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Sino-US Contestation over Regional Hegemony in the Asia-Pacific

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RAPHAEL KUNZ, MAY 15 2014

“Keep cool-headed to observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.”

Deng Xiaoping, “24 characters” strategy[1]

Will ‘China’s rise’ be peaceful or will it lead to a sort of great power competition with the U.S.? [2] Over a decade ago, one of the most prominent scholars of international relations, Kenneth N. Waltz, wrote that “China will emerge as a great power even without trying very hard so long as it remains politically united and competent” [3]. In the meantime, China’s economic growth continues at an impressive pace, despite the global financial crisis in 2008, and the economy is expected to grow more for some time to come. A 2007 study of Goldman Sachs projected China to surpass the United States as the largest economy in the world between 2025 and 2030. The same report assumes that China will have an economy 1.8 times bigger than the U.S. by 2050. Much has been written (and speculated) about the topic, some viewing the region ‘ripe for rivalry’ [4] while others argue that China’s ascendancy will be peaceful due to an increasingly dense web of economic interdependence among Asian nations and beyond which serves as a powerful deterrent to military conflict in the region. [5] 2 The argument of this essay is that *China’s continued rise will lead to a Sino-U.S. contestation over regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific*. [6] Yet, at the same time ‘contestation’ does not mean that a major great power war between China and the U.S. is likely or inevitable in the foreseeable future. A traditional war, especially between two nuclear-armed states, appears to be a much too costly activity to engage in. But the rise of China and the question of whether Beijing will peacefully find its place in East Asia and the world will be one of the most important issues in international politics of the 21st century.

Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), the man who implemented the well-known economic transformation of China over the last few decades, had probably known that rapid development of the most populous nation in the world would bring profound changes in the distribution of power in international relations. From 1978 onwards, Deng, convinced that China had to strengthen its economy, effectively opened up China’s economy and making it an integral part of the global economy. Deng knew that economic growth could only be achieved in an atmosphere of stability and peace inside and outside of China, thus he formulated the so-called “24 characters” strategy which was directed both at a foreign audience to reassure other nations about China’s benign intentions and at Chinese foreign policy decision-makers to instruct them how they should conduct China’s foreign policy in the future. The questions now are, with much of Deng’s vision materialised, will China continue to adhere to Deng Xiaoping’s declared “24 characters” strategy and thus rise peacefully within the existing Western-led international order? Or will it use the same strategy to continue building up its own strengths in ‘secret’, and once it has achieved this, ultimately become a rather hostile and ‘revisionist state’ that aspires to regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific?

The U.S., as currently the only regional hegemon in the system, not only possesses and commands a “multifaceted set of power resources” [7], but enjoys also ‘structural power’ which gives Washington the ability not only to shape other states’ preferences and interests but also to command power resources. The American preponderance is not only sustained by its overwhelming material power but also by a “hegemonic transnational culture that legitimises the rules and norms of a hierarchical interstate system” [8]. John J. Ikenberry argues that these “universal institutions”

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which were created by the United States and its allies in the aftermath of the Second World War absorb sufficient incentives for China to “work[ing] within, rather than outside of, the Western order”.^[9] He suggests that China would jump on the seemingly stronger, existing ‘bandwagon’ and with it, join the West and basically accept and adapt its values and institutions. According to this view, Sino-U.S. relations are reciprocally beneficial and thus not a zero-sum game.^[10]

However, it seems rather questionable if it is rational and beneficial for a future superpower to conform to an international order that it has neither created nor significantly shaped. Against the backdrop of China’s own experience of a “century of humiliation”, which began with massive foreign intervention in the early 19th century this seems even more implausible. Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean academic and former diplomat, observed that “China today is like a dragon that, waking up after centuries of slumber, suddenly realises many nations have been trampling on its tail”.^[11] In fact, China, adhering to Deng’s wisdom, is constantly reassuring both in its actions as well as in its rhetoric that it is willing to conform, rather than to challenge the existing international order. But this tactic is a clear “strategic choice” since China still depends on technology, market access, and capital from the West in order to continue its economic development, which in turn allows the Chinese leadership to stay in power.^[12] From the Chinese perspective, a ‘peaceful environment’ is very much desired to continue its uninterrupted rise to great power status. Once it has achieved great power status, it is unlikely to continue to fully conform to existing rules and to subordinate itself to a Western-led system given its vastly different ideological and political views (e.g., human rights, ‘Beijing consensus’, non-intervention, etc.). Even though China’s overall national security (in terms of territorial integrity and sovereignty) has probably never been as good since the First Opium War (1839-1842), the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) feels quite insecure, especially since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. The preservation of the political system of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has become Beijing’s key objective – or in other words, China’s foreign policy is primarily driven by concerns regarding regime survival.^[13] Since China’s leadership cannot be expected to relinquish its monopolistic hold on power, the democratic peace theory will remain unlikely to be applicable to Sino-U.S. relations in the foreseeable future.

As Susan Shirk, a leading expert on Chinese politics, points out, the CCP leadership is concerned that it could face the same destiny as the Qing rulers or the leaders of the Republic of China – that it would be overthrown whenever it looks weak facing pressure from abroad. In fact, the CCP puts “political stability ahead of everything else” and can be expected to go to great lengths to remain in power.^[14] Unsurprisingly, Beijing embraces a ‘comprehensive security’ concept which prioritises political survival and regime maintenance.^[15] Thus, for the time being Beijing adheres to a “peaceful rise”^[16] in its pursuit of building a “harmonious society”^[17] since it is practically impossible for the Chinese leadership to openly confront the Western order. Both concepts clearly reflect Deng’s strategy of Chinese rise to great power status. Hence, Deng’s “24 characters” strategy which essentially encompasses China’s grand strategy is nothing more than a mere scheme to weaken Washington and Tokyo-based fears of a “China threat”. For the intermediate-term, it is not beneficial to Beijing to be regarded as a peer competitor to the United States since Beijing needs economic exchange with the U.S. to continue its rise to great power status. Besides considerations which mainly focus on regime survival and the perceived insecurity of Beijing, there are certain signs that China is already ‘balancing’ the U.S. as the current regional hegemon in the Asia-Pacific by external (alliances and use of soft power) and internal (military and economic build-up) means.

Simply put, China has embarked on “balancing” the US-led order by developing its own economic and military power and in the meantime, by cooperating with other non-Western societies, while preserving indigenous values and institutions, or in short, to ‘modernise but not to Westernise’. Internally, China has been modernising its armed forces.^[18] Within a few years, China has been able to modernise its naval and air forces to an extent that allows it to operate beyond its territorial waters – something that was still unthinkable a decade ago.^[19] This has been possible due to its increasing wealth created through its successful economic development. Externally, Beijing has started using its own kind of soft power to enhance its image and reputation abroad and pursue highly active diplomacy to find new friends and allies around the globe, but especially in the developing world.^[20] The concept of ‘balancing’ is theoretically founded on Neorealism which characterises the international system with its anarchic environment that operates with a self-help system in which “considerations of security subordinate economic gain to political interest”.^[21] State survival is the absolute minimum states seek, but beyond this motive “the aims of the states may be endlessly varied; they may range from the ambition to conquer the world to the desire merely to be left alone”.^[22]

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From this point of view, the strategy advocated by Deng would simply mean that “China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it” and consequently try to push U.S. forces out of Asia.[23]

At the time when Deng launched his economic reforms, he was well aware of the fact that he was presiding over a poor and vulnerable country. He knew that the “economy first” option was the only possible way for China to rise to *great power status* at some point. As China has grown stronger, China has not only become more engaged with the Asia-Pacific region (in a positive way)[24], but it has also started to behave in a more self-confident and assertive manner in its foreign policies towards smaller states in the region and even towards the United States. From the mid-2000s onward, Chinese leaders have increasingly sensed the balance of power shifting to their favour.[25] At times it seems that as China’s power grows “its allegiance to Deng’s maxim [expressed in the “24 characters” strategy] becomes more dated and stale”.[26] But perhaps Deng’s strategy is simply being misinterpreted. China’s leadership has time on its side as long as it can sustain its economic growth which in turn helps the regime to legitimise its authoritarian rule. Yet, the U.S. remains the region’s most powerful actor.[27] As Neorealism as well as a careful reading of leading Chinese strategists would suggest, once China will have surpassed or at least reached parity with the United States in terms of economic and military power (the latter will probably take a decade more), China is more likely to change the international order to its liking.[28] The likelihood that Beijing would try to take over Taiwan would increase significantly, and China would be eager to push out U.S. military forces from the region and introduce a Sino-centred hegemonic system to the region but one which would very unlikely be based on either coercion or territorial expansion.[29]

The Asia-Pacific region as a whole has so far largely benefited from China’s economic rise; it is not unimaginable that the region would resist Beijing to protect its sea lanes in a re-established Sino-centred system.[30] However, facing China’s military build-up, diplomatic and soft power offensive, Japan cannot be expected to stay passively at the sidelines. In turn, Japan will strengthen its own Self Defence Forces (SDF), or at least tighten its security alliance with the United States in order to enhance its own security.[31] This in turn will contribute its share to an emerging security dilemma in East Asia. Yet, Neorealism, or at least its ‘offensive’ version, would not expect the U.S. to disengage voluntarily from the region. Thus, the region could face a destructive downward spiral. Furthermore, this essay has not discussed the nationalist inclinations of both Japanese and Chinese domestic politics and its impact on the region. It has also left out the increased Sino-U.S. resource competition which could further aggravate relations.[32] Although a hegemonic transition still remains quite unlikely to happen within the next two decades, China can be expected to increasingly test American resolve. In the long run, the Asia-Pacific region is likely to be a region of Sino-U.S. power competition and increasing instability.

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[1] Taylor M. Fravel, "Revising Deng's Foreign Policy," *The Diplomat Blog* (2012).

[2] In this essay the term "China" is used instead of the country's official name "People's Republic of China" (PRC).

[3] Kenneth N Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 56.

[4] Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia," *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993/1994).

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[5] Nicholas Khoo, Michael LR Smith, and David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia? Caveat Lector," *ibid.* 30, no. 1 (2005).

[6] Christensen (2006) gives a good overview over the competing perspectives on China's rise. He does not simply differentiate between the major schools of IR, but divides the academic literature into two categories, "zero-sum" and "positive-sum". The former claims that continued relative increase in Chinese power will pose a "formidable long-term danger" to the national security and the economic interests of the United States, whereas the proponents of the latter perspective argue that China and the United States have strong incentives to cooperate and thereby, minimize the likelihood of "avoidable military conflicts"; Thomas J Christensen, "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and Us Policy toward East Asia," *ibid.* 31 (2006).

[7] John J Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to Us Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 387-88.

[8] Martin Griffiths, Terry O'Callaghan, and Steven C. Roach, *International Relations: The Key Concept*, 2nd ed. (New York/London: Routledge, 2008), 139.

[9] G John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?," *Foreign affairs* (2008): 32.

[10] Khoo, Smith, and Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia? Caveat Lector," 90.

[11] Kishore Mahbubani, "Understanding China," *Foreign Affairs* (2005): 49.

[12] Fei-Ling Wang*, "Preservation, Prosperity and Power: What Motivates China's Foreign Policy?," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2005): 672.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 62. See also Yang Jiang, "Rethinking the Beijing Consensus: How China Responds to Crises," *The Pacific Review* 24, no. 3 (2011): 352.

[15] Mark Beeson, "Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 102.

[16] Zheng Bijian (2005) argues that China's emergence as a great power will be peaceful, because China knows that its continued development depends on world peace. However, Bijian's "peaceful rise" could be an official mouthpiece, since he held senior positions in governmental academic and party organizations in China. See Zheng Bijian, "China's Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* (2005).

[17] Former President Hu Jintao (2005) said that "China's development, instead of hurting or threatening anyone, can only serve peace, stability and common prosperity". See Hu Jintao, "Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity," *Speech by Hu Jintao to the United Nations Summit, September 15* (2005).

[18] Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013): 449-50.

[19] David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia," *International Security* 29, no. 3 (2004/2005): 86.

[20] *Ibid.*, 77-78.

[21] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading (MA): Addison-Wesley, 1979), 117.

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[22] Ibid., 91.

[23] John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Time Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83.

[24] Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia," 89.

[25] Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," 447.

[26] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2011): 24.

[27] Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia," 66.

[28] As one senior Chinese military official noted – very much in line with Deng's principles – that "for a relatively long time it will be absolutely necessary that we quietly nurse our sense of vengeance [...] we must conceal our abilities and bide our time"; quoted in Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, "The Coming Conflict with America," *Foreign Affairs* (1997): 20.

[29] David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and Stability in Asian International Relations," in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. G John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[30] Beeson, "Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power," 107.

[31] Recent events in Japan clearly point into this direction. The Abe administration not only calls for constitutional change to abolish article 9 of the 'peace constitution' but also aims to significantly strengthen Japan's military. Martin Fackler, "Japan Shifts from Pacifism as Anxiety in Region Rises," *The New York Times* (2013).

[32] Beeson, "Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power," 109.

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