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to attempting to browbeat its neighbors, China adopted a tougher verbal stance toward the United States. At various points Chinese officials threatened to impose sanctions on U.S. companies involved in possible arms sales to Taiwan and issued public statements warning that they might stop buying U.S. debt if the president met with the Dalai Lama. Although it proved to be a bluff, the latter threat went well beyond previous expressions of displeasure over this sensitive issue.

The year 2010 also saw a number of notable displays of China’s growing military capabilities, including the rollout of a prototype stealth fighter during a visit to Beijing by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the initial deployment of new antiship ballistic missiles evidently designed to target U.S. aircraft carriers. During the summer the People’s Liberation Army Navy conducted its biggest exercises ever outside the so-called first island chain.

After a brief period of hesitation, the Obama administration began to respond to China’s actions by increasing emphasis on the balancing half of the U.S. strategic portfolio. In addition to sending a deterrent signal to China, the administration sought to reassure U.S. friends and allies of its continuing commitment to the region. Thus, in 2010, the president visited the capitals of various Asian democracies while notably forgoing a stop in Beijing. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded to assertions that the South China Sea was a “core national interest” of China by declaring that the United States had a “national interest” in maintaining freedom of navigation through its waters.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “China’s Aggressive New Diplomacy,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> “U.S. Senators Warn Beijing on South China Sea,” *Financial Times*, July 19, 2011.

At the same time it sought to strengthen its alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines, the United States also took steps toward closer relations with Vietnam. Back in Washington, the Department of Defense announced the formation of an air-sea battle office, a group of planners from the various services whose primary purpose is to develop counters to China's growing anti-access capabilities.

In November 2011, on his third official trip to Asia, President Obama announced a series of additional initiatives: a plan to station U.S. marines in northern Australia, the first steps toward reopening long-suspended diplomatic relations with Burma, and the launch of negotiations for a new free trade area designed to strengthen trans-Pacific economic ties, especially those among the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Vietnam. The president also promised that, despite impending cuts in defense spending, the United States would not merely maintain but actually increase its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. As it sought to detach itself from the protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States would "pivot" toward East Asia. While officials declined publicly to describe U.S. strategy in this way, the Obama administration did nothing to discourage the widespread perception that its words and deeds were part of an effort to counter China's growing power in the region.

The next phase in the escalating geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China will depend in part on the forces driving Beijing's apparent increase in assertiveness. There is a significant body of opinion among professional China watchers that regards the country's recent behavior as the result of transitory factors that have already begun to recede in significance. In this view, Beijing may have overreacted to a number of unanticipated events, but this does not imply that China has adopted a fundamentally new course. The inclination to take tougher positions on a number of issues perhaps had something to do with jockeying among candidates for elevation in the run-up to the impending leadership transition, a protracted and opaque process whose results will be formally announced at the 18th Communist Party Congress this autumn. Finally, some adherents to this view argue that the perception that China has adopted a more confrontational stance is largely due to the unauthorized effusions of a few rogue military officers.

According to this interpretation, China will learn from its mistakes—just as it did in the mid-1990s when it backed away from an earlier series of clashes with its Southeast Asian neighbors—adjusting its policies and toning down its rhetoric so as not to provoke undue anxiety and hostility. Obama's

tough stand will persuade Beijing to back away from its recent belligerence. In retrospect, the assertiveness of the past few years will appear to have been an aberration rather than the wave of the future.

This view is reassuring, but it may be that recent shifts in China's external behavior are manifestations of deeper and more long-lasting changes within the country itself. Since the onset of the financial crisis, many analysts and officials have reached the conclusion that the United States has entered a period of relative decline, which has permitted China to rise even more rapidly than many had expected. This appears to be feeding a sense of triumphalism in some quarters and encouraging the further spread of an especially potent strain of assertive nationalism. The coming decade will see the emergence of a new generation of Chinese political elites who have known nothing but rapid growth and national success, and who, as a result, may lack the patience and innate caution of their elders. As the fate of ousted former Chongqing mayor Bo Xilai suggests, the impending transition will also mark the further institutionalization of a system of comparatively weak collective leadership at the top of the Communist Party. From Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to the present group of unprepossessing bureaucrats, the stature of China's leaders has tended to diminish, to the point where no one figure has the authority to impose his will on the others. Bo's attempt to use his personal popularity to catapult into high office threatened to reverse this trend and to make him the first among equals; it thus posed an unacceptable challenge to all of his contemporaries.

With popular nationalism on the rise, no member of the top leadership will want to risk accusations of softness from potential rivals, and the safest option for all concerned may be to adopt a hard-line stance toward external enemies, real or imagined. Pressures from various quarters will encourage this tendency. In contrast to the past, when mild criticisms of policy generally came from groups of retired officers, some of the more outspoken recent advocates of greater toughness are comparatively high-ranking figures still on active duty. These men are not rogues but representatives of a significant body of opinion within the military and the party. Their willingness to weigh in at critical moments is one indication that the military is playing an increasing role in debates over national policy, along with other groups, including state-owned enterprises and lesser ministries. The danger is that these groups will see their interests as best served by initiatives that deviate from the kind of careful, incremental, rational approach that until recently has characterized Beijing's external strategy.

How will the United States respond to a more forceful, forward-leaning China? The answer will turn on whether Washington has the will, and the wallet, to follow through on the initiatives of the last several years. Although the shift in U.S. policy toward a stiffer stance is likely to be sustained, there are already beginning to be counterpressures. Some observers fear that the Obama administration has gone too far and warn that its recent moves may have been unnecessarily provocative. These arguments are likely to be bolstered by the belief that the United States simply does not have the resources necessary to compete with China. If Washington fails to back strong words with real capabilities, the United States could find itself in the worst of all possible worlds: talking loudly while carrying a too-small stick.

Regardless of who is elected president in November 2012, the next administration will have to operate within tight fiscal constraints as it seeks to narrow annual budget deficits and reduce the level of national debt. Among other things, this will likely result in cuts in defense spending, making it more difficult to respond in an effective and timely way to China's continuing military buildup. The combination of increasing Chinese assertiveness and temporary, self-imposed U.S. restraint could make the coming decade in the Asia-Pacific region more difficult and dangerous than the one just past. 