



The New Model of Major Power Relations in the Asia-Pacific

By Yuan Peng and Robert Tyrer February 20, 2014

For the United States and China, building a new model of major power relations will hinge upon their success or failure in pursuing peaceful, constructive interactions in the Asia-Pacific region over the long term. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi put it on a recent trip to the United States, “this journey may well start from the Asia-Pacific region.”¹ During our September 2013 U.S.-China High-Level Dialogue in Beijing, we were privileged to discuss strategic issues presented by the Asia-Pacific region. It was a very robust and interesting discussion, reflecting both the breadth and the complexity of the topic. The paper that follows is inspired by our meetings.

Sea change

The Asia-Pacific region is undergoing a sea change:

- The U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific
- China’s increased activity with its neighbors
- Frictions in the Sino-Japanese relationship
- Russia’s southern thrust
- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations’, or ASEAN’s, greater role
- Territorial disputes in the South China Sea
- Continuing tensions on the Korean Peninsula
- India’s Look East policy
- Australia’s northern focus
- Latin America forging a Pacific Alliance trade bloc
- The European Union mapping out its Asia-Pacific master plan

The U.S.-China relationship continues amid these strategic adjustments. Threat perceptions are in the eye of the beholder. Beijing sees itself bearing the brunt of Washington’s recent increased military redeployments in Asia, intense diplomatic maneuvering, and the push to realize a Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP. Washington is concerned by China’s quickening pace of military modernization,

unfair economic practices, and more assertive diplomacy. America's friends and allies in the region have expressed alarm about some of China's recent actions regarding the East and South China Seas, such as the declaration of the Air Defense Identification Zone, or ADIZ.

Stabilizers

Fortunately, there are a number of factors that point to the likelihood of a stable and peaceful U.S.-China coexistence in the Asia-Pacific.

First, the United States and China have no direct disputes over sovereignty, territorial issues, or deep-seated historical grievances, which can make forging a peaceful, constructive relationship challenging. The two nations do, however, have very different points of view on how existing territorial disputes in Asia ought to be handled, and some of those disputes involve U.S. allies, including Japan. Dialogues such as the consultation mechanism on Asia-Pacific affairs and Strategic Security Dialogue, or SSD, will help inform each side of the other's perceptions and expectations.

Next, each has significant interests and investments in the Asia-Pacific and close ties with many nations. This means that countries in the region are invested in their relationships with both the United States and China; regional players will work to ensure that they are not forced to choose between these ties. No one wants another Cold War. That said, a Chinese participant in our talks noted that one tension within the Chinese decision-making process is that Chinese political, social, and economic sectors have been incorporated into the international system to one degree or another, whereas the People's Liberation Army, or PLA, perceives itself to be excluded. China plays a leading role in international and regional economic arrangements. This is accepted, respected, and welcomed, but when China has security issues with many of these same countries reliant on the Chinese economy, they turn to the U.S. military for help. China is at the center of the economic system in the Asia-Pacific, this participant argued, but the United States is at the center of the security system.

A third stabilizing factor is that China and America are global powers. With their status as the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and the world's first and second largest economies, they share interests in other regions and cooperate over a wide array of issues such as climate change, energy, rebalancing world trade, anti-terrorism, nuclear nonproliferation, Iran's nuclear program, tensions in the Middle East, and others. These global responsibilities and related global collaboration may help to offset tension in the Asia-Pacific. The United States and China should cooperate in defending the post-World War II international system against detractors.

Moreover, their interwoven national interests and full domestic agendas in the coming decade may be a driving force for peaceful coexistence. More than 90 bilateral dialogue or exchange mechanisms, including the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, take place between Beijing and Washington, something never before seen in the annals of big power relations. These exchanges cover virtually every important issue from agriculture to zoology. In the decade to come, building up a prosperous society will be the central task for China, whereas economic rejuvenation and national revival will be that of America. This work requires a stable international environment and a steady bilateral relationship.

Finally, despite frictions and conflicts between different ministries, departments, interest groups, social media, and nongovernmental bodies in the two countries, there is a high degree of consensus at the highest level for expanding bilateral ties on both sides.

Nevertheless, despite all the conditions favorable for long-term bilateral peaceful existence in the Asia-Pacific region, it will be not be easy to navigate the turbulent waters.

Hurdles ahead

Both sides feel a growing tension in the Asia-Pacific. The United States views China's actions, such as military exercises near disputed territory and confrontations with U.S. vessels, as increasingly assertive. For its part, China feels pressure from U.S. reconnaissance activities near its coastline, the U.S. Air-Sea Battle Concept, and new weapons procurement. There is a clear risk of an inadvertent encounter spinning out of control, including one involving a third party such as Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. An American in our talks observed that territorial disputes were the most likely factor to derail progress in the U.S.-China relationship. Nationalism can lead quickly to increased friction, as seen in the China-Japan relationship. The United States, he said, is not seeking to exacerbate tensions in the region and does not take a side in the disputes; it only wants international norms and rules to prevail.

In contrast, a Chinese participant said that a common perception in China is that the United States is intentionally using the disputes between China and Japan and China and the Philippines to achieve its own purposes—to hedge against a rising China. Another Chinese participant noted that while the United States has just 2 nations on its borders, China has 14, not including Japan. He said that China has settled territorial disputes with 11 of those 14 neighbors, which was impressive. He encouraged U.S. friends to remember that China's issues with borders and neighbors are decidedly more complex than those faced by the United States.

Recommendations

The following are some policy suggestions that flow from our track II discussions:

- Managing the lack of strategic trust will require intensified strategic communication. It is critical for both countries to understand the other's strategic intentions accurately and directly through such mechanisms as China-U.S. consultations on Asia-Pacific affairs. For example, an American participant noted that no thorough discussion has taken place between the United States and China on contingencies if an immediate crisis were to occur on the Korean Peninsula. Deepening strategic collaboration will also promote converging interests. As Henry Kissinger has said, the two countries should be “part of a common cause” that means building a “Pacific community” geared to bilateral interests.²
- Breaking down the economic and security spheres discussed above may be helpful. Steps could include China joining more multilateral regional military exercises, as it is doing this year with the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, or RIMPAC; China welcoming U.S. assurances that it is invited to join the TPP, as National Security Advisor Susan Rice recently made clear; and ultimately integrating the TPP and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP, into a high-standard trade arrangement.
- A matter of immediate urgency is to establish maritime protocols, including defining more clearly the appropriate activities under international law in the Exclusive Economic Zones, or EEZs; freedom of navigation; crisis management; and maritime safety. Also, as the United States supports China and ASEAN in finalizing the code of conduct that they are negotiating, China expects the United States to play a neutral and constructive role in advancing peace and security in the region.
- It would be worthwhile to focus on triangular relations—including Beijing-Washington-Moscow; Beijing-Washington-Tokyo; Beijing-Washington-New Delhi; Beijing-Washington-Canberra; and Beijing-Washington-Seoul—because Russia, Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea are all major players in the Asia-Pacific region and some are U.S. treaty allies. China and the United States having strategic dialogues with those four countries would not only ameliorate their suspicions about a Group of 2, or G-2, but may lead to better integrated efforts to contribute to peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific, thus serving as a bedrock for China-U.S. interactions in this part of the planet.
- Continuing to cement China-U.S. coordination and collaboration in regional multilateral mechanisms, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC; East Asia Summit, or EAS; and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, ADMM-Plus. The United States and China should continue to actively consider how to address security cooperation in Northeast Asia and whether a new mechanism would be helpful.

All of these recommendations would assist peaceful coexistence and positive interactions in Asia-Pacific. The next step will be the translation of awareness into concrete actions through which to accumulate mutual trust, which will, in turn, lead to further actions. Needless to say, all of these call for vision and broad thinking on the part of diplomats, officials, and the strategic community on the two shores of the Pacific Ocean.

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Endnotes

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: We Hope that China and the United States Will Develop Sound Interactions in the Asia-Pacific," Press release, January 9, 2014, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1116501.shtml>.

2 Max Frankel, "Henry Kissinger on China," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2011, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/books/review/book-review-on-china-by-henry-kissinger.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.