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The Rise of China: What To Watch For

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Denny Roy, Senior Research Fellow at the East-West Center, explains that “Particularly in recent years Beijing has shown an inability or unwillingness to recognize that, in the eyes of some neighbors, Chinese ‘defense’ looks like Chinese assertiveness.”

As China becomes relatively stronger, its foreign policy continues to evolve. The character of China’s relationships with its neighbors one or two decades henceforth is therefore unknowable. China is entering uncharted territory, even China’s leaders cannot make credible promises about the future because the collection of pressures and incentives that will influence their calculations will be different from today. China has been a great power before, but never in the age of modern nation states, never when the region was so crowded with other major powers, and never when a reigning superpower was already on the scene. Furthermore, Chinese elites in the post-“Century of Humiliation” era view the current international system as more dangerous than did their pre-modern counterparts who believed in the then age-old mantra that foreigners could not really conquer China.

Current indications are that Beijing does not aspire to superpower status. As the Chinese have seen, this requires constantly providing international public goods and taking the lead on inevitably controversial issues and policies that engender ill-will toward the superpower. For the Chinese, being one of a small group of a roughly equal great powers and having a prominent voice in the management of global affairs is enough. On the regional level, however, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) government apparently believes China is destined to lead the Asia-Pacific. Although this is not officially pronounced PRC policy, it is safe to say the Chinese want and expect the United States to leave the region as a strong strategic player, taking a role more akin to that of Europe—an active economic partner, but no longer a “resident power,” shorn of the military bases and alliances as well as the influence that comes with them.

Where China goes from here will depend partly on which of two opposite and contending trends takes the fore. One trend is Chinese convergence with the present international system (i.e., the norms and institutions that order international affairs). Think of China during the Cultural Revolution—practically disengaged from international diplomacy, self-isolated from the capitalist global economy of which Mao was highly suspicious, and committed to fomenting revolution in nearby countries. In contrast, today’s China has diplomatic relations with countries around the world including South Korea and the Southeast Asian states, participates enthusiastically in multilateral organizations, powers global capitalism, is a recent host of the Olympic Games, and practices (to a fault, arguably) a live-and-let-live approach to other countries’ domestic political systems. The Chinese government has signed the UN Law of the Sea and major UN human rights covenants, renounced exporting missiles and nuclear weapons technology, and endured significant domestic pain to join the World Trade Organization. One can of course take issue with how well the Chinese have lived up to their international commitments. The point is this: over the past few decades, China has moved dramatically from sullen outsider to full participant in the global order.

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The countervailing trend, however, is a growing compulsion to assert Chinese preferences rather than seek cooperative or compromise solutions to international disputes, especially those within the region. This inclination is likely to strengthen as the Chinese perceive they are coming closer to overcoming the gaps between their economic, diplomatic and military power and those of the United States. The dubious notion of irresistible US decline adds to Chinese confidence. In many instances this Chinese insistence on China always getting its way puts China at odds with international norms and institutions.

The rise of *this* China inevitably challenges the current system, which was built by Western states and naturally reflects and supports their interests. Key parts of this international order reflect liberal Western values (pro-democratization, settlement of disputes without force or bullying, promotion of good governance, recognition of the principle of “responsibility to protect,” etc.), adherence to modern international law, and a pre-eminent “enforcer” country that has no irredentist territorial agenda in the region. China’s ascendance calls each of these aspects of the status quo into question. Each country in the Asia-Pacific region is thinking about whether it would fare better under a US-led or a Chinese-led system. These governments are voting with their feet, and one important indication is that the United States has stronger—and growing—security cooperation arrangements with the region than China does.

China’s rise is full of economic opportunity; it is already the leading trading partner of most countries in the region and is integral to their plans for future prosperity. Furthermore, countless Chinese officials have assured the region and the world that China only wants to raise its living standards, will be a “force for peace,” and “will never seek hegemony” as in domination over smaller countries. Yet there remain several reasons to worry about the security implications of the rise of China. First, despite Chinese official promises to the contrary, the country will be subject to the usual temptation to act like a great power, including coercing smaller countries. Some of China’s neighbors are already experiencing this.

Second, China’s 5,000-year history creates expectations that will weigh heavily on Chinese leaders. For centuries China was at the top of a hierarchical system of regional states, a position presumably earned through China’s moral and cultural superiority. This sets the bar for China’s contemporary rulers and helps explain why we see in China’s foreign relations both a sphere of influence mentality and hyper-sensitivity to perceived foreign affronts to China’s dignity—a poor formula for avoiding and cooling crises.

Third, China holds an expansive notion of “defense.” Officially, all Chinese security policies and uses of force since 1949 have been defensive. The PRC’s claims over the South China Sea, India’s Arunachal Pradesh state, Taiwan, and the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands are all cases of China defending “Chinese” territory. China has not shied away from using lethal force in such cases, and this propensity is not changing as China grows stronger. In November Beijing announced an “air defense identification zone” over part of the East China Sea beyond the PRC’s territorial airspace. Beijing now claims the right to shoot down foreign aircraft that fly into this zone without Chinese government permission. Chinese officials dismiss foreign worries over China’s massive and rapid military buildup as illegitimate. Particularly in recent years Beijing has shown an inability or unwillingness to recognize that, in the eyes of some neighbors, Chinese “defense” looks like Chinese assertiveness.

A final reason for worry is that China suffers from the usual disease of rising powers: impatience. Having stoked a nationalistic and triumphal atmosphere at home to shore up its own shaky legitimacy, the Chinese Communist Party leadership is under pressure to settle international scores in China’s favor now that the country is an emergent great power. Thus Beijing is increasingly unable to take a moderate and cooperative approach to disputes even when it wants to.

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