



CLAWS

US-China Relations- Conflict or Cooperation?

■ Aditi Arora

In this paper, I hypothesise that US-China relations will cease to be cooperative in the near future and tensions might escalate between the two. The paper will begin with an assessment of China's growing power, both military and economic, followed by an appraisal of China's recent aggressive foreign policy. The new diplomacy has fuelled suspicions throughout East Asia about China's rise, which, in turn, has led the United States to balance power in the region. The U.S has unnecessarily challenged Beijing by boosting its military presence in the East Asia mainland. Using a realist pessimist view along with the liberal pessimist paradigm, I will support my claims that the future of the relationship will not be as cooperative as it is today. The main thrust of the paper would be an evaluation of Taiwan as a flashpoint in the relationship.

We can't predict with certainty what the future will bring, but we can be certain about the issues that will define our times. And we also know this: the relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century.

— President Barack Obama¹

This statement is an insight into the US-China relationship. President Obama, on the one hand signals that the US will no longer be able to shape the world alone, and will have to invite China to help with this process. On the other hand, his words express concern about the tenuous nature of the US-China relationship.

Defining US Role Post End of Cold War

The dismemberment of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of a bipolar political order that had defined the world order since 1945. This was replaced by a system which was characterised by the hegemonic ascendance of the United States of America (Renic, 2012). The predominance of the US in this system led many theorists, including Waltz, to claim, "Never since Rome has one country so nearly dominated its world" (2002, p. 350). Statements such as this, however, have been problematised by the rapid rise of China. Increasingly, present-day China is being looked upon as a genuine economic, political and military counter-balance to US hegemony. For many, this perception has led to growing anxiety that the rise of China poses a significant threat to international security. Global politics is understood as a sphere of the zero-sum interaction. Any change in the existing balance of power is seen as a step towards conflict or instability. For many academicians and scholars, the rise of China, inevitably, constitutes a threat to world peace and stability.

In the recent years, China's sudden growth has attracted worldwide attention. The rise of China—from its expanding military to its swelling demand for energy—is being debated and discussed in the international community as well as within China. A correct understanding of China's achievements and its path towards greater development is, thus, crucial. Since 1978, when the economy opened up, China has averaged 9.4 percent annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, one of the highest growth rates in the world (Bijian, 2005). China

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has also attracted hundreds of billions of dollars of foreign investment and more than a trillion dollars of domestic non-public investment (Bijian, 2005). In the years ahead, China has a good chance of becoming the leader in science and technology, the area of alternative energy, and many other fields. It even has the potential of surpassing the US in certain aspects. As is evident, China has been experiencing explosive economic growth which has been coupled with an increase in military modernisation. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been on a mission to modernise its air, maritime and naval forces and has adopted several measures to this effect. China possesses the largest Army in the region and is also a nuclear power. Though the PLA has evidently developed its defence stance during the past decade, it still has a long way to go. The strategy of the PLA is to give the People's Republic of China (PRC) a power projection capability, it seems that the PLA is principally procuring weapons technologies which provide China with enhanced maritime, air and land capabilities. China has the potential to concentrate its resources and abilities in acquiring the various forms of military strength, despite being relatively poor on a per capita income basis. This situation has also created concern and suspicion among China's neighbours. The country's defence budget has also increased dramatically in the last two decades: China, for the first time, became the second largest military spender in the world in 2008 (*SIPRI Yearbook*, 2009, p.183). There is no doubt that there has been dramatic increase in Chinese military expenditure in the last decade.

Theoretical Underpinning

China's rapid economic rise, increase in military strength and enhanced influence have all contributed to the raising of doubts regarding the US ability to persist as the world's hegemon. The power transition theory adds to the insecurity of the fast changing international environment, raising questions about the behaviour of rising powers which support conclusions of the "China threat." (Liu & Ming-Te, 2011). As a result of China's increasing growth and expanding influence on the international system, it seems that China and the United States are inescapably engaged in a power transition process. The power transition theory provides a very useful perspective for an understanding of great power relations. Throughout history, variations in the balance of power, and struggles to maintain or change the international order, have led to skirmishes among the big nations and set the stage for great power wars. These

confrontations usually result in the rearrangement of the international systems. Gilpin has added to this line of thought with his work, *War and Change in World Politics* (1981), in which he has argued that the rising states and their efforts bring them into confrontation with the dominant nation and its allies about the rules governing the international order, the division of the sphere of influence, etc. War will break out between the dominant power and the challenger if they cannot settle their differences in peaceful ways. Gilpin (1981) calls this "hegemonic war". It is the primary means that great powers use to resolve the differences in their relations or to create a new international order. Unfortunately, "[e]very international system that the world has known, has been a consequence of the territorial, economic, and diplomatic realignments that have followed such hegemonic struggles".

The tendency to associate the rise of China with instability is due to the dominance of the realist logic of power politics. For many realists, it would be difficult to circumvent the challenge which a rising China will pose to the international community. This realist logic is reflected very clearly in the US' response to the rise of China. Having enjoyed a dominant position in Asia, the rise of China is now a challenge to this position. China will also attempt to imitate the United States. Specifically, it will try to dominate Asia in the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. According to Mearsheimer (2006), "A rising China is likely to try to push the US out of Asia, much the way the US pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere". China might do so primarily because such domination offers the best way to survive under international anarchy. The realist scholar John Mearsheimer has argued that, "If China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades; the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war," (2001). It is also important to keep in mind that China is involved in various territorial disputes and the more powerful it gets, the better able it will be to settle those disputes on terms favourable to it. The basic system of the international system dictates the behaviour of nations. In an anarchical international system, each state holds unpredictable intentions and possesses offensive capability (Mearsheimer 2001). In such a scenario, a state's best bet for survival is to maximise its national power. Great powers like China, by their nature, have greater needs. Their need for survival is not merely to be more powerful than their

next door neighbour but to be the most powerful nation in their region. Regional hegemony aims for global hegemony. No regional hegemon tolerates another hegemon. The drive for global hegemony necessitates a competition among the great powers. The best way for them to win is to increase their own power, on the one hand, and to prevent the development of other regional hegemony, on the other. It seems to be conventional wisdom among many policy analysts in the United States that China has a clear goal of establishing regional hegemony and will do so as its relative power increases (Friedberg). This argument evokes Sino-centric images of the Middle Kingdom impulses of creating a modern day version of the ancient “tribute system”. Under this system, the smaller states would docilely submit to China. The argument also raises the more generalised historical analogies whereby China would naturally want to change the power hierarchy in Asia, and eventually want to end US unipolarity, replacing it with a multipolar world.

The rise of China is viewed as the primary source of instability in Sino-US relations and, by extension, in the Asia-Pacific region. Some scholars like Zakaria have even suggested that Asia is becoming “Sino-centred” (Zakaria, 2005). Many realists consider that China’s regional strategy is to challenge America’s position in East Asia. They believe that China’s rise will be a zero-sum game between China and the US. For some other realists such as Friedberg (1993), Organski and Kugler (1980), a dissatisfied great power is likely to challenge the dominant state and this could possibly lead to conflict and wars. China falls into this category. These realists predict a “coming conflict” between China and the US. China as a rising power, by definition, is dissatisfied with the US, dominated global order. A rising China in its present strategy, ideology as well as geo-politics, is undoubtedly unacceptable for the US. In the current situation, the rise of China constitutes a serious challenge and threat for the US’ hegemonic role and position in Asia. With its Communist ideology along with its non-liberal values and culture, China is believed to be the US’ natural enemy, according to the Huntingtonian logic of the Clash of Civilizations (1994). In addition, the power of China’s economy is enhanced by the fact that China is a great power in terms of territory and population. China can be a real great power and demand respect from other nations while pursuing its own interests. For many, this explains the tendency for China to challenge the hegemony of the US, both within and outside the region. Or, as a senior US official, James Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, puts it, China is

“challenging status quo aggressively... by enhancing its diplomatic representation, increasing foreign assistance, and signing new bilateral and regional arrangements” (Goh 2007/8).

Clearly, however, there will be political friction and economic conflicts between the United States and China as China’s economic and military power in East Asia continues to expand. As China and America jockey for advantage over each other there will certainly be some arms racing. Each state will be driven by its respective necessity of threatening and protecting Taiwan, and the United States will be forced to respond to China’s growing power projection capabilities. Historically, dominant powers have not readily given up their position to rising challengers, and rising challengers have always demanded, and fought for, the fruits they believe they are entitled to. There is no reason to expect that things will be different in this regard with China and the United States. China’s rise will feature a declining United States and an increasingly powerful China fighting over the rules and leadership of the international system. It is a drama that might end with the ascendance of China and the onset of an Asia-centred world order, given that this country emerges not from within but outside the established post-World War II international order.

China and the United States understand that they are engaged in a power transition process, hence, they need to take careful measures to manage the contentious relationship. The two nations nonetheless have disputations over what can be called China’s nation-building efforts, which include its maritime ambitions, the issues with Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang and settlement of the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. The United States is involved, directly or indirectly, in all of these issues.

Aggressive Elements in China’s Foreign Policy

It is important to understand China’s domestic politics in order to predict its foreign policy. This section is dedicated to analysing what will make China act aggressively in the future. Most observers would argue that China today is neither a totalitarian state nor a democracy—rather, it is an authoritarian regime. The Beijing government gets support, and claims legitimacy, on the promise of continued increase in prosperity and wealth. It combines this with appeals to nationalism, and leans less on Communist principles. This is a dangerous and unstable mixture, for if economic progress

falters, the present government will have little choice but to lean even more heavily on nationalist appeals. China might also be tempted to divert the frustrations of the Chinese people by resorting to assertive external policies. These would most likely be directed towards Japan or Taiwan or the United States or even India. Jack Snyder (2000) has concluded that it is precisely when nations are in transition from authoritarianism toward democracy that they are most likely to initiate conflict with their neighbours. Both stable autocracies and stable democracies are generally less war-prone. In Snyder's words, the resort to nationalism has often been accompanied by militarism and by "the scapegoating of enemies of the nation at home and abroad," (2000, p. 158). If past patterns hold, and if China is indeed in the early stages of democratisation, the road ahead may well be rocky. The prospects of a worsening US- China relationship might be greater if China were to democratise then if it were to remain a stable autocracy. In the book, *The Coming Conflict with China* (Bernstein and Munro, 1997), the authors argue that if the United States wants to maintain its hegemony and superiority, it must get a clear understanding of the various challenges it faces, and defeat them. A look at China's culture, life style and value concepts reveals clearly that it poses a genuinely serious threat because it differs so greatly from the United States. For Bernstein and Munro, war is inevitable between China and the US. China's goal of achieving paramount status in Asia conflicts with the established American objective of preventing any single country from gaining overwhelming power in Asia. For some, the United States is declining, while China is in the process of catching up. This view fuels speculation about a power transition, which is supposed to increase the danger of war. This danger has been hypothesised to be especially great when the challenger is an undemocratic or illiberal state (Shweller 1992, pp. 235-269). According to this formulation, democracies are generally satisfied powers, unlikely to challenge the international status quo (the democratic peace thesis argument). Democracies are presumed to support this order and changes in relative power among democracies are not seen to be especially alarming. A power transition in favour of an undemocratic challenger, however, is likely to be treated as more threatening to this order.

Some typical characteristics of Chinese foreign policy are influenced by the country's unique historical experience. For instance, China views itself as being both a great power and a weak power. This is a controversially mixed attitude

and greatly affects how China formulates its policies. On the one hand, due to its size, culture and history, China views itself as a great power. The rise of China is often described by many Chinese as *daguo jueqi* [the rise of a great power]. China tries to shape itself as a great power in the world. It wants to demonstrate to the world that it can achieve the same position that America holds and be a great power in the sphere of economics as well as politics (Kurlantzick 2007, p.42).

Some constructivists stress the role of national identity in explaining China's foreign policy in general (Gries 2004; Rozman 2004). From the 1990s, as Rozman has argued, China has increasingly pursued a "great power identity" (Rozman 2004). The great power identity is largely shaped by a state's enduring perception of other great powers and the interaction between them (Rozman 2004). Many scholars like Michael Leifer and Andrew Nathan, among others, have tried to explore the historical reason for China's great power identity. Nathan and Ross suggest that, "In contrast to the self-confident American nationalism of manifest destiny, Chinese nationalism is powered by feelings of national humiliation and pride" (Nathan and Ross 1997, p.34). It is true that many Chinese feel shamed by the "century of humiliation" but are also proud of their civilisation. The nature of Chinese national identity is shaped and influenced by the concept of the "century of humiliation", referring to the period when China suffered at the hands of Western imperialists from the 1840s. China's economic rise and military might since the 1990s provide it an opportunity to regain its national pride while erasing its humiliation.

Taiwan Issue

The Taiwan Strait presents a particularly tricky situation and is the most likely scenario for a direct confrontation between the United States and China. Both are entangled in this tough situation and neither can afford to back away from its respective position. China claims that Taiwan is a part of China and has refused to renounce the use of force for unification. China's leaders cannot give in on the ultimate status of Taiwan due to nationalist reason and also because it would set a disastrous precedent given its concern for its borderland regions. Given the strong nationalist feelings in China regarding Taiwan, and given the regime's increasing use of nationalism to bolster its political position, no government could survive long if it were seen as soft on Taiwan. China cannot, and will not, back down from

its core demand that Taiwan is a part of China. The US position on what Taiwan's ultimate status should be is not clear, although its position on how Taiwan's status is to be settled is crystal clear- it will not allow China to use force to bring Taiwan to heel. The US is committed to the peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status. Given this commitment, the United States must have credible and sufficient military power in the region to deter China from using force to resolve Taiwan's status. If the US were to renege on its commitment and allow the mainland to reintegrate Taiwan forcibly, its commitment to Japan would suffer grievous harm. America's overall political-military position in East Asia depends on how Taiwan's status is settled.

China feels that it has lost wars and territories to Japan in the past hundred years and to date, has not "recovered the lost territories", namely the islands in the South and East China Seas, or even received a formal apology from Japan (Lai, 2011). There is ample evidence in China that the dispute over Taiwan is already a heavily-loaded nationalistic and emotional issue; and there is no room for China to back down.

Analysis

The US alliance and coalition network in the Western Pacific is solid. The coalition is strong enough to maintain the US-led regional order in the years to come. China is understandably uncomfortable with this U.S.led 'encirclement', however, there is no reason for it to be paranoid. The US' effort is part of its hedging strategy to guard against a China that might turn aggressive, but it is not a strategy to contain or attack China.

On the Taiwan issue, it can be argued that if the US-China power transition were to end in a war, it would most likely be over the fate of Taiwan. It is also fair to say that the United States and China would have been at odds with each other whether they had the Taiwan issue or not. However, because of the Taiwan issue, the United States and China have to be prepared to face each other. There is no doubt that the Taiwan issue is complicated but there is also room for mutual understanding, a little of which can make the United States and China go a long way toward preventing unwanted conflict.

Conclusion

The rise of China has not only caused alarm for the US but also for China's neighbours like Japan. Japan is believed to have every reason to be fearful. The two countries have deep

hostility for each other, steeped in antiquity. For China, many of Japan's policies are antagonistic, including the latter's close relations with Taiwan, and its unwillingness to apologise for the aggression it committed during World War II. Japan's close relations with the US also comprise a major issue between China and Japan. Consequently, China's relations with Japan get overshadowed by the increasing feelings of nationalism in China, and Japan becomes an easy target. It would be prudent to invoke the example of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands which have become the bone of contention between China and Japan. In the event of any hostility between them, the US is obliged to come to the aid of Japan and this makes matters more complicated in the Asia-Pacific region. The US and Japan forged a security alliance in the wake of World War II and formalised it in 1960. Under this, the US has been given military bases in Japan in return for its promise to defend Japan in the event of an attack. This means that if conflict were to erupt between China and Japan, Japan would expect US military back-up. US President Barack Obama has confirmed that the security pact applies to the Senkaku Islands and that escalation of the current row would harm all sides.²

The rise of China might trigger a twisting hegemonic transition in Pacific-Asia. However, a change in the international order might be difficult to come about. The nuclear revolution has made war among great powers unlikely. It has led to the elimination of the major tool that rising powers have used to overturn international systems characterised by declining hegemonic states. Though it has acted as a deterrent, it has not been able to eliminate the possibility of sub-conventional/conventional conflict between the US and China. War by miscalculation is always possible. Either or both governments could take a serious misstep over the Taiwan issue.

In totality, there will be some security dilemma dynamics at play in the US-China relationship, not just over Taiwan but also over maritime supremacy in East Asia, should China decide eventually to contest America's maritime hegemony, and there will certainly be political and military conflicts. The angle of the US: Japan and China too needs to be examined. If tensions between the two Pacific powers worsen, the whole of Eastern Eurasia could become divided in a new Cold War.

Although China and the United States both have expressed the desire for a peaceful future, the two nations, nevertheless, have a conflict of interest on many

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issues. This is complicated by the power transition process which, if not managed properly, may lead to war between the two. In the years ahead, the ongoing

transition process and the conflicts discussed encapsulate the potential to cause the US and China to challenge each other.

Notes

1. Opening remarks by President Barack Obama at the first U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Washington, DC, July 27, 2009.
2. Procured from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-asia-pacific-11341139> on April 24, 2014.

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Aditi Arora, Research Intern with CLAWS from June to August and a currently in the second year of Masters in International Relations and Political Science from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva.

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in