

Leadership Issues for Asia in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Many if not most major international issues that currently agitate the Asia Pacific region may be discussed within the framework of leadership rivalry and a shift in the leadership paradigm. The 'war against terrorism', Asian integration efforts, resource competition, the overcoming of national separation in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean peninsula are part of the US endeavour to maintain its preeminence in the region against the background of China's seemingly unstoppable rise. The territorial disputes in the East China Sea, the frictions over history, and the creation of a vast Free Trade Association (as well as bilateral FTAs) in the region have strong connotations with the Japanese-Chinese struggle for leadership in Asia and this will have an impact not only on the outcome of the US-China wrestling for regional but even for global leadership. The other countries of the Asia Pacific are watching carefully, eager not to lose current certainties and stability while not wanting to risk emerging opportunities. At the same time the paradigm of leadership seems to continue to change from the current American dominance which allows the mobilization of coalitions of the more or less willing to much more complex and incoherent ad hoc coalitions which in most cases somehow have to include China. Moreover, the objectives of regional leadership are no longer only chosen by the US, and even long established US priorities – as can be seen in the case of nuclear non-proliferation and regional integration – are shifting.

From US Leadership to Chinese Leadership?

Since the Chinese-Soviet split in 1960, Asia has no longer been living within the narrow confines of the East-West conflict to the extent as it was the case with Europe until the end of the 1980s. Although the PRC did not become a third equal pole, the regional structure became more multipolar even though Vietnamese, Chinese and Korean national division was instrumentalised for the pursuit of the US-USSR confrontation. This circumstance, but also the survival of national communist regimes, the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1972 and the remaining division of China

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and Korea, made the change in 1989 appear much less dramatic in Asia. Although the end of the Cold War allowed the termination of the conflict in Cambodia (no longer being of any benefit to any other country) and encouraged an amelioration of relations between North and South Korea, it has been the opening of China and the resulting stupendous economic development in the 1990s which started to cast doubts on the future of US leadership in the region. It is useful to remember, however, that until around 1995, it was not China but Japan which was seen as a more imminent threat to US dominance in Asia and even globally, with some American observers even depicting Japan as the replacement of the former Soviet threat. Yet, the Japanese challenge was always only an economic one and took shape before Japan had been able to fully translate its economic power into political let alone military power. With the end of the so-called bubble economy and the over 10 year long economic crisis, a Japanese challenge disappeared from American discussions. China, on the contrary, has been a nuclear power since 1964 and a permanent member of the UN Security Council since 1972 to which it is now adding a successful developing economy and the modernization of its military force.

The end of the Soviet challenge to American global dominance shaped US leadership perceptions in a very fundamental way and continues to determine the leadership issue for the US. During President George Bush (sen.) Administration at the beginning of the 1990s, the Pentagon came up with a draft document called the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) for fiscal years 1994-99, the first formal statement of US strategic goals in the post-Soviet era. According to this draft which was leaked to the press early 1992, the US would strive to prevent the emergence of any future competitor on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. In 1992 the document was discussing as potential competitors Russia, Germany, India, Japan, and China. Although the ideas in this early draft were later watered down after protests from many Western countries and allies of the US, and the list of competitors was overtaken by subsequent developments in Germany, Russia and Japan, the basic goal of US unchallenged dominance did not disappear and has only been reinforced by the Bush jun. Administrations. The 1st Administration of Bush jun. named China as a strategic competitor. The perception of China as America's strategic competitor had already been formulated by Condoleezza Rice in an article in *Foreign Affairs* while serving as a foreign policy adviser to then Governor George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign. However, the Bush Administration dropped this reference when China's cooperation against international terrorism after the 11 September 2001 became necessary as well as possible. In addition China's cooperation or at least tolerance of American power deployment is also necessary in the case of many other regional and international issues. One of the most important examples for US-China cooperation in Asia are the Six Party Talks where the Bush Administration has given China's nascent regional role a major boost by leaving it to Beijing to keep the talks continuing. The American calculation is most likely that China should use beneficially its leverage over North Korea which is arguably greater than that of any other

power, but if it does not succeed, the US can blame China or North Korean intransigence rather than its own contradictory policies.

China is very cautious about asserting openly regional leadership ambitions because of US strength and regional concern about the so-called 'China threat'. It seems to have lost its hope about an imminent emergence of a multipolar international system and now adapts to an American unipolar role. All official pronouncements refute the ambition of a regional leadership role or challenging America's leadership. Instead China emphasizes its 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development' for which it requires regional and global peace and stability. However, at the same time, most Chinese leaders and observers do not seem to believe in the sustainability of US power dominance and the difficulties which the US encounter in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia seem to reinforce this perception. Peter Hays Gries detects in China's reaction to the US a strategy of 'bargaining, binding and buffering of US power' (Gries 2005, p. 407). According to this interpretation China uses all means, including the UN and regional fora, to resist US objectives which it does not share. At the same time, it has begun a very active Asian diplomacy and continues its economic development and military modernization. It is meaningless to discuss whether China's military modernization is already a threat to the US or not. US weapon systems and force deployment abilities are incomparably higher and will stay so for some time to come, but this misses the crucial point that US dominance is slowly made more expensive and difficult to sustain. Moreover, US economic prosperity depends increasingly on China as a market and supplier, including the purchase of treasury bonds to finance the rising US deficit.

Is China therefore just playing for time until it feels strong enough to more squarely resist the US and assume greater leadership? On the one hand one should not forget that the Chinese political and economic system is constantly evolving and that China is becoming more dependent on a stable and peaceful world. On the other hand, China will resist more strongly the US where it sees its essential interests at stake, the major one being the Taiwan issue. It is working hard to prevent US (and Japan-assisted) military and political power balancing in the region. Its growing quest for resources is heavily influenced by security considerations (access, transport). Given that the US is a democratic country it is probably much more worrying that China, even while changing and becoming itself more democratic and liberal, may learn the wrong lessons from US unilateralism, selective application of multilateralism and the use of force, including the use of preemptive force. This may encourage Chinese leaders and foreign policy experts who are anyway often more inclined towards a realist approach to international relations in their belief that might is right and that therefore China has to continue to enhance its military capabilities. Even before the US invasion of Iraq, Betts and Christensen reminded us of US frequent interventions in its own hemisphere which most Americans consider 'legitimate, defensive, altruistic and humane', and warn that 'if China acts with the same degree of caution and responsibility in its region in this century as the United States did in its neighbourhood in the past

century, Asia is in for big trouble' (Betts/Christensen 2001/01, p. 23). Casting doubt on the 'democratic peace' theory, Paul Wolfowitz mentions the US as one example of a democracy 'behaving with bellicose aggressiveness', and warns about a more democratic China reflecting popular nationalist pressures (Wolfowitz 1997, p. 52). In addition to serving as a negative model for great power behaviour, US unilateralism is weakening multilateralism at a critical time when political and economic enmeshment policies are trying to involve China into global and regional regimes.

The future of US dominance in Asia will not only be affected by China, but also by India and even its Japanese and Korean allies. India's economic rise (although not on the scale nor width of that of China), its now overt nuclear weapon power status and its subregional/regional role as a potential balancer of China's power has prompted the US to significantly curtail its nuclear nonproliferation objectives with as yet unknown consequences for its policies towards Iran and North Korea. South Korea is challenging US regional leadership by pursuing a more autonomous diplomacy vis a vis North Korea, China and Japan. Its aim of a 'softlanding' of North Korea, political and economic rapprochement with China and pursuit of a hardline policy with Japan over the history and territorial issues is in effect weakening US influence in Northeast Asia to the advantage of China. Japan is currently seeking a much closer military relationship with the US to cope with the Chinese as well as North Korea security challenges, but the sustainability of such a policy in view of growing economic dependence on China, public hostility to the modalities of US base restructuring in Japan, and differences in priorities concerning North Korea (solving the abductees issue rather than preventing nuclear and missile proliferation) and China (territorial issues, human rights, Taiwan, Myanmar) may be doubted. The rising military profile of Japan at the side of the US (participation in BMD, Iraq, Indian Ocean refueling, anti-terrorism) should also not blind us to the fact that Japan is still more interested in non-military burdensharing ('human security'), faces a declining political and economic position (political isolation in Northeast Asia, shrinking GDP and ODA) and is weakening Asian regionalism and its own regional leadership ambitions as a result of its unresolved economic policy priorities (economic restructuring, FTAs) and conflictual relationship with China and South Korea.

Outlook

The current trends in Asia Pacific leadership developments are contradictory (e.g. increasing economic integration and interdependence contrasting with rising nationalism, rivalry and competition) and complex. It is clearly too early to write off the US as a preeminent power and leader in the Asia Pacific and to elevate China to it, but this short overview should have shown that the US position is becoming more difficult to sustain, is increasingly contested by China and to a lesser degree by India, and has increasingly to rely on allies which, however, have their own (often conflicting) priorities. As a result, US leadership objectives are subject to change. Asian region-

alism and integration are still very weak and recently have been seriously affected by intra-regional rivalries. Yet, the US is concerned about any regional integration which may exclude it. Most Asian countries do not want to become too dependent on China and hope for the US and Japan to balance it, but they do not want to miss out on opportunities in China as a result of conflicts between the US, China, Japan and South Korea. If current trends continue – and that cannot be taken for granted given political, economic and ecological uncertainties in China – China may gradually continue to erode US preeminence in Asia, create a precarious multipolar balance and ultimately reduce the US to an off-shore balancer.

This makes an European role in the region even more difficult and delicate. In view of current transatlantic frictions on an increasing array of international issues and its strong inclinations towards strengthening economic relations with China, Europe is perceived as almost exclusively focused on China. As has been demonstrated by the reactions of some Asian countries concerning the discussion about the lifting of the 1989 EU arms embargo against China, the EU moves on this issue sending important signals which have an influence on regional as well as global leadership and go beyond any conceivable material impact.

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