

Summary

This is a summary of a presentation given during the First United States-China Relations Forum on January 25, 2016.

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United States-China Relations Forum: A Quest for Status and Influence?

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China has recently been the center of international attention following Xi Jinping's ascension to the top leadership position of the Chinese Communist Party. Xi has stated that "the period extended to 2020 is a period of strategic opportunity for China's growth and development." He has also announced his intention to have closer economic, political as well as cultural ties to other Asian countries through what he defined as "major-country diplomacy with China's own characteristics". This has marked the biggest shift in Chinese foreign policy in decades. It is a shift from a low-profile path of non-interference and focus economic growth to a more assertive and active role in world affairs, all the while maintaining and advancing China's sovereignty and security interests.

Accordingly, here we will first look at the main goals and objectives behind Xi's new foreign policy, secondly we need to explain perceptions and reactions from other Asian countries, and finally some predictions for the future of the U.S.-China Relations regarding the Asia-Pacific Region are provided.

China's Three Core Objectives in Asia

At present, China can be seen as seeking to achieve three major goals in Asia in order to gain closer relations with its neighboring countries and avoid a direct confrontation with the U.S. First, China is pursuing the goal of regional economic integration. This is represented by many projects initiated in the region such as the establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt

and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, collectively known as the One Belt, One Road initiative. Active promotion of bilateral and multilateral FTAs with eminent economic powers, such as Japan and South Korea, has also been a priority.

The second goal is China's control over its near seas. Beijing attaches great importance to its surrounding seas, which include the East China Sea, South China Sea, and the Yellow Sea. And here, China is enhancing the PLA's capacity to conduct regional military operations. This goal aims at countering any foreign intervention, mainly U.S. military forces, in a conflict in China's near seas.

In the same spirit, China is pursuing its third goal of defending and advancing Chinese sovereignty and maritime claims over some disputed areas, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with Japan, and generally exerting control over the land and waters contained within the nine-dash line. Clearly, China's approach and behavior in the Asia-Pacific region is aimed at persuading its neighbors of the economic and development benefits, and advance the country's territorial and maritime claims.

Reactions and perceptions: How persuasive is China's Foreign Policy?

China's assertiveness and muscular behavior has raised concerns among East Asian countries as it has brought back memories of Chinese aggression in the region. Public

opinion polls conducted by the Pew Research Institute regarding regional concerns about China's behavior and intentions in Asia-Pacific shows "very high" concerns with in the Philippines (91%) and in Japan and Vietnam (83%), while people in Pakistan and Indonesia were significantly less concerned at 18% and 11% respectively. We might deduce that responses to China's policies creates a dilemma for Asian countries: choosing between economic integration or dealing with the military threat. And here, we can predict two different scenarios of reactions, depending on the geographical proximity to China.

Countries that are most exposed to the South and East China seas are more worried about China's military activities, and thus will be more willing to welcome an increased American military presence. While the countries that are not directly linked to the South and East China seas will be more likely to embrace greater economic ties with China and benefit from the massive influx of money and resources to their countries. The worst scenario for Beijing, if the security threat keeps growing and countries don't respond positively to these new proposals and initiatives, would be granting tremendous amount of money without getting any returns in the form of increased regional influence, the result China is truly seeking. Some Asian countries will be keen to cooperate with China on development issues, while leaning towards the U.S. on security issues.

Future of U.S.-China Relations

As for predictions regarding the future of U.S.-China Relations, it is probably still early to foretell a U.S.-China rivalry or whether cooperation will blossom in the region. China's plans and new initiatives are still in their first phase of establishment, and the U.S., other than the announcement of the Rebalance to Asia policy which many experts feel lacks clear vision, has yet to express

a clear position on their intentions in the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the two countries tend to show contradictory behavior, with high hostility in some issues and increasing cooperation in others.

However, it seems judicious to assume that a powerful China will be less willing to tolerate an American military presence in East Asia, particularly near its borders. Therefore, Beijing will undoubtedly attempt to push and deter U.S. forces away from the Asia-Pacific region. By a way of conclusion, the next step by the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region, not just militarily, but also economically and diplomatically, will be crucial in shaping the security landscape in the region. It will be also interesting to see how the divergent courses taken by the various Asian countries regarding Chinese economic and security policies develop, and whether the future holds economic integration or security fragmentation or both.

Discussion: Will China's Diplomatic Strategy Be Effective in the Long Run?

China's diplomatic strategy seems to be a mix of charm offensives and the issuing of veiled threats by displaying its power. China's charm offensive strategy refers to its attempts to woo Asian countries with promises of economic and security benefits. At the same time, it is also striving to threaten its neighbors and the U.S. Some might question how effective this would be in the long run in increasing China's influence in Asia. China's diplomatic strategy is unlikely to be effective in the long run unless it comes up with a more convincing alternative.

First, China's prolonged economic slowdown has reached a level at which Asian countries no longer feel threatened nor interested in China which seems to be losing power on the international stage. To illustrate this point, last year, China's economy grew at its slowest pace in a quarter of a century as it undergoes a difficult

transition from a country reliant on manufacturing and exports to one based on consumption. Some predict that China will seek implementation of a Monroe Doctrine type policy in Asia. However, China's sluggish economy and weakening power will eventually cause neighboring Asian countries to have less enthusiasm in the regional economic integration that China is pursuing at the moment through efforts such as creating the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). When the economic incentives vanish due to the weakening of the Chinese economy, the neighboring countries would no longer have a stake in China itself.

Secondly, there are still many unresolved human rights as well as humanitarian issues in China which makes it difficult for its neighbors to respect China as a democratic country that abides by the rule of law. A closed society that does not embrace the expression of different views within a country is very likely to go on to refuse to listen to its neighbors' opinions as well. This would certainly make China an unattractive partner.

Finally, China will find it difficult to sustain its position as a superpower when it continues to fail taking responsibility for the environment by combating climate change. What is worse, it is in fact the main culprit in creating environmental pollution thus victimizing neighboring countries with serious problems including intense smog and yellow dust.

Discussion: Second Cold War?

China's foreign policies greatly affect the coexistence of the U.S. and China in East Asia. Although the two great powers are getting along well on certain agendas that meet both countries' national interests, the ultimate aim of China's long-term strategies and policies seems to be at displacing the U.S. as the preeminent power in the Asian bloc. The core problem is that neither is the region big enough to hold both of them, nor is it

willing to allow both of them to be the great powers of the region. The worst scenario is that another Cold War might occur if they cannot find a way to cooperate to preserve peace and stability in the region. In order to prevent another global confrontation, China's policies should not be merely limited to achieving its own "Chinese dream," but rather engage with the U.S. and other middle powers.

China seems to be extremely vigorous in implementing many foreign policies with special names such as the "One Belt One Road" strategy. Implementation and practice of the diverse policies and strategies are only successful when other countries buy into their intentions. However, a great majority of China's policies and strategies that others show their willingness to cooperate with are those that deal with economic issues. On the other hand, its security policies and objectives seem to be hardly agreeable as they deal with historically and geopolitically sensitive issues. Hence, the military policies tend to be more or less unilateral. When China is showing such a contradictory attitude towards the two utmost elements of hard power, economics and security, the time seems to be approaching for the neighboring countries such as Japan to decide whether they should also show a two-track response: economically cooperating with China even when the historical and geopolitical disputes remain unresolved.

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