

## From Cooperation for Competition to Non-confrontational Assertiveness: China's Strategic Rivalry with the United States in Southeast Asia

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Since 2009, the Obama Administration has staged a high-profile program of "pivot" or "strategic rebalance" to Asia. The US reengagement with East Asia seems to have sparked a new round of strategic dynamics in the region. Many observers note that Washington's new initiative aims at constricting China's growing regional influence, which many Chinese officials and analysts appear to believe as well. Partly because of the US strategic rebalance policy, Beijing's strategic response to the United States has transitioned from *cooperation for competition* in the 2000s to non-confrontational assertiveness in recent years.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, in light of the challenges posed by US strategic preponderance in the region, China had basically three major options. First, it could use its power and adopt a hard-line approach to confront the United States and its allies, and coerce other regional states to remain either neutral or closer to China. Second, China could attempt to sabotage US preponderance by coming up with various proposals to influence the political and security environment in East Asia. Third, it could work within the existing political, economic and security structure in the region in order to maximise Chinese long-term strategic and security interests.

The first option would be a very difficult strategy to implement. Sober-minded Chinese decision makers understood that it was simply a non-starter given the still quite notable disparity of national power between China and the United States. For the second option, Beijing proposed the "new security concept" in the mid-1990s in order to redefine the security environment in East Asia but it was not successful.

To better compete with the US and other major powers, what Beijing did was to take the third option: fostering and strengthening cooperative relationships under the existing regional system in order. The essence of this strategy is "cooperation for competition". It is important to distinguish between the cooperation for competition strategy with the often-mentioned "cooperation and competition" approach. Beijing's strategy was to promote cooperation in almost all policy arenas as it competes for a better strategic position in the long run. Even on sensitive territorial issues, i.e. the South China Sea disputes, China attempted to reduce competition by quietly accepting the status quo and pushing for cooperation.

In implementing the "cooperation for competition" strategy in much of the 2000s, China has employed liberal institutional and constructivist means for realist purposes. Examples include improving bilateral relations with individual states, dramatically expanding trade and investment ties, downplaying sovereign and territorial disputes, maintaining generally stable relations with other major powers, actively participating in various multilateral institutions and non-traditional security projects, and extending preferable loans and assistance programs to neighbouring states. Beijing's cooperative means were aimed to achieve various competitive goals, including: (a) to downplay the China threat and build a more benign regional image, (b) to create a conducive regional environment for sustained domestic economic development, (c) to establish a stronger position vis-à-vis other major powers, especially the US and Japan for regional influence, and (d) secure a stronger and enduring strategic position in the region.

Most observers would probably not dispute the fact that China has gained much diplomatic weight in East Asia or that it has expanded its strategic role in this region by the end 2000s.

However, China's strategy began to change roughly in 2009. Fuelled by a new confidence in China's capability to safeguard its core national interests in the wake of the financial crisis, Beijing has adopted an assertive approach in the past few years. Examples include Beijing's unprecedented strong response to American arms sales to Taiwan, tit-for-tat reactions to several rounds of American joint military exercises with South Korea and Japan in the wake of the sinking of the "Cheonan" ship and North Korea's bombing of the Yeonpyeong island, strong positions over the South China Sea disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines, and heavy-handed approach to the territorial dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku. Even though many regional states may not conclude that China has become an imminent threat, there is growing concern over China's increasing assertiveness in regional international affairs.

Recent developments, especially in the South China Sea, and East China Sea, suggest that China's strategy of cooperation for competition has been abandoned. In place of cooperation for competition, China has adopted a new security posture-non-confrontational assertiveness. I characterize non-confrontational assertiveness as a strategy that simultaneously displays national power assertively and attempts to avoid military conflict or long-term diplomatic confrontation with the United States or other regional countries.

China's non-confrontational assertive regional security policy has been largely shaped by the changes in Beijing's strategic thinking. The most significant shift in China's strategic thinking is the elevation of the importance of "rights protection" on a par with "maintaining regional stability".

While acknowledging that the policy environment in China has become conducive for assertiveness, we need to bear in mind the tremendous constraints on Beijing's assertive moves. Beijing will have to take into account at least two major concerns when it feels the impulse to push the envelope. The first and perhaps the most obvious constraint for China is the power gap between China and the United States. The Chinese decision makers understand very well that their national power, especially military power, still lags far behind that of the

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United States. It would be premature for China to challenge America's predominant security role in the Asia Pacific region. The other major factor is Chinese leaders' preoccupation with domestic economic development and socio-political challenges. According to mainstream view among the economists, the Chinese economy is poised to grow at a slower rate. At the same time, the Chinese society has become more volatile and unstable for many reasons. The new leadership in Beijing has vowed to achieve the goal of doubling the GDP and per capita income by 2020 at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. Achieving this goal in the context of an increasingly unstable society and economic slowdown would necessitate at least overall stability in China's relations with major powers in the world, in particular in the East Asian region.

As a result of conflicting imperatives, non-confrontational assertiveness is likely to remain Beijing's strategic posture in the near future. This policy shift has generated many new dynamics in regional strategic and security relations including growing strategic anxieties of regional states towards China's rise, the decline of strategic trust between the US and China, and strategic re-alignments between regional countries and external powers. In the coming years, the key issue in Sino-US relations is how the two countries can properly handle various territorial disputes and maritime matters that involve China in East Asia, including Southeast Asia.