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U.S.-China Competition in Asia: Legacies Help America

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As Sino-American competition for influence enters a new stage with the Obama administration's re-engagement with Asia, each power's legacies in the region add to economic, military and diplomatic factors determining which power will be more successful in the competition. How the United States and China deal with their respective histories in regional affairs and the role of their non-government relations with the Asia-Pacific represent important legacies that on balance favor the United States.

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The Role of History

From the perspective of many regional government officials and observers, the United States and the People's Republic of China both have historically very mixed records, often resorting to highly disruptive and violent measures to preserve their interests. The record of the United States in the Cold War and later included major wars in Korea and Vietnam and constant military friction along Asia's rim as it sought to preserve military balance and deter perceived aggression. Many in Asia benefited from America's resolve and major sacrifices. Most today see the United States as a mature power well aware of the pros and cons of past behavior as it crafts a regional strategy to avoid a potentially dangerous withdrawal and to preserve stability amid U.S. economic and budget constraints.

In contrast, rising China shows little awareness of the implications of its record in the region. Chinese officials and citizens remain deeply influenced by an officially encouraged erroneous claim that China has always been benign and never expansionist. The highly disruptive policies and practices of the People's Republic of China under the revolutionary leadership of Mao Zedong and the more pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping are not discussed. Well-educated audiences at foreign policy forums at universities and related venues show little awareness of such legacies as consistent Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge as a means to preserve Chinese interests in Southeast Asia. China's military invasion of Vietnam and Chinese directed insurgencies against major governments in Southeast Asia, both Western-aligned states and the strictly neutral government of Burma, seem widely unknown.

Chinese officials who should know better also refuse or are unable to deal honestly with the recent past. Speaking last year to a group of Asian Pacific including Vietnamese, American and Chinese officials and scholars deliberating over recent trends in Asia, a Chinese foreign affairs official emphasized in prepared remarks that China "has always



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been a source of stability in Asia.” After watching the Vietnamese participants squirm in their seats, others raised objections to such gross inaccuracy.

The Chinese lacuna regarding how it has been perceived by its neighbors encumbers China’s efforts to gain influence in the region. China has a lot to live down. Regional governments need steady reassurance that China will not employ its growing power to return to the domineering and disruptive practices that marked forty of the sixty years of the People’s Republic of China. Educated Chinese citizens and at least some responsible officials appear insensitive to this need because of ignorance. They see no requirement to compensate for the past and many criticize Chinese government actions that try to accommodate concerns of regional neighbors. The nationalistic rhetoric coming from China views neighbors as overly sensitive to Chinese assertions and coercive measures on territorial, trade and other issues which revive regional wariness that the antagonistic China of the recent past may be reemerging with greater power in the current period.

Non-government Relations

Like many countries, China’s interaction with its neighbors relies heavily on the Chinese government and other official organizations. Even areas such as trade, investment, media, education and other interchange are heavily influenced by administrative support and guidance. An exception is the large numbers of ethnic Chinese living for generations in neighboring countries, especially in Southeast Asia, which represent a source of non-government influence for China. On balance, the influence of these groups is positive for China, although suspicions about them remain in some countries.

By contrast, for much of its history, the United States exerted influence in Asia and the Pacific much more through business, religious, media, foundations, educational and other interchange than through channels dependent on government leadership and support. Active American non-government interaction with the region continues today, putting the United States in a unique position where the American non-government sector has such a strong and usually positive impact on the influence the United States exerts in the region. Meanwhile, almost 50 years of generally color-blind U.S. immigration policy since the ending of discriminatory U.S. restrictions on Asian immigration in 1965 has resulted in the influx of millions of Asia-Pacific migrants who call America home and who interact with their countries of origin in ways that under gird and reflect well on the U.S. position in the region. No other country, with the exception of Canada, has such an active and powerfully positive channel of influence in the Asia-Pacific.

Outlook: Advantage U.S.

The primary concerns in the Asia-Pacific with stability and development mean that U.S.-Chinese competition for influence probably will focus more on persuasion than coercion. The strong American foundation of webs of positive non-government regional interchange and the Obama government’s widely welcomed re-engagement with the region contrasts with rising China’s poor awareness of its historical impact on the region and limited non-government connections.