

Forging a common regional approach to China

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Despite China's rapid and unprecedented economic growth, the world has yet to come to grips with the challenges and opportunities that the country presents. The story of China's rise is as much about how the rest of the world responds to China as it is about the nation that China is growing to become.



China is going to be an increasingly influential player in the region. But concerns abound about what sort of power China aspires to be. Will it utilise its increasing power to promote shared stability and prosperity or to unilaterally alter the regional status quo?

From Japan's perspective, Chinese activities over the Senkaku Islands seem geared toward competing for effective control, in contrast to the status quo, under which Japan maintains effective control. This can be construed as a tactic to test the resolve of the US-Japan alliance. China's domestic governance challenges — income inequality, corruption, environmental degradation, and the pressure to achieve the target of doubling 2010 GDP and per capita income by 2020 — could exacerbate the risk that China will utilise a tough foreign policy posture as a diversionary tactic.

A number of obstacles need to be considered to lay the groundwork for a common regional approach on cooperation with China.

The United States has long pursued a hedging policy toward China, but the efficacy of its policy is undermined by domestic political divisions. Some political leaders tend to emphasise an alliance-first approach and the need to hedge against unpredictable behaviour while others emphasise the need to forge constructive relations. But the issue of how to deal with China has

too often been used by one side as a bludgeon against the other. A continuation of partisan politics will only exacerbate the difficulties that the US faces in formulating its China policy, and there is an urgent need to consolidate this policy before presidential election posturing kicks into high gear and Obama enters a lame duck period.

Any hedging strategy by definition includes both deterrence and engagement. The current hedging strategy mistakes engagement for weakness, but engagement should be bolstered through concrete measures, including strengthening confidence-building processes. Deterrence measures must balance the reality that US resources are limited. The US should, therefore, be careful about drawing any red lines, which may present China with a convenient opportunity to expand its influence right up to the line without actually crossing it.

Japan's current approach to China under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is to talk tough. To fend off critics, Abe insists that the door for dialogue with China is always open. But what is sorely needed is a comprehensive China strategy that is both firm on security and bold on engagement.

Moves to reinforce Japan's security should be welcomed. With the shifting balance of power, it is necessary for the Japanese public to deeply consider issues such as collective self-defence, the role that the SDF should be performing, and how Japan can contribute to the maintenance of peace. Japan may in the future need to play greater roles than rear-area support to the US. And security cooperation with countries such as Australia, India, and ASEAN member states, the US, and South Korea, should be promoted in order to hedge against future unpredictability.

The reinterpretation of Article 9, adopted by the Abe government through a cabinet decision on 1 July, will remove some of the existing restraints on SDF troops' use of weapons during UN-led peacekeeping missions and allow the SDF to contribute more actively in responding to contingency scenarios that directly threaten Japan's national security. But it is crucial that in-depth explanations are given as to why changes have to be made now, and a robust mechanism should be established to ensure that the scope of changes stays within the intended purview and genuinely retains the spirit of Article 9.

At the same time, Japan must boldly build constructive relations with China in order to promote regional stability. Two main issues stand out as obstacles to rebuilding meaningful and cooperative government-to-government relations: tensions surrounding the Senkaku Islands and history issues. The Senkaku issue does not lend itself to a short-term resolution. Before a long-term solution can be achieved, it is critical that the two countries de-escalate tensions and strengthen crisis management systems. On the question of Japan's past, it is vital that the Japanese government does not undermine established official statements, such as the Murayama and Kono statements.

On ASEAN there is a critical need to demonstrate a unified front and continue to move steadily toward the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in order to cooperate confidently with China.

Given China's increasingly assertive posture and the unpredictability of its future role, many

nations around the region feel a strong motivation to align themselves with the US. At the same time, it must be made clear that hedging is not containment and includes a strong component of engagement toward China.

A robust regional confidence-building mechanism, perhaps through the East Asia Summit, is sorely needed. Talk of responsible regional stakeholding may be perceived in China as an attempt to constrain its behaviour. However, engagement with China can help to bring about the realisation that unilateral changes to the status quo will undermine its regional relations and economic growth founded in international cooperation is the best path forward both for China and shared regional stability and prosperity.

The makeup of the East Asia Summit (EAS) means that it is the best venue for working toward a shared prosperous future in East Asia.

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