

More Security for Rising China, Less for Others?

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I S S U E S

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S U M M A R Y In the face of a rising China, the most fundamental concern of Asia Pacific governments is how a stronger China affects their own security. While China could achieve a reasonable amount of security and prosperity playing within the current international rules, there is reason to expect China to use its expanding economic, military, and diplomatic influence to press neighboring governments to conform to its wishes on political issues. Based on a historical perception that a China-centered regional order is the region's natural destiny, China sees itself as the rightful leader of the region. And despite pragmatic forces restraining aggressive behavior by China, there is immense nationalistic pressure that pushes the top leadership toward more confrontational foreign policies. An important aspect of the strategic impact of China's rise depends on whether its policies violate international norms and threaten the security of other countries. Regional security will be defined in part by the willingness and ability of the region to stand up to China's demands.

The rise of China presents a mix of opportunities and perils. One of the dangers is stress on the structures and arrangements that have kept most of the region relatively peaceful since the climax of the Cold War. Currently peace is robust, but within a decade or two powerful forces within China may defy restraint and increase the risk of conflicts, especially in the geographic areas close to China's borders. In the longer term, maintaining peace will require Beijing and Washington to reconcile competing visions of the regional order.

China's "rise" is made possible by a relatively rapid and sustained economic growth rate. A strong economy is the basis for technological and military power, and by extension political influence. An economically more capable PRC (People's Republic of China) is also strategically more capable. Not only is it able to build large numbers of more formidable weapons platforms and systems, but the Chinese also gain leverage with regional governments that are eager to trade.

An important question is how Beijing will wield this new influence. The first order of business for states is to protect themselves from other states; the most fundamental concern of Asia Pacific governments is whether a stronger China makes them more or less secure. The strategic impact of China's rise depends partly on the extent to which it pursues policies that violate commonly accepted norms and threaten the security of other countries. How other countries react to the rise of China is equally important. China's perception of whether its external environment is accommodating versus threatening, and offers opportunities versus dangers, will shape PRC foreign policy. Much is still undetermined.

During much of antiquity the Chinese saw their country as the cultural, political, and economic center of the world

The Burden of History

China brings a mountain of historical baggage to its new global role. Its unique view of itself and its place in the region heavily colors the perceptions and expectations that shape PRC security policies. The Chinese draw at least three prominent lessons from their history. The first is that China is the rightful leader of the region. During much of antiquity the Chinese saw their country as the cultural, political,

and economic center of the world. For centuries regional kingdoms participated in a Chinese tribute system. They periodically professed the superiority of the Chinese emperor and presented Beijing with symbolic gifts. In return they received trading privileges and sometimes military assistance. The Chinese saw all foreign countries as inferior, but ranked them as more or less civilized depending on how much they had assimilated Chinese culture. Many Chinese believe this previous China-centered regional order represents the region's natural destiny absent Western intrusion.

A second historical takeaway for the Chinese is the belief in Chinese exceptionalism. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership argues, and many Chinese accept, that while great powers are typically avaricious and ruthlessly exploitative, China is different. The difference purportedly stems partly from China's Confucian culture (which stipulates that superiors should set a morally upright example and should treat inferiors with benevolence) and partly from China's empathy for downtrodden Third World countries. Accordingly, it is not difficult for Chinese to believe their government's claim that a strong China will be a benevolent, principled great power that abhors exploitation and bullying.

A third theme from the Chinese interpretation of their history is that China is a victim, not an aggressor. In CCP historiography, when China was the regional great power, it was magnanimous toward its smaller neighbors, sharing its culture and expertise. Other strong countries, however, were not magnanimous toward China. They treated China as, in Sun Yat-sen's memorable imagery, a huge piece of meat to be carved up to feed foreign appetites.¹ The "eight imperialist powers,"² especially Japan, inflicted injustice and terrible suffering on a China that was too weak to keep them at bay. These events are abundantly commemorated through the Chinese media and education system. The narrative of victimhood became especially strong during the 1990s as the CCP government stoked nationalism to motivate the masses to support the party and rapid economic development.

At least two important legacies of China's interpretation of history are visible in Chinese foreign

relations today. The first is what could be called an asymmetry of security sensitivity. On one hand, the Chinese are undersensitive to other countries' fears about China. These fears are fed not only by the long premodern history of Chinese regional domination, but also by Chinese policies that threatened neighboring governments (such as promoting communist revolution or the punitive 1979 invasion of Vietnam) during the PRC's first decades. China's interpretation of its own history has led to a national myth that Chinese security policy, including threats or actual uses of force, is always defensive and morally justified.³ Chinese officials and media routinely dismiss the concerns of other Asia Pacific countries as groundless or disingenuous. On the other hand, the Chinese are hypersensitive to threats from other countries. Most Chinese seem unwilling or unable to distinguish between "containment" and hedging by the United States, and are prone to seeing US policies as fundamentally anti-China when they are not. An example was the Chinese reaction to the US and South Korean naval exercises in the Yellow Sea after a serious North Korean provocation in 2010. Chinese commentary described the episode as an American attempt to intimidate China, rejecting the more reasonable interpretation that Seoul and Washington needed to demonstrate resolve to Pyongyang.

A second legacy is the Chinese belief that as a great power returning to the level of prominence it enjoyed in premodern Asia, China is entitled to a regional sphere of influence. China demands that foreign governments be deferential to its wishes in the areas that constitute China's "near abroad": the Yellow Sea, the Korean Peninsula, the East and South China Seas, Taiwan, and mainland Southeast Asia. Beijing bristles when other countries undertake policies in areas near its border that affect and conflict with China's agenda. The PRC also seeks greater influence in the adjoining subregions of South Asia and Central Asia, competing with India and Russia, respectively. Such Chinese behavior is double-determined: it is consistent with the general behavior of great powers (the United States, for example, has the Monroe Doctrine) and with China's historical self-image.

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Restraints on China

In the modern world, there are at least three forces that restrain aggressive behavior by a strong China. One of these forces is Beijing's realization that China benefits immensely from the current international system. The PRC economy has relatively high dependence on foreign trade. China has for many years enjoyed a massive annual trade surplus with the United States, which reached nearly \$300 billion in 2011. In addition to foreign trade and investment, China gains expertise and technology from its engagement with the international economy. It would therefore suffer greatly and disproportionately from a Chinese act or policy that curtailed its access to this inflow of economic benefits from the outside world. This gives the Chinese leadership a strong incentive to maintain the status quo even if this requires patience and tolerance toward the parts of the status quo that China dislikes, such as the strong security role the United States plays in the region. The US security presence is an obstacle to China realizing its desired outcomes on issues such as Taiwan's autonomy, the South China Sea territorial disputes, and Japan's remilitarization.

A second force restraining Chinese policy is the tendency of states to engage in balancing behavior against perceived threats. The Chinese have demonstrated extraordinary awareness of the danger that their country's ascendance could alarm other countries and cause them to band together in an anti-China coalition. Outright PRC aggression would likely rally not only the combined opposition of the Southeast Asian countries, but also the possible intervention of the middle powers: Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea. And then, of course, there is the United States.

Despite the tyranny of distance, the United States can project unmatched military power into the Western rim of the Pacific basin. At minimum, military conflict with the Americans would be prohibitively costly for the Chinese, behooving Beijing to avoid such a conflict short of a direct US challenge to a vital PRC interest. Unless Washington decides to strategically downsize, the United States will likely maintain the upper hand militarily even after China's

economy becomes larger than America's. Washington claims US forces and policies aim to uphold stability and international norms, leaving ample room for China to "rise" through peaceful, noncoercive economic and diplomatic competition. Based on a cold-blooded cost-benefit analysis, attempting to run the sheriff out of town does not seem a prudent choice for China.

A third restraining force, at least in theory, is China's persistent internal frailty. Despite its apparent economic success, China still faces many daunting domestic challenges that could limit its national strength. The CCP fears large-scale discontent and with good cause. Many groups of Chinese citizens are unhappy for various reasons—their region or ethnic group is relatively disadvantaged, they suffer injustices at the hands of corrupt local officials, they have been left behind by the economic boom, or their demands that their government follow the rule of law are unsatisfied. Continuing to hold together the restive parts of the Chinese empire is a drain on China's political and financial capital; in particular, it requires the regime to maintain large ground forces for internal security. Many economists point out that in order to maintain robust economic growth, China's leaders must rebalance the economy away from export-dependent growth toward growth based on greater domestic consumption. This will require Beijing to make politically difficult adjustments.⁴ As China becomes more prosperous and Chinese society strengthens relative to the state, Beijing is facing stronger calls for political liberalization despite the CCP's claim that multiparty democracy would lead to chaos and disaster. These and other weaknesses could deter China's leaders from attempting an aggressive foreign policy, which would strain Chinese resources and national cohesion.

Self-defense requirements do not explain China's large and steady expansion in its defense spending

Increased Capabilities, Increased Tensions

China is a potential adversary for many Asia Pacific countries, especially those with a recent history of conflict or strategic tensions with China. Even leaving aside the question of Chinese intentions, the rise of China includes the expansion of the country's

military capabilities relative to those of other states. This alone inevitably worsens regional friction.

China's rapid military buildup is both quantitative and qualitative. Annual military spending has gone up by a double-digit percentage in every year for over a decade.⁵ The governments of Japan, India, the United States, Australia, and some Southeast Asian countries have expressed concern about this buildup and about some Chinese actions. A common argument of outside observers is that China's self-defense requirements do not explain the large and steady expansion in its defense spending, since there is no apparent military threat to China. There would be no need for extraordinarily strong armed forces unless China planned to go to war against one or more of its neighbors. Chinese officials and some analysts respond that the country is bringing a long-underfunded military up to the standard appropriate to China's size, importance, and newly acquired economic heft; that most of the increased funding goes toward raising the salaries and living conditions of the troops; and that China's military spending is still much less than that of the United States. A largely unstated point is that China's main perceived security threat is the possibility of Taiwan independence under the umbrella of US military protection. In that case the Chinese must be prepared to fight American forces in the western Pacific.

A militarily bulked-up China presents new limitations and risks for the other Asia Pacific countries, especially those that have strategic disputes with the PRC. India has long worried about China establishing a military presence in the Indian Ocean or pressing more strongly Chinese claims to disputed border territories such as Arunachal Pradesh. Japan fears a blockade of essential imports by Chinese forces and blackmail by China's nuclear arsenal. A stronger China could prevent Southeast Asian countries from taking fish or hydrocarbons from the South China Sea.

An enhanced Chinese navy now routinely sends vessels into the Indian Ocean, through the Ryukyu chain across the sea-lanes that supply the main islands of Japan, and deep into the South China Sea. The recent deployment of an aircraft carrier, with the promise of more to come, gives Chinese forces an

unmatched capability to seize and hold disputed islands in the South China Sea. A hypothetical PRC invasion of Taiwan, once derided as the “million-man swim,” is no longer a joke as the PRC deploys short-range ballistic and cruise missiles, large numbers of modern ships and aircraft, transport vessels, and cyber-war capabilities. The United States claims a leadership role in the Asia Pacific, premised on America maintaining a preponderance of military strength relative to would-be rivals. Once practically invulnerable to PRC counter-attacks, US bases and naval task forces in the western Pacific region now face the realistic possibility of serious losses in the event of a US-China military clash. If other countries were to lose faith in America’s ability to apply decisive force in the region, American influence might diminish and Chinese leadership might correspondingly increase.

With Great Power Comes the Will to Dominate

With greater relative capabilities, China’s aspirations will expand. The country will use its economic and diplomatic influence, with expanding military capabilities in the background, to press neighboring governments to conform to its wishes on political issues. For example, the upgraded PRC navy, originally limited to coastal missions, is implementing a new concept of “far sea defense.” Under this doctrine Chinese warships project naval power into distant oceans, even preparing for the contingency of escorting ships from the Persian Gulf through the Indian Ocean. The deputy commander of China’s East Sea Fleet explicitly linked China’s economic growth with a stronger military: “With the expansion of the country’s economic interests,” he said, “the navy wants to better protect the country’s transportation routes and the safety of our major sea lanes . . . [and therefore] needs to develop along the lines of bigger vessels and with more comprehensive capabilities.”⁶

As China’s security demands expand, inevitably they will further impinge on the strategic freedom of other Asia Pacific countries. In the case of the “sensitive” issues that involve CCP legitimacy or are within the presumed Chinese sphere of influence, the usual restraints against heavy-handed Chinese

behavior are relatively less powerful. The imperative of self-defense takes precedence over Chinese fears of appearing dishonorable or threatening. Yet Chinese actions in their backyard challenge areas of vital interest to other countries.

An example is Taiwan. Beijing insists that the government of China (i.e., the CCP) has sovereignty over the island even if Taiwan’s inhabitants may disagree. The PRC asserts a position (backed by the threat of military force) that represents an existential threat to the people of Taiwan and their chosen political and economic system. In the case of the South China Sea, Beijing refuses to renounce its claim to ownership of nearly the entire body of water. This denies the Southeast Asian claimant countries even the coastal exclusive economic zones that are granted by the Law of the Sea Treaty, of which China is a signatory. When high-ranking Chinese military men and many Chinese media organs stridently objected to 2010 US–South Korean naval exercises in the Yellow Sea that were amply justified by North Korean provocations, the PRC implicitly asserted that China should have veto power over US security cooperation with a formal US ally in waters near the ally’s coast.

The rise of China has a particular impact on US-China relations. The United States is the principal sponsor of a historically unique regional security order. This order includes an architecture of US alliances, forward-deployed bases, and international institutions, overlaid with a set of widely accepted norms regulating international affairs. This order reflects US interests and values, but not necessarily those of China. As the rising power, China naturally aspires to take leadership of the regional order from the old master and to revise it to China’s liking. History has seen other cases like this, and past experience suggests the scenario is dangerous. The rising challenger may pick a fight because it is impatient and wants to speed up the transition, while the reigning great power may consider starting a preventive war before its power level is surpassed by the rising challenger. Some scholars argue that the risk of war is low in this case: China and the United States lack a compelling reason to go to war against each other; both have nuclear weapons, which makes them cautious about

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China's long-term vision for East Asia has no room for US bases or alliances

getting into even a conventional conflict; and both would rather concentrate on domestic issues and gain through peaceful trade.⁷

Nevertheless, maintaining equilibrium between US accommodation and Chinese patience will become increasingly difficult, posing a stiff challenge to future US and PRC leaders. Beijing clearly aims to ease out the United States as a strategic player in the western Pacific. In the short term, the PRC expects Washington to extract itself from the Taiwan issue (by phasing out arms sales) and from the South China Sea issue. China's long-term vision for East Asia has no room for US bases or alliances.

Selective Global Citizenship

On global security issues outside China's perceived sphere of influence, cooperation between the country and other major powers is potentially easier because the sense of a proprietary Chinese interest is weaker. China, however, only conditionally supports international norms. In the Chinese view, these norms and most of modern international law reflect a relatively recent and anomalous period of Western global dominance. Thus the Chinese are not intrinsically supportive of Western norms and law. Beijing tends to fall in line when it faces a united international consensus to avoid attracting negative attention as an outlier. The Chinese often appeal to widely accepted international laws and principles that bear on international security, but in a selective way in support of specific Chinese policies. As China's interests become more global and less parochial, Beijing has a greater interest in maintaining stability in far-flung parts of the world. Chinese leaders may therefore take a more managerial view of global affairs and see wisdom in more closely aligning Chinese policy with an evolving set of internationally negotiated rules of international affairs. On the other hand, with continued relative growth the Chinese will be in a stronger position to assert alternative principles to justify actions that suit narrow PRC interests.

For the foreseeable future, Beijing's objectives will clash with important security-related norms upheld by most of the other major powers. The PRC's

support for multinational efforts to curtail the proliferation of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles has improved since the 1980s, but the process has been slow and halting. China's unannounced destruction in 2007 of one of its satellites in orbit, which created a debris field that will imperil other countries' space equipment for years, was disturbing. China is the source of a massive and well-organized computer hacking campaign against the United States and other countries that attempts not only to steal their industrial secrets but also to compromise their security.⁸ Claims of noninvolvement in this outlaw activity by the PRC government have become difficult to take seriously.

The Beijing government is highly fearful of attempts by the Western governments (especially the United States) to overthrow Chinese Communist Party rule. This has led to the PRC's "non-intervention" doctrine, which continues to conflict with the UN-recognized "responsibility to protect." Beijing often shelters and supports authoritarian regimes, which impedes the global promotion of good governance, civil liberties, and social justice. Lack of progress in these areas contributes to conditions in which terrorist organizations can flourish.

When the major Western countries try to employ sanctions against misbehaving countries with which China has valuable economic and political partnerships, China tends to resist, putting forward the principle that sanctions are unjust and ineffective.⁹ Yet Beijing has on several occasions implemented or threatened sanctions against countries that tread on narrow Chinese interests. China's overall record demonstrates at best selective defense of global security norms. A stronger China is more capable of undermining international efforts to discipline outlaw regimes in cases where the perceived value of a bilateral relationship outweighs Beijing's sense of international citizenship.

Not-So-Pacific Century?

If China's preferences were fulfilled, countries in the region would defer to China on all major international issues. Based on recent positions taken by

Beijing, the PRC's objectives clearly include gaining rule-setting authority over the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea; victory for the PRC in all of its claims to disputed territory; greatly reduced security cooperation between the region and the United States, including the elimination of US bases and the "Cold War era" US alliances with Asia Pacific countries; the end of Western efforts to promote democratization in Asia; absorption of Taiwan into the PRC; a militarily weak Japan that accommodates Beijing; and the continued survival of the North Korean government along with deepening economic integration between North Korea and China's northeastern provinces. These form China's maximum objectives.

Short of achieving the entirety of these objectives, China's people can certainly achieve a reasonable amount of security and prosperity while playing within the current international rules or by peacefully seeking to adjust those rules. None of the Asia Pacific governments actively opposes China becoming wealthy or addressing legitimate Chinese security concerns. In striving to realize all of their preferences, however, the Chinese would reduce the security and prosperity of other countries in the region. The question is whether the Chinese can settle for getting much but not all of what they want. Unfortunately, Chinese impatience with aspects of the status quo they dislike can be expected to increase, driven by nationalistic elite groups (led by the People's Liberation Army) and vociferous segments of PRC public opinion. The current situation features strong cushioning against conflict: China benefits handsomely from peaceful engagement within the current system, while the promise of coordinated international resistance led by the superpower United States helps deter Chinese behavior that other states would consider threatening.

Two major concerns emerge. The first is China's willfulness within the sphere of influence to which the Chinese believe they are entitled. What the Chinese may see as their backyard is other countries' front yards. Yet persuading the PRC to climb down from contentious positions it has taken on some

strategic issues in the near abroad will be difficult. One reason is the expectation that China's material strength will continue to grow relative to other states in the region. The Chinese have cause to believe their economic and political importance will eventually become so overwhelming as to force regional governments to submit to Chinese preferences.

Another reason for China to resist compromising its maximum objectives is that the leadership in Beijing fears the wrath of nationalistic public opinion at home. Understandably, the legitimacy-hungry CCP has tried to gain credit among the Chinese people for establishing China's international status as a great power. This mood of national triumphalism, however, has the unintended effect of intensifying domestic pressure on the government to stand up to foreign governments in defense of China's interests. In contrast to the recent past, much of the Chinese public closely follows developments in international affairs and is immediately aware of acts by the Chinese government that Chinese nationalists would consider overly submissive.¹⁰ Generally, the effect of these domestic nationalistic forces is to push the Chinese government toward more confrontational foreign policies. Mobilized public opinion sometimes forces Beijing's top leadership to take tough actions opposed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, requiring subsequent damage control by Chinese diplomats. China's diplomatic partners must understand that nationalistic domestic forces constrain decision making by the top level of PRC leadership.

The second concern is the willingness and ability of the region to stand up to unreasonable Chinese demands. Up to now, the rise of China has produced not a mass regional defection from the US-sponsored security order, but rather increased demand for US influence and leadership. The supply of that leadership now appears uncertain due to America's financial difficulties. A strong American economic rebound could quickly retire this issue. Otherwise, Asia Pacific states might face a choice between paying greater costs to maintain a defensive coalition with less US help and reaching their own separate accommodations with China.

The question is whether the Chinese can settle for getting much but not all of what they want

Notes

¹ David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840–1949: Power, Presence and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 216.

² This descriptive phrase is commonly used in China and refers to Britain, the United States, France, Russia, Japan, Italy, Germany, and Austria.

³ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴ Damien Ma, "Is Chinese Growth Sustainable?" *Atlantic Monthly*, Aug. 18, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/08/is-chinese-growth-sustainable/243795/>.

⁵ Jane Perlez, "Continuing Buildup, China Boosts Military Spending More Than 11 Percent," *New York Times*, Mar. 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/world/asia/china-boosts-military-spending-more-than-11-percent.html>.

⁶ Edward Wong, "Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power," *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/asia/24navy.html>.

⁷ Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁸ Bryan Krekel, Patton Adams, and George Bakos, "Occupying the Information High Ground: Chinese Capabilities for Computer Network Operations and Cyber Espionage," Northrop Grumman Corporation, report prepared for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Mar. 7, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/03/08/National-Security/Graphics/USCC_Report_Chinese_Capabilities_for_Computer_Network_Operations_and_Cyber_%20Espionage.pdf.

⁹ "Washington Exempts Nations from Sanctions on Iran," *China Daily*, Mar. 22, 2012, <http://www.chinadailyapac.com/article/washington-exempts-nations-sanctions-iran>.

¹⁰ One source of information on Chinese public opinion is <http://www.pewglobal.org/search/China/>.

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