

**China in Northeast Asia: Maintaining Order  
or Upsetting Order?**

**David Arase**

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Author: David Arase

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Institute of Chinese Studies  
8/17 Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines  
Delhi 110 054, INDIA  
Ph.: +91-11-23938202; Fax: +91-11-23830728  
Email: [info@icsin.org](mailto:info@icsin.org)  
Website: [www.icsin.org](http://www.icsin.org)

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**David Arase** is Resident Professor of International Politics at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. His most recent three books are edited volumes: *The US-Japan Alliance: Balancing Soft and Hard Power in East Asia* (Nissan Institute/Routledge, 2010) that was awarded the 2011 Ohira Foundation Special Prize; *China's Rise and East Asian Order* (Palgrave, 2016); and the *Routledge Handbook on Africa-Asia Relations* (Routledge, 2018). A single authored book on China's rise to predominance in Asia (Palgrave) is forthcoming.

# China in Northeast Asia: Maintaining Order or Upsetting Order?\*

## Abstract

*Rising tension at each of the three main flashpoints in Northeast Asia is driven by China's desire for a new China-centered order. China therefore seeks to undermine US cold war-era security commitments, challenge broader US-backed regional governance norms, and subordinate neighbors in order to institute alternative territorial, security, and political arrangements that match Chinese interests and values. Thus, Northeast Asia is polarizing and stability is becoming critically imperiled. The situation has helped to usher in an unprecedented era of US-China great power rivalry that threatens to divide an open and globalizing world into a system of closed regional spheres governed by resident hegemons.*

**Keywords:** *Northeast Asian security; Chinese Dream; Strategic rivalry; Indo-Pacific; Xi Jinping; Asian security.*

## Introduction: Clashing Visions of Order in Northeast Asia

Whether China is maintaining order or upsetting order in Northeast Asia is a matter of viewpoint. For its part, China believes that its historical destiny is to recover from a “century of humiliation” and reconstruct an Asian order properly rooted in Chinese tradition and culture. Xi Jinping speaks of achieving the ‘Chinese Dream’ of a ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) by 2049 (*CRI English* 2012). This foretells a Communist Party of China (CPC) ruled Sino-centric world order reminiscent of the traditional Confucian *tianxia* (‘All Under Heaven’) cosmology, which mandated the Chinese emperor’s universal rule over the world. This *tianxia* order never reflected the actual facts of China’s international relations in Asia over the past three millennia but Confucian ideology required that Chinese history be written this way. This carefully cultivated ideological orthodoxy and cultural identity collapsed after the First Opium War (1839-42). The subsequent “century of humiliation” saw a Han Chinese political movement led by Sun Yat-sen overthrow an ideologically Confucian but Manchu-ruled multi-ethnic empire in 1911. Since then integration of the successor Chinese “nation-state” into the Westphalian international order has been a central question that perhaps still remains unresolved.

Today, the CPC historical narrative explains how it patriotically struggled on behalf of the Chinese people since 1921. By 1949, under Mao Zedong’s leadership

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it succeeded in defeating imperialism (together with the collaborationist KMT or Nationalist Party led by Sun Yat-sen's successor Chiang Kai-shek) to establish the sovereign and independent People's Republic of China (PRC). In the subsequent era of Deng Xiaoping, the CPC successfully modernized and enriched China. Today under Xi Jinping, the CPC is uniting the energies of the Party, State, and Nation to strengthen and restore China to a position of centrality in world order. In the words of Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress:

The Chinese nation ... has stood up, grown rich, and become strong - and it now embraces the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation ... It will be an era that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to mankind (cited in Phillips 2017).

The key external goal is to restore a neo-traditional *tianxia*-like China-centered order by 2049, in time to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the PRC. Along the way, China is to become a 'fully modernized socialist country' by 2035, a target that Xi's era of personal authority may last to see.

### ***Response of Northeast Asian Neighbors***

Generally speaking, China's Northeast Asian neighbors neither remember the past nor imagine the future in quite the same way. But these neighbors are the first to bear the brunt of the CPC effort to achieve China's national rejuvenation.

The Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan, and Taiwan deplore China's unilateral and coercive efforts to expand its maritime boundaries and governance authority at the expense of their own sovereign rights under customary international law and mutually agreed treaty arrangements. Individually, these neighbors are powerless to stop Chinese moves to change the territorial and normative status quo. They rely on the US to maintain existing security commitments that protect them against the threat and use of military force by either the PRC or its ally, the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), as the latter two seek to change in the region's political geography and governance.

The US has compelling reasons to defend its allies, its strategic presence, and the regional status quo. The US is much better off maintaining a defense perimeter in the Western Pacific instead of retreating to a continental coastline defense posture. And to remain a global economic power, it needs guaranteed freedom of navigation through East Asia to access the dynamic growth occurring across the Indo-Pacific region.

Thus, the fundamental security interests of the US, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan align them against a revisionist Sino-centric order. It is not that US strategic predominance has been perfect from anyone's viewpoint—including that of the US. But the US and its allies agree that the existing stable rules-based order would be preferable to what seems to be on offer from China.

## China Aims for Glory under Xi Jinping's Leadership

When Xi Jinping took power in 2012 he declared that the 'Chinese Dream' to match and even surpass ancient China's golden ages must be achieved by 2049. Xi has forcefully asserted revanchist territorial claims against maritime neighbors and using the call for a "new type of great power relations," he habitually warns the US not to contest China's right to manage Asian affairs according to its own interests. Domestically, Xi has worked tirelessly to revive, strengthen, and centralize the many ideological, organizational, legal, economic, and societal control mechanisms of the Leninist party-state (Ringgen 2016).

His stunning success in advancing this agenda was recognized at the November 2017 19th Party Congress when the CPC approved his sweeping reconstitution of the CPC leadership. The new Central Committee saw three-quarters of its members replaced; the Politburo saw two-thirds of its members replaced; and the Standing Committee of the Politburo saw five of its seven members replaced—with no one age-eligible to succeed to Xi in 2022 in accordance with existing CPC norms.

The 19th Party Congress also wrote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into the CPC Party Constitution; added 'Xi Thought' to the official canon of Marxist-Leninist ideology; and approved a degree of centralization of power under Xi that ends the notion of 'collective leadership' that Deng Xiaoping attempted to institutionalize (*Xinhua* 2017b).

Thus, Xi enjoys more political and ideological authority over the CPC, the PLA, the state apparatus, and society—that is more control over China's present and future—than any leader since Mao Zedong (*BBC* 2017). To understand why Xi Jinping's first five-year term of leadership was thus rewarded, one needs to view the CPC regime in longer-term perspective.

When Xi Jinping took over in 2012, he vowed to save the CPC from the fate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by fighting tooth and nail to return ideological discipline and socialist virtue to the CPC (Beach 2017). He replaced the ideologically empty 'to get rich is glorious' spirit of the Deng era with the Chinese Dream. Xi used nationalism and selectively chosen Confucian values to "other" liberal "western" values as a means to unite the Party, State, and Nation in a patriotic crusade to rectify historical injustices and raise "socialism with Chinese characteristics" to a dominant world status.

Internationally, Xi acted aggressively to advance Chinese dominance in Asia. Domestically, Xi organized a draconian purge of the CPC, State, and PLA that replaced corrupt leaders at all levels with his own loyalists. Then delegates nominated to the 19th Party Congress rewarded Xi with leadership status and

authority unseen since the era of Mao Zedong. Thus, Xi is empowered to continue his agenda with renewed vigor and commitment going forward.

### **The US-Sustained Order in Northeast Asia**

The US established the liberal international order after its victory in WWII. Then the collapse of communism globalized this order by default. But today, a rising China under Xi Jinping is offering an alternative vision of a China-led international order.

The US-led liberal order has relied on multilateral organizations premised on the sovereign equality of states, the rule of formally agreed and customary international law, liberal economic principles, and liberal political principles. Continuing global US political and strategic engagement defends it. This US-led liberal hegemonic order attracts participants because it provides a valuable ‘public good’ to member countries: free, equal, unhindered, and continuous commercial access to a global market under conditions of general global stability.

This order took root in Northeast Asia in the following way. Defeat in the Chinese civil war forced the Republic of China (ROC) under the Nationalist Party (KMT) to escape to Taiwan where it continued to claim sovereignty over China. Meanwhile, in the Korean peninsula, Soviet forces occupied and took the Japanese surrender in the northern half while US forces did the same in the southern half. In 1950, with Soviet and Chinese support, the communist DPRK regime in North Korea invaded the South in a bid to unify the peninsula under communist rule.

This invasion caused the US to intervene under UN auspices to defend the South. The resulting Korean War (1950-53) led to US treaty commitments to defend Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and other non-communist areas of Asia against communist aggression or subversion. To contain the spread of communism, the US integrated non-communist ‘Free Asia’ into the US-led postwar liberal economic order. Much later, the acceptance and integration of China into this economic order occurred after China aligned with the US against the Soviet Union in 1972 and Deng Xiaoping sought economic assistance and inclusion from the West from 1978.

However, US security commitments have been and are still needed to maintain stability at Cold War era flashpoints in the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. And since 2012, the US has found it necessary to warn China that military aggression against Japan in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute would lead to US intervention. Thus, Cold War era security commitments remain essential to the national security of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (in the latter case modified by the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979), as well as to overall Northeast Asian stability.

China has long rhetorically demanded an end to “Cold War thinking” (i.e., removal of these US security commitments). Since the era of Xi Jinping’s leadership began

in 2012, it has begun to act boldly to bring this about and realize the Chinese Dream agenda.

### **China's Strengths**

China possesses formidable economic, military, and political assets in its struggle to remake Asian order.

#### ***China's Economic Rise***

Rising regional prosperity aided by Chinese growth has contributed to deepening interdependence, economic cooperation, and stability. However, emerging economic frictions are altering this benign aspect of China's rise.

First, China's headlong pursuit of economic growth has exacerbated such problems as fresh water management, fisheries preservation, energy security, and pollution management in the region. China's search for more fresh water, energy, and food to sustain high growth drives conflict with neighbors in, for example, the Mekong River basin and around the South China, East China, and Yellow Seas.

Second, China's hybrid state capitalism model features large-scale corporate entities acting under direct CPC guidance, whether via actual ownership or via party cadres in management and corporate board positions. Thus, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" coordinates trade, financial, monetary, industrial, and technology policies well enough to produce high industrial growth and rapid ascent of the technological ladder (Zhang 2017). This hybrid state capitalism works because trade partners observe their WTO obligations and give China free trade and investment access to their economies with minimal state intervention while China manages foreign access to the Chinese economy and subsidizes Chinese penetration of overseas trade and investment markets in accordance with state policy priorities. This neo-mercantilism is destabilizing the system of free trade institutions and rules (*Reuters* 2017).

Third, having become the world's largest economy in real output and the largest trading partner of over 100 countries (including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), China is now using trade and investment access to its market to reward or punish governments and individual firms according to their compliance with Chinese political interests. States, firms, or even private individuals that protest China's human rights practices; support Taiwan's right to self-governance; assist South Korea's defense against the North Korean missile threat; or oppose China's 9-dash line ownership claim in the South China Sea can face boycotts, disruption of business, cancelled visits, visa denials, territorial incursions by Chinese vessels, diplomatic protests, and media condemnations.



## ***Increasing Maritime Conflict and the Changing Role of Military Force***

Xi Jinping has placed extraordinary pressure on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to reform, reorganize, and modernize in order to create a military that can effectively fight and win short sharp local wars using high tech means—and that will be personally loyal to him (Buckley and Stephens 2017).

Since coming to office, Xi has had over 100 high level officers arrested for corruption, including Central Military Commission members who served under Xi Jinping. A further 13,000 officers have been disciplined. This year we saw that ninety percent of military delegates to the 19th Party Congress were newcomers; and Xi appointed new commanders to all four PLA service branches; to three of five theater commands; and to nine of 15 functional offices under the CMC. All may be presumed to be personally loyal to Xi. And last year, Xi assumed a new title and role as sole Commander-in-Chief at the top of the chain of command in wartime (Li 2017).

China's military spending ranks second in the world, and it is expected to continue growing at seven percent. It is acquiring technologically cutting edge capabilities in maritime, land, air, space, and cyberspace weaponry, as well as in C4ISR (Office of the Secretary of Defense of the Federal Government of the United States 2017). Chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr. testified before Congress that, 'If I look out to 2025,... I think China probably poses the greatest threat to our nation' (US Congress Senate Committee on Armed Services 2017).

Important military parades in September 2015 and July 2017 saw Xi give widely reported speeches. At the massive September 2015 parade in Beijing that celebrated victory over Japan in WWII, Xi charged the PLA with defending China's right to defend peace and security in Asia, a right that China won when it achieved victory over Japan in WWII. At the July 2017 event, an unusual display of military field exercises and the latest weapons at a remote training base in Inner Mongolia with Xi attending as the sole representative of the CPC leadership, he urged the PLA to always be 'ready for the fight, capable of combat and sure to win.' He also offered instruction: 'Always obey and follow the party. Go and fight wherever the party points' (*Xinhua* 2017a).

Xi seems to personally favor the militarized pressure tactics displayed in the East China Sea and South China Sea territorial and navigational rights disputes (Li 2013). In October 2013, he reportedly cut short debate and approved the imposition in November of an ADIZ over a wide swath of the East China Sea including the airspace over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (*Apple Daily News* 2013; *Phoenix New Media* 2013; *Duowei News* 2013). Confidential records of a Central Military Commission meeting held in February 2017 record Xi stating that 'military operations deep into the East China Sea and Diaoyu Islands to safeguard

our interest in territorial sovereignty... [show that] we could seize an opportunity and even turn a crisis into an opportunity' (*The Japan Times* 2017). And *The Study Times*, a CPC newspaper, praised Xi because: 'In the South China Sea, he personally decided on building islands and consolidating reefs, ... and built a robust strategic base for ultimately prevailing in the struggle to defend the South China Sea, and has in effect constructed a Great Wall at sea' (Buckley 2017b).

Thus spurred by Xi's bold leadership in the maritime power dimension (*Xinhua* 2013b) the first China Military Strategy whitepaper (2015) states: 'The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.' It also says the PLA must 'safeguard the security of China's overseas interests' and 'gradually shift its focus from 'offshore waters defense' to the combination of 'offshore waters defense' with 'open seas protection' (US Naval Institute 2015). Finally, it calls for 'winning informationized local wars' in the face of increasing threats and challenges in the maritime domain (Fravel 2015).

The most relevant aspect of this new strategy to Northeast Asia is a so-called Area Access/Area Denial capability (A2/AD) that seeks 'to attack, at long ranges, adversary forces that might deploy or operate within the western Pacific Ocean in the air, maritime, space, electromagnetic, and information domains' (Office of the Secretary of Defense of the Federal Government of the United States 2017).

In the wider Indo-Pacific, open seas protection and the defense of China's 'core interest' in continuing economic development mean that China is also building toward an extended strategic sea-lane control capability in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. This control would make South Korea and Japan, as well as India, which are all critically dependent on energy and trade transported through these sea-lanes, vulnerable to Chinese pressure. It also challenges current US dominance across the global commons, including these maritime domains.

As Chinese experts debate whether China's strategic opportunity for peaceful development that began after the cold war is now ending (Xu 2014), a sharper emphasis on the need to prepare for armed conflict and a new attitude toward the threat and use of force may be detected in recent commentary:

The stand-off in Donglang is a reminder of how crises and even wars can start in totally unexpected places and sooner than might be expected. China has reason to continue to exercise the utmost restraint as it wishes to extend its 'period of strategic opportunity'. However, it should also prepare for the worst-case scenario and be prepared to fight and win. This may sound harsh, but the truth is that peace is not a godsend. It often has to be earned, sometimes at the cost of war (cited in Zhou 2017).

Xi's thinking about when force will be used in this era of China's rise is distilled in his concept of the 'principled bottom line' (原则底线 *yuanze dixian*), which says that China will fight before it sacrifices its 'core interests' (*Xinhua* 2013a). 'Core interests' include the system of party and government (party-state) rule in China; the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Chinese state; and the continuing stability and development of China's economy.<sup>†</sup>

### ***Leninist Party-State Foreign Policy Instruments***

The CPC coordinates a variety of channels at the levels of government relations, party relations, military relations, and societal relations to advance party-state international agendas.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is the mouthpiece in official state-state relations, but the State Council (under CPC policy guidance) coordinates MOFA and other state ministries and agencies when targeting countries.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA), which answers to the Central Military Commission (CMC) chaired by Xi Jinping, manages military-military relations, as well as a growing number of PLA-supported civilian think tanks, business corporations, foundations, friendship associations, and academic institutions that seek ties with civilian counterparts in target countries to advance China's strategic interests.

Finally, the CPC directly conducts relations with target countries through organs under Politburo supervision. One is the highly secretive Propaganda (recently renamed 'Publicity') Department, which monitors and guides ideological thought and discourse at home and abroad via research, educational, information, and mass media institutions. Perhaps its best-known effort (aside from the China Global Television Network) is the Confucius Institute program that seeks to guide thought and discourse about China on university campuses around the world (Brady 2006).

Another organ is the International Liaison Department, which maintains ties with other communist parties but more recently, the CPC has expanded its mission to include overseas academic institutions such as think tanks and foundations. Scores of new Chinese think tanks set up with CPC encouragement now engage with their overseas counterparts in every major country and region of the world.

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<sup>†</sup> In 2009, speaking at the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, State Councilor Dai Bingguo defined China's core interests in the following way:

‘中国的核心利益第一是维护基本制度和国家安全，其次是国家主权和领土完整，第三是经济社会的持续稳定发展’(‘China's core interest is to protect first, the fundamental system and state security; next, state sovereignty and territorial integrity; third, the continuing stable development of the economy and society’) (*China News Online* 2009).

Similar to this is the United Front Work Department (UFWD), called the ‘magic weapon’ of the CPC because of the indispensable role it played in the struggle to achieve and maintain single-party rule in China. Using Chinese government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) or overseas NGOs and Chinese community organizations, the UFWD works to politically isolate ‘enemies’ and help ‘friends’ to advance CPC agendas (Kynge, Hornby and Anderlini 2017).

The less well understood non-official PLA and CPC international engagement strategies incorporate a ‘three warfares’ (三种战法 *san zhongzhanfa*) approach to international political struggle. This refers to the use of psychological, information, and legal warfare methods to isolate the enemy and overcome his ability to resist (Walton 2010). This approach has been used with success against rival claimants in the South China Sea, but the best example of how it operates in Northeast Asia may be Taiwan (Cole 2017).

### **Chinese assertiveness and the US response**

The construction of a China-centered order in Asia requires China to replace the US as East Asia’s resident guarantor of peace, stability, and prosperity. Thus, China must persuade or coerce the US and its Asian allies to ‘end Cold War thinking’, i.e., to peacefully end US alliances and military basing arrangements that date from the Cold War era in order to make way for ‘China’s rise’, i.e., China’s rise to predominance in Asia that is its historical destiny.

The end of US alliances and basing arrangements in Northeast Asia would force the US to withdraw its strategic defense perimeter from East Asia to its Pacific island bases in Hawaii and Guam. This shift would make the US less secure; reduce the US from global to regional power status; hand regional hegemonic status to China, and free it to focus on extending its dominion across all of Eurasia and into surrounding regions such as Africa and Oceania using its Belt and Road Initiative as a platform.

The rise of overtly revanchist Chinese territorial and normative agendas in maritime Asia dates from 2009 when China launched a variety of new unilateral coercive actions using civilian and naval vessels to unilaterally and coercively enforce China’s claimed rights (based on China’s historical memory) against other coastal states’ claimed sovereign maritime rights (under international law) in the Yellow, East China, and South China seas. US allies along with traditional friends requested a reassuring US response.

A US offer to mediate China’s disputes with Asian neighbors was made by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the 2010 ARF, and an appeal by the Singaporean FM to China to show restraint at the same meeting were both angrily rebuffed by Chinese FM Yang Jiechi. In effect, he demanded that the US stay out of conflicts between China and neighboring Asian states, and that small

neighboring Asian states should just deal with the reality of a bigger and more powerful China.

At the same time, China began educating the world about its ‘century of humiliation,’ warning it to respect China’s growing strategic ambitions and interests. Observers began to pay attention to China’s improving A2AD military capability that undermined the credibility of US security guarantees and made Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan increasingly vulnerable to Chinese intimidation and threats.

The Obama Administration responded with the so-called strategic pivot or rebalancing toward Asia enunciated by Obama before the Australian Parliament in December 2011. Beyond promising greater diplomatic engagement, he pledged to assign 60 percent of US military forces to the region and upgrade defense and security relationships. This included the idea of ‘networking’ the existing Asian spokes of US bilateral alliances in order to rationalize and multiply the deterrent effect of existing alliances.

## **China’s Five-Pronged Answer to the Obama Pivot**

### ***A. China offers the US a New Type of Great Power Relations***

During an informal visit to Washington DC in early 2012 just after Obama’s Australian visit, then-vice president Xi Jinping introduced ‘the new type of great power relations,’ a formula for Sino-US relations that would preserve peaceful cooperative bilateral relations as China continued to rise. The term’s implicit contrast with the ‘old type’ of great power relations marked by rivalry leading to war suggested that, to avoid this outcome in US-China relations, what was needed was bilateral management based on the following guidelines: mutual respect for each other’s core interests; a search for win-win cooperation; dialogue to manage differences; and avoidance of armed conflict.

Unlike the Obama proposal for a ‘G-2’ strategic partnership with China, Xi’s proposal did not seek to achieve a fusion of core interests and a shared strategic agenda. It offered to avoid war if each side agreed to respect the other’s different and competing ‘core interests.’ Thus, in bilateral dialogues China warns the US when its core interests are at stake (Blanchard and Martina 2017). It offers ad hoc cooperation in remaining areas if mutually beneficial arrangements can be found. Strategic competition remains peaceful because armed conflict is ruled out.

Meanwhile, China presses US allies to surrender maritime territory and rights. As it acts unilaterally and forcefully—but peacefully—with paramilitary fleets of fishing vessels and civilian coast guard vessels against maritime neighbors, China only uses PLA Navy vessels to defend China’s civilian lives and assets. China explains that conflict with neighbors’ concerns China’s core interests in sovereignty and development; and that such matters do not affect core US interests, which reside

in the Western Hemisphere, not Asia. Otherwise, China stands ever ready to discuss the peaceful and cooperative management of Sino-US relations.

Finally, China lavishes flattering hospitality on visiting dignitaries and offers to 'assist' US efforts to de-nuclearize the DPRK; show restraint toward Taiwan; and buy US real estate, high technology, and Wall Street financial services. The intent is to reassure the US into strategic complacency and creeping accommodation to China's rising power. This may indeed be a tempting and face-saving course for the US if the alternative is armed confrontation leading possibly to war

Xi Jinping had this to say about his initiative:

When President Obama and I met at the Annenberg Estate, California, in the summer of 2013, we made the strategic decision of jointly building a new model of major-country relationship between China and the United States featuring non-conflict or confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation. In the past two years and more since then, guided by this agreement, our exchanges and cooperation across the board have kept deepening and been upgraded. We maintain close and effective dialogue and cooperation on almost all major international and regional issues and global challenges (cited in *The Wall Street Journal* 2015).

During his years in office, Obama never officially endorsed Xi's proposed relationship. But Obama arguably did 'respect' China's core interests in Asia and avoided conflict by giving only minimal symbolic responses to the provocations of China and its ally, the DPRK; and Obama staged the annual bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) that maintained the appearance of advancing toward a G-2 type of bilateral relationship.

### ***B. Nuclearizing North Korea***

At the end of the global Cold War, both the PRC and the Soviet Union ended their generous economic and strategic support of the DPRK in order to normalize their relations with the US, South Korea, and the rest of the West. Both communist powers then put their economic relations with the DPRK on a cash commercial basis in principle.

But as an exceptional measure, China did continue to supply aid in the form of oil supplied through a special pipeline that kept the DPRK regime barely alive. Meanwhile, it advised Kim to open up and reform its economy as China had. This policy was justified by: a) the need to maintain the DPRK as a buffer zone to keep US forces stationed in South Korea away from the Chinese border; and b) the desire to avoid the fall of another yet ruling communist party, especially one with whom China had allied to fight the Korean War.

This put the brutally repressive and economically incompetent DPRK regime established by Kim Il Sung in a dilemma. If it took Chinese advice and opened up its economy, the DPRK's malnourished and impoverished population would learn about the ROK's economic success and realize the colossal incompetence of the Kim dynasty. But if the Kim dynasty kept the DPRK hermetically sealed, it would remain in bare survival mode with poor long-term survival prospects.

As a way out, the Kim dynasty chose to develop nuclear weapons. These would be useful to deter the use of force by richer and more powerful adversaries; extort aid from the world in return for 'good behavior'; and maintain hope (via military advantage) to reunite the Korean peninsula under the DPRK. So the DPRK has been developing nuclear weapons while delivering small material advances to its people through piecemeal reforms. This *byungjin* (dual advance) strategy is financed by natural resource exports and covert trade in drugs, weapons, counterfeit money, and slave labor.

### **China's Strategic Calculation**

The North's choice to develop nuclear weapons contravenes China's principled opposition to nuclear proliferation. But China has not believed that DPRK missiles would ever target China. And China has believed that DPRK nuclear weaponization could serve two paramount Chinese strategic interests.

One is that the DPRK's survival could be guaranteed without China again having to fight a bloody costly war to save it. The other is that a credible DPRK threat to strike the US homeland would raise profound questions regarding the credibility of US pledges to protect its allies in Northeast Asia against Chinese or DPRK armed aggression. Once the ROK and Japan began to doubt US promises to defend against North Korean aggression, China would have a much easier task of 'Finlandizing' its neighbors and removing US alliances from Asia.

Thus, allowing the DPRK to continue its nuclear effort while rhetorically deploring this effort might best serve Chinese interests. After all, earnest Chinese compliance with US demands to stop DPRK nuclearization might only perpetuate US prestige and strategic predominance in Northeast Asia, which is not China's goal.

### **Six Party Talks**

In January 2003, the DPRK deported IAEA inspectors monitoring the 1994 US-DPRK Geneva Framework Agreement (under which the DPRK froze its nuclear program in return for energy assistance from the US and its allies). China then hosted the Six Party Talks to negotiate a renewed freeze agreement. Meanwhile, China continued to supply oil, conduct educational, trade, investment, and military exchange relations, and permit DPRK access to wider exchanges with third parties on a sub

rosa basis. This stabilized a tense situation and permitted continuing DPRK nuclearization even as a new freeze was discussed.

The George W. Bush administration tasked Ambassador Chris Hill to negotiate a new freeze with the DPRK leading to the landmark September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks (*The Washington Post* 2007). But further talks soon foundered over whether a verifiable freeze should come before or after the DPRK is rewarded for a signed freeze pledge (Pinkston 2006).

During the Obama years of ‘strategic patience’ toward the DPRK, China was trusted to responsibly manage its DPRK ally. The last moment to prevent the DPRK from full strategic nuclear weaponization probably passed with the testing of a hydrogen bomb in early January 2016 followed by an ICBM test in February 2016. These events quickly led to South Korea’s decision to deploy THAAD missiles.

### ***The Risk of a Nuclearized DPRK to the US-led Regional Order***

The risk of a fully nuclear weaponized DPRK is not that it would initiate a nuclear strike against the US or its allies. This would be irrational because it would immediately provoke a devastating US military response that would destroy the Kim dynasty that is trying to preserve itself with nuclear weapons. The actual risk is that this nuclear capability may permit DPRK armed provocations and nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation via the covert sale of weapons technology and materials.

With an effective nuclear deterrent, the DPRK could mount armed provocations against South Korea, Japan, or the US with little fear of military retribution. Thus, deterrence against North Korean aggression would be gravely weakened, and the ability of the ROK and Japan to deter DPRK aggression and maintain sovereignty and security would be critically compromised.

To counter this capability, the US and its allies might consider counter-balancing nuclear proliferation. One opinion poll showed that, already 65 percent of the ROK population favors nuclear weapons development. This, of course, would represent a signal failure of the US-backed non-proliferation effort. And given the volatile nationalism inflaming the public in China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula could spread to the rest of Northeast Asia.

### ***What is to be Done?***

The DPRK will soon have the ability to strike major US cities; or to pull off the simpler job of a nuclear blast in the ionosphere above the US to create a massive electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that would destroy 90 percent of US critical infrastructure along with personal devices such as wi-fi routers, cell phones, motor vehicles, computers, and other home devices. If the DPRK does not soon offer to



give up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for certain rewards, the US dilemma is to choose between preemptive military action and acquiescence to DPRK nuclear weapons.

Trump visited China in November with a plea for China to stop the DPRK's nuclear program. China refused to stop supplying oil, but it agreed to better enforcement of existing sanctions, and it reiterated a 'double-freeze' proposal. To wit, the US and its Asian allies should cease all joint military exercises. In return the DPRK should freeze—but not necessarily reverse—its nuclear efforts.

Both the DPRK and the US-ROK alliance had already rejected this double-freeze formula. The DPRK is adamant about retaining possession of nuclear weapons. The US-ROK concern is that another freeze would acknowledge and normalize a nuclearized DPRK and weaken deterrence by instating a ban on alliance maintenance activities. The DPRK could then demand new aid and reduced sanctions to continue a freeze that cripples the US-ROK alliance.

### ***C. Assaulting Japanese Maritime Sovereignty and Security***

In 2010, the ramming of a Japanese coast guard vessel by a Chinese fishing vessel near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands marked a new Chinese coercive diplomacy campaign to force Japan to cede these islands to China. The campaign of intrusions by Chinese civilian vessels backed by PLA naval and air forces then sharply escalated around the islands in the summer of 2012 immediately after China successfully wrested control of Scarborough Shoal (*Huangyandao*) in the South China Sea away from the Philippines using swarming fishing vessel tactics backed by coast guard and PLA assets.

In August when the same tactics were begun in the East China Sea, Japan mobilized 50 coast guard vessels to thwart the campaign, and the US warned China not to use military force there. In November 2013 China declared an ADIZ that included the airspace above the Japanese administered islands (*Duowei News* 2013). China has since been increasing the scale and militarization of its takeover effort (Neill 2017). From 1 April 2016-31 March 2017, Japan scrambled jet interceptors to meet unidentified air intrusions 1,168 times, mostly to deal with PLA aircraft. This number exceeds anything recorded by Japan during the Cold War era (*The Japan Times* 2017). Taiwan has recorded a parallel rise in PLA Air Force intrusions (*Sputnik* 2017).

China aims to overwhelm the ability of Japan to peacefully control access to the islands and surrounding sea after which it may unilaterally and coercively take possession of the islands, which are strategically located just west of the Miyako Strait that is China's main exit through the Japanese archipelago into the Western Pacific (Fanell and Gershaneck 2017). And in 2017, the PLA has increased pressure on Japan by passing vessels around and through the Japanese home islands in more

numerous and provocative ways that invite a new international incident (Newsham 2017).

China's 'peaceful' affronts to Japanese sovereignty below the threshold of war fail to trigger US security treaty obligations. This Chinese 'hybrid warfare' strategy is designed to 'salami slice' China's way toward fulfillment of its revanchist territorial ambitions and degrade the strategic relevance of the US using all means short of war with the US. The Japanese predicament teaches a more vulnerable and less capable South Korea to do everything possible to avoid being targeted in like manner.

#### ***D. Obstructing US-Japan-ROK Alliance Coordination***

The US wants to network or trilateralize its bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan respectively to make current US strategic deployments more effective in deterring Chinese and DPRK threats to regional stability. Japan fundamentally supports this strategic conception.

However, South Korea tends to be the odd man out in this desire to reconfigure alliance relations. Recently democratized South Korean society harbors resentment and blame toward both Japan and the US. Both countries had a turn dominating and shaping modern South Korea, each for decades at a time during which tragic experiences shaped the South Korean identity in profound ways. Under Japanese colonial rule there was suppression of national self-determination and wartime comfort women and slave labor experiences; and after US occupation in 1945, there was national division, war, military dictatorship, and the 1980 Kwangju Massacre.

This anti-Japanese and anti-American undercurrent makes ROK society susceptible to Chinese psychological, economic, and security manipulation. China gets attention when it promises to facilitate peaceful reunification, or when it appeals for partnership in keeping alive memories of Japanese WWII victimization of Korea and China. China may thus easily create political impediments to improved triangular alliance coordination in a recently democratized South Korea.

Economically, key South Korean industrial sectors are now critically dependent on investments and consumers in China. And in the realm of security, South Korea is on the front line facing growing PRC and DPRK military capabilities.

These deep vulnerabilities to Chinese manipulation mean that South Korea wants a US alliance only if it protects against DPRK aggression. It does not want an anti-Chinese alliance or fear of inciting Chinese displeasure and punishments. Thus, South Korea collaborates with the US alliance agenda only to the extent needed to retain US protection from the North's aggression, and avoids any commitment to deter Chinese aggression except against itself.

China has skillfully exploited this asymmetry of interests and sympathies in the US-Japan-South Korea triangle to repeatedly divide South Korea from the US and Japan. The THAAD issue is only the most recent example of Chinese gambits that obstruct US alliance agendas in Northeast Asia.

Prior to this, president Park Geun Hye partnered with Xi to protest Japanese prime minister Abe's efforts to strengthen Japan's defense capabilities and to condemn him for failing to properly apologize for Japan's WWII atrocities. She joined Xi on the Tiananmen podium to review the 'Victory over Japan' military parade on 15 September 2015. All this obstructed US alliance strategy. At the same time, South Korea began a bilateral FTA negotiation in 2012 that was rewarded with a free trade agreement with China in November 2014.

But its hope to put bilateral economic ties on a solid and privileged foundation lasted only until China launched a raft of carefully targeted economic sanctions against South Korea to register Chinese displeasure with South Korea's 2016 THAAD deployment decision that was taken in response to DPRK hydrogen bomb and ballistic missile tests. Chinese economic sanctions will cost the South Korean economy an estimated 0.3 percent of GDP in 2017 (Mayger and Lee 2017).

South Korea is appealing to WTO tribunals for redress of these blatantly discriminatory measures, but this course offers neither a timely nor promising remedy. South Korea, therefore, has taken the expedient step of promising China 'Three Noes': no further THAAD deployments; no trilateral alliance coordination against China; and no participation in US ballistic missile defense systems. In return China promises normalized commercial relations but it remains unhappy with the existing THAAD deployment (*The Hankyoreh* 2017).

### ***E. Mounting pressure against Taiwan***

The Taiwan Strait situation has remained more or less calm since the last major crisis in 1996. In that year, the US sent two aircraft carriers to stabilize the situation and reassure recently democratized Taiwan after China fired ballistic missiles over Taiwan in a coercive and ultimately failed effort to prevent the direct democratic election of presidential candidate Lee Tung-hui, an unusual native Taiwanese KMT leader that shockingly revealed long-hidden pro-native Taiwanese sympathies after first assuming power in 1988. Though the Taiwan Strait situation has been mostly calm since 1996, the situation remains unstable. A PRC decision to return to forceful means to absorb Taiwan could occur depending on circumstances.

The landslide election defeat of the KMT in 2016 questions whether PRC strategy fashioned under Jiang Zemin will be able to bring about the desired end state in a timely manner. Following the January 2016 presidential election victory of native Taiwanese Tsai Ing-wen and her predominantly native Taiwanese and pro-

independence Democratic People's Party (DPP) in national legislative elections, conditions may be ripening for another crisis at a moment of China's choosing.

Because we face new triangular forces after the 2016 Taiwanese elections, the 2017 19th Party Congress and the 2016 election of Trump, we review the complex origin and dynamics in the Taiwan Strait strategic triangle in order to better appreciate its delicate dynamics and its significance for the wider Indo-Pacific region.

### **Taiwan's Political and Societal Division**

The political allegiance of Taiwan's population today is divided between two main political parties, the Democratic People's Party (DPP) and the Nationalist Party (KMT). These parties represent different understandings of Taiwanese identity and historical destiny. Consequently, there is profound disagreement on the current political and legal status of Taiwan and Taiwan's future relationship with the PRC.

The KMT created the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912 and gained wide recognition as Mainland China's legitimate national government from 1928. After losing the Chinese Civil War (1946-49), the KMT government withdrew from its capital in Nanjing and established a 'temporary' ROC capital in Taiwan. Some two million KMT members and supporters along with hundreds of thousands of troops accompanied this move. The so-called 'mainlanders' that flooded into Taiwan and appropriated the political and economic privileges surrendered by the 50-year old Japanese colonial government were alien Mandarin-speaking and ethnically Han Chinese KMT loyalists. The ROC government claimed sovereignty over both mainland China and Taiwan when it formally evacuated Nanjing and relocated to Taiwan in 1949.

The native population of Taiwan in 1945, however, was a mixture of races and ethnicities with diverse native languages whose common language was Japanese after having spent the years since 1895 under a Japanese colonial administration that, for all its shortcomings, had materially advanced the living standards and educational level of the native population.

After KMT defeat in the Chinese Civil War appeared likely, mainland-born and Mandarin-speaking KMT officials, soldiers and camp followers came as foreign occupiers to rule over Taiwan's native non-Mandarin-speaking population. A native popular uprising against harsh mainlander rule in 1947 was put down with much bloodshed and the KMT imposed martial law that suspended ROC constitutionally guaranteed civil and political rights.

The lifting of martial law in 1987 enabled the DPP, an underground party that sought to defend native Taiwanese rights under harsh alien KMT rule, to lawfully organize and contest popular elections against the KMT. A DPP leader, Chen Shui-

bian, managed to win two terms as president in democratic Taiwan (2000-2008), but the DPP never managed to win a parliamentary majority until 2016.

### **The Ambiguous Legal and Political Status of Taiwan**

Because the KMT's founder, Sun Yat-sen, led the 1911 Xinhai Revolution that overthrew the Manchu Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China (ROC) in 1911, the KMT identity is rooted in Sun's Han Chinese nationalism. The CPC also traces its own revolutionary Han Chinese nationalism to Sun Yat-sen. This kinship has allowed the KMT and CPC to mend party-to-party relations in the post-Cold War era and to establish a basis for state-state dialogue called the 1992 Consensus. And it may help explain why both oppose the Taiwanese nationalist interpretation of Taiwan's current political status.

To back the claim of ROC sovereignty in Taiwan, the KMT cites three documents. One is the Japanese instrument of surrender on Taiwan, which was handed to a KMT official accompanied by an American official in 1945. The other two are the Cairo and Potsdam declarations signed by the ROC President Chiang Kai-shek. These declarations called for sovereignty in Taiwan and the Pescadores to be given to the ROC. However, these were wartime political declarations stating the Allies' intentions. They were not legally binding agreements that established the sovereign status of these territories after the Japanese surrender.

Many DPP intellectuals and party leaders believe that the ROC government on Taiwan was established by military occupation rather than by legal agreement or popular consent. They point out that neither the instrument of Japanese surrender on Taiwan to allied forces nor the San Francisco Peace Treaty explicitly convey sovereign authority over Taiwan from Japan to the ROC, the PRC, or to any other state party. They merely record Japan's renunciation of sovereignty, leaving the question of post-WWII sovereignty in Taiwan unspecified and unresolved (Charney and Prescott 2000). Native Taiwanese nationalists believe that the sovereignty question should have been resolved legally and democratically by holding a popular referendum. Such a referendum, if held today without external interference, could very well produce a vote for local Taiwanese sovereign independence.

The US position is that the sovereign status of Taiwan is unresolved. The US takes no position on what it should be, but in the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972 the US noted that at that time both the ROC and the PRC agreed that they belonged to one China and that the US would respect this position. Since then, the US has discouraged any move toward formal Taiwanese independence. The motive, however, is not the same as China's. The US does not deny the people of Taiwan the right of self-determination. It simply does not want developments that could lead to instability.

## **PRC and US entanglement over Taiwan**

### ***The PRC Desire to Unite with Taiwan and Fulfill the Chinese Dream***

The absorption of Taiwan into the PRC is a vital aspect of the CPC's mission to unify and lead all 'Chinese peoples' (*zhonghua minzu*) toward their great collective rejuvenation. It would also end the unfinished Chinese Civil War; discourage ethnic nationalism and separatist movements inside the PRC; and signify the end of 'Cold War thinking' in Asia, thus opening the way for China's rise to Eurasian and global predominance. All this makes the 'recovery' of Taiwan a PRC 'core interest' and a top agenda item for any PRC leader. But great caution is needed because the stakes are so high and the arrangements supporting current cross-strait stability are complex and fragile.

The PRC offers to incorporate Taiwan into the PRC on a provisional 'one country-two systems' basis modeled on the political formula for the reversion of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997. The PRC would like Taiwan's peaceful agreement in this matter, but it will not tolerate endless delay and, as stated in the 2005 Anti-Secession Law, it will use 'non-peaceful means' to prevent any move toward independence (*BBC 2005*). In order to demoralize and peacefully overcome Taiwanese resistance to Beijing's agenda, the PRC builds a military capability to take Taiwan by force and deter US military intervention, and it works to isolate Taiwan by persuading other states to end diplomatic ties with Taiwan, acknowledge PRC sovereignty there, and exclude Taiwan from international meetings (with great success). Meanwhile, through economic integration and political dialogue with the KMT, the PRC gives incentives for ever-closer relations.

### ***The US Commitment to Taiwanese Security***

Though the US and the ROC no longer have official ties or a formal security relationship, under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, the US still does have a residual commitment to the people residing on Taiwan that authorizes continuing arms sales to Taiwan and, should the PRC use coercive measures to compel Taiwanese submission to Beijing's sovereignty claim, even armed intervention to defend the 'human rights' of the people of Taiwan.

The KMT-ruled ROC was a US ally in the war against Japan, and the US favored the KMT over the CCP throughout both WWII and the ensuing civil war. However, after the KMT lost the Chinese Civil War and moved the ROC capital to Taiwan in 1949, the US weighed dropping its KMT ally.

However, DPRK's invasion of South Korea in June 1950 created a new alliance rationale. After having 'lost' China, to contain further communist expansion in Asia, the US actively protected and aided the KMT regime on Taiwan during the ensuing Cold War period.

### ***The 'One China Policy' of the US***

The US cold war relationship with Taiwan saw a decade of transformation in the 1970s. In 1971, the ROC, a founding member of the UN, was expelled from the UN and the PRC took over representation of China on the UN Security Council and elsewhere in the UN system. Nixon visited China in 1972 and the Shanghai Communiqué signed on this occasion states that:

The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves (Foreign Relations of the United States 2006).

This is the genesis of the US government's 'one China policy.' It is important to note that this policy is agnostic on the legal and political status of Taiwan, and considers this question unresolved with the US having no position on a desired end state. The US formally supports neither the ROC's nor the PRC's political or legal claims against the other. The US policy is for both sides to *peacefully settle* their differences. For the US, the *process* of accommodation rather than the outcome is the key concern.

The US 'one China policy' is not to be confused with the PRC's One China Principle, which is that the PRC is the sole sovereign authority in Taiwan, and that it will use force to ensure this final outcome.

### ***The Taiwan Relations Act (1979)***

Though the US and the ROC no longer have official ties nor a formal security relationship, the US has made a commitment to assist Taiwan with continuing arms sales, ensure a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question, and defend the 'human rights' of the people of Taiwan.

In 1978, when the US agreed to recognize the PRC as the sole government of China, the US called for a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan question and left the substantive content of any future cross-strait settlement for the two sides to decide (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 1978). At the same time, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). Unlike the Shanghai Communiqué and subsequent US-China political declarations, the TRA creates a legally binding requirement on the US president.

Section 2, subsection 2 of the TRA succinctly states what this commitment means.

*2. It is the policy of the United States-*

1. *to preserve and promote extensive, close, and friendly commercial, cultural, and other relations between the people of the United States and the people on Taiwan, as well as the people on the China mainland and all other peoples of the Western Pacific area;*
2. *to declare that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern;*
3. *to make clear that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means;*
4. *to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States;*
5. *to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and*
6. *to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.*

Subsection 3 adds: 'The preservation and enhancement of the human rights of all the people on Taiwan are hereby reaffirmed as objectives of the United States' (American Institute in Taiwan 1979).

### ***The Taiwanese General Election of January 2016***

The DPP presidential candidate, Tsai Ying-wen, won a landslide election victory over her KMT opponent Eric Chu (6.9 versus 3.8 million votes), and in the legislative election the DPP won 68 of 113 seats putting the KMT in the legislative minority for the first time ever.

Voters punished the KMT because from 2008 through 2015 when it controlled both the presidency (under Ma Ying-jeou) and the legislative majority, the government focused on achieving closer economic integration and opening political dialogue with the PRC.

Ma Ying-jeou championed a KMT-CPC modus-vivendi called the 1992 Consensus (Kan 2014). In 1992, both sides agreed that one China that included Taiwan was desirable. They could also permit each side a different interpretation of what 'one China' means. (The core difference is whether the PRC or the ROC is the sovereign government of Taiwan.) However, there is no official document that records this consensus. When DPP leader Chen Shui-bian occupied Taiwan's presidency from 2000-2008, the 1992 Consensus dropped out of sight.

After KMT leader Ma Ying-jeou was elected in 2008, he revived the 1992 Consensus as a basis for political dialogue while negotiating agreements to widen trade, investment, and cultural exchange. However, during the years of KMT governance, ordinary Taiwanese experienced a growth slowdown and a hollowing out of jobs as



factories moved to the mainland; an accelerating take-over of Taiwanese firms by mainland Chinese investors; and rising inequality as a rich and politically connected class gained lucrative new mainland investment opportunities. Politically, Taiwan saw increasing international isolation. Photos of a smiling outgoing president Ma Ying-jeou shaking hands with Xi Jinping at a specially arranged valedictory meeting in Singapore only weeks before the 2016 election crystallized Taiwanese voter frustration with the out-of-touch KMT government.

The 2016 election results were a grave setback to CPC policy toward Taiwan. First, the CPC's political partner, the KMT, lost power to the DPP. Second, the new DPP leadership is mostly native Taiwanese and may have little affinity or desire for closer relations with the mainland. Third, educational reforms and renaming of street names and public memorials under the DPP government are reducing sentimental connections with the mainland and celebrating a native Taiwanese identity. Fourth, the new government is pushing new trade agreements with other countries, such as the Philippines, which provoke the PRC. Finally, though Tsai Yin-wen pledges to do nothing to disturb the cross-strait status quo, the DPP believes that the sovereignty question in Taiwan remains unresolved and will not repudiate the population's right to determine how they shall be governed.

### ***The Current Delicate Cross-Strait Balance***

Upon Tsai's election to office, China required that she endorse the 1992 Consensus and the One China Principle (according to the PRC understanding) and reject independence before the PRC would have high-level dialogue with the new Taiwanese government.

In response Tsai pledged to uphold the peaceful status quo and drop all talk of independence, but she would not expressly endorse the 1992 Consensus or the One China principle. Instead she called for talks to create a new mutually acceptable basis for cross-Strait relations. China has ignored this offer and so, unusually, there has been almost two years of drift in cross-Strait relations since Tsai's election that widens the political and cultural gulf between the two sides.

The CPC continues to cultivate ties with the defeated KMT (Chen 2016). But the proportion of the Taiwanese population that self-identifies as Chinese is dwindling and the proportion that favors independence is growing with the passage of time. Over 70 percent of Taiwanese believe that Taiwan is already an independent country; and by 2014 only 3 percent identified exclusively with being Chinese (as opposed to 60 percent identifying as exclusively Taiwanese), while at the time of the 1992 Consensus one quarter of the population exclusively self-identified as Chinese (with only 18 percent self-identified as exclusively Taiwanese). Three-quarters of the population would favor declared independence if this did not provoke Chinese military attack, and among those under 40 years old, 43 percent

would support formal independence even if this meant war with China (Chen, et. al 2017).

The situation is highly unfavorable from a PRC perspective. But in order to have a good relationship with newly elected US president Donald Trump, who personally spoke to Tsai to accept her congratulations and to prepare for a successful 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping swept the difficult Taiwan problem under the carpet.

### ***Xi's Dilemma: Delay or Confront?***

Helped by his power to manage domestic media and information, Xi has kept public attention away from the awkward drift in cross-strait relations. But after the 19th Party Congress this situation cannot last. Xi must soon address the adverse currents running in the Taiwan Strait or risk being overtaken by events beyond his control.

When President Trump visited China in November to discuss DPRK's advancing nuclear weapons program, Xi Jinping told him that the single most important issue in US-China bilateral relations was the Taiwan question (*Reuters* 2017). This juxtaposition of US concern over the DPRK with Chinese concern over Taiwan suggests an offer to exchange pieces on a chessboard.

However, such an uneven trade is unlikely. Geopolitically, Taiwan is of much greater importance than the Korean peninsula if the core strategic issue is maritime dominance in East Asia. And the value of a de facto independent Taiwan only rises as China becomes more overtly hostile toward the security interests of the US and its allies in Asia.

### **A New Era of Rising Risk and Deepening Division?**

As indicated above, tensions are rising in Northeast Asia. The growing counter-intervention capabilities of the PLA in the Western Pacific cast doubt on the credibility of the US as a regional security guarantor. China has also benefited from the DPRK's nuclearization and China's own clever bilateral diplomacy backed by growing economic and military leverage to undermine US nuclear and conventional deterrence guarantees given to its Northeast Asian allies; exploit ROK vulnerabilities and strain ROK-US bilateral alliance relations; frustrate US efforts to coordinate the US-ROK and US-Japan bilateral alliances against China's strategic challenge; and demand territorial concessions and political deference from Japan using militarized psychological war measures. The general effect is to make the US together with its regional partners feel beleaguered and less secure in Northeast Asia, which is probably just what China intends.

Whether the net result will be in line with Chinese hopes and expectations is another matter. Material capabilities still heavily favor the US and its allies, and much will depend on questions of political will and the quality of individual US

security partnerships. Unforeseen events, which become more likely with rising tensions; and whether and to what degree the US and its allies will actively counterbalance Chinese moves, will determine the future.

### *Japan*

Japan under conservative LDP rule would do everything possible, including Constitutional revision, improved military deterrence capabilities, and new defense cooperation arrangements to defend its sovereignty and to support continuing US strategic involvement in Asia. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, having just led the LDP to another landslide Lower House electoral victory, is positioned to deliver on this agenda. It would be hard to imagine the US remaining a dominant maritime power in Asia without this kind of Japanese support. But the US will still need the continuing cooperation of other Asian partners and friends to meet the Chinese strategic challenge.

### *The ROK*

The ROK is more vulnerable to PRC and DPRK pressures and demands, making US alliance coordination to address China's strategic challenge difficult to manage. So long as the ROK faces the existential threat posed by the hostile DPRK, it cannot afford to give up its US alliance. But if the DPRK threat is somehow removed from the equation, ROK interests might dictate a closer relationship with China than with the US.

### *The Complicated DPRK Factor*

China has believed that DPRK nuclearization posed few problems for China (because DPRK missiles would never threaten China). Moreover, it could preserve the DPRK with less cost to China and undermine the credibility of the US security guarantees given to US allies.

However, at a point too late to stop the DPRK, China is only now beginning to realize some less obvious costs and risks of permitting this ally to develop deliverable nuclear weapons.

- The ROK and Japan must now ask the US for ballistic missile defense; real-time satellite surveillance information; assistance in acquiring a nuclear deterrent should one be needed, etc., making them more, rather than less, dependent on the US. Moreover, China's continued shirking of responsibility for the threatening actions of its ally has increased anti-Chinese sentiment. This trend is precisely what China does not want to see.
- If the US accepts DPRK nuclearization as a *fait accompli*, there is a real risk that the ROK and Japan would want to acquire a nuclear deterrent. This step would leave Japan and the ROK less vulnerable to Chinese military coercion.

- Should the US seek to forcibly disarm the DPRK, the loss of innocent lives would be tragic, but few would regret the quick and assured demise of the Kim Jong Un regime. As mere bystanders to this US justifiable military intervention on China's border, Chinese leaders would face huge risks, costs, and damaged domestic and international prestige.
- Finally, as mentioned above, absent a China-sponsored DPRK existential threat to the ROK, the ROK could conceivably be peacefully persuaded to abandon its US alliance for assured market access to, and security guarantees by China.

Recently, credible Chinese academics have argued that a nuclearized DPRK is not in China's interest (Deng 2013); that a Korean peninsula unified under the ROK would be preferable to the status quo (Buckley 2017a); and that, in case of US military action against the DPRK, it would be better for China to cooperate than to remain a bystander (Jia 2017). It is doubtful whether the PLA takes a similar view, but this thread in Chinese strategic thinking gives South Korea hope for strategic partnership with China and reason to refuse US alliance roles that are 'anti-China' (Zhou 2017).

### *Taiwan*

The democratic elections of 2016 in Taiwan saw the demise of the CPC's partnership with the KMT that put in place an economic (ever more comprehensive free-trade agreements) and political (the 1992 Consensus) basis for the eventual peaceful absorption of Taiwan into the PRC. The landslide victory of the DPP represents a popular repudiation of this whole PRC construct.

Xi must soon do something to arrest adverse trends in Taiwan and restore momentum toward the timely absorption of Taiwan or face domestic criticism. The PRC could brandish its growing military power to induce panic in Taiwan and force Tsai Ying-wen and the DPP to acknowledge Beijing's ultimate sovereignty over Taiwan.

However, Tsai defiantly vows to resist all such coercion and offers only to negotiate a new mutually agreed basis for sustaining the status quo. Xi must also take into account the impact of Chinese military intimidation on other regional flashpoints and on international perceptions of China. Finally, Xi has to deal with the enigma of Trump who, as Commander in Chief of the US military, is legally obligated (under the TRA) to respond to military threats against Taiwan. The last time China launched such intimidation against Taiwan in 1996, the US sent two aircraft carrier groups to Taiwan to demonstrate a US commitment to stability, and China at that point backed down. Trump has sent three aircraft carrier groups to exercise in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula in 2017. What might happen in another Taiwan scenario today?

## ***The Trump Factor***

The upset victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election has added unexpected tension and uncertainty to US-China relations. In his 'America First' election campaign to 'Make America Great Again' Trump condemned the 'bad deals' that constitute existing US commitments to uphold the status quo global order that were agreed by the elite liberal establishment. He singled out China as a top example of such bad deals and he pledged to rectify the 'unfair' relationship if elected president.

This agenda attracted the scorn of the bi-coastal liberal establishment, but it won the allegiance of voters and communities experiencing only downward mobility; the military; and the conservative/nationalist media serving mostly local media market consumers.

Elite interests—including professional white-collar elements in Silicon Valley, corporate America, and Wall Street who profited from globalizing post-Cold War emerging markets (such as China), joined by liberal intellectual elites, have been scornful of Trump's populist agenda. However, business oriented elite interests have also noticed a systematic Chinese effort under Xi Jinping to manage domestic and overseas markets in ways that unfairly advantage state-backed Chinese firms that seek to erode the market shares of established US high-tech, industrial, and financial powerhouses. Today, US business interests are becoming impatient for Trump to get tough with China (Browne 2017). So the converging views of the Pentagon, the downwardly mobile working and middle classes, corporate America, Wall Street, and Silicon Valley on the need for a tougher policy toward China foreshadows sharpening US-China strategic rivalry under Trump.

## **Conclusion**

With rising Chinese assertiveness destabilizing each Northeast Asian flashpoint, we see increasing insecurity and a new era of rivalry and division in Northeast Asia. Depending on one's point of view, China's challenge to the status quo may be a heroic and successful struggle by Xi Jinping to reclaim the glory of past ages of Sino-centric order; a fundamental challenge to the US-led liberal international order; a fundamental threat to the security of each targeted country, South Korea, Japan, the US, and Taiwan; a threat to regional stability; or just another turbulent phase in a repetitive hegemonic cycle.

Geopolitics, rather than defense of the post-Cold War liberal order, compels the US to defend the status quo in Northeast Asia. As explained above, US alliances and forward strategic presence in the Northeast Asia only gains geostrategic importance as China's power grows more threatening and its behavior becomes

more belligerent toward the US presence there. The US will not simply retreat in order to avoid displeasing this kind of rising China.

Moreover, China's increasing heedlessness of international norms as it reaches for regional and global predominance has consequences for the viability of the existing liberal global order. The desire of the US and other G-7 countries to maintain this order withers as China acts in self-aggrandizing fashion to undermine this order. For example, China demands WTO market economy status and UNCLOS legal protections that grant China open, non-discriminatory access to other nation's markets and to the global maritime commons. Meanwhile, many believe that China fails to implement promised reforms that bring it into compliance with WTO principles and norms, and that fail to respect the rights of other states under this treaty (US Trade Representative 2017).

Will the US continue to turn a blind eye toward China's non-compliance, or will it sanction China for perceived violations of treaty commitments? China under Xi Jinping is making it ever more clear that it will strengthen rather than abandon "socialism with Chinese characteristics", and that China will use its increasing power to institute an alternative, China-centered system of strategic and economic governance epitomized by the assertion of Chinese sovereignty over the South China Sea and the Euro-Asia-African Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Under president Trump, the US joined by other like-minded countries are coming to see China as a threat to the status quo and to their respective sovereign interests. In this sense, China's 'period of strategic opportunity' seems now to be ending a few years earlier than Chinese strategists had expected. A new era of great power rivalry will necessarily entail difficult dilemmas, ruptures, and complications. The US can no longer sustain the cost of public goods that support today's rising China that is unsupportive of liberal values, norms, and institutions. It will have to negotiate new burden-sharing agreements with like-minded nations to sustain some kind of liberal order, but it cannot continue to embrace others that act to undermine this order, which gives them benefits they cannot do without.

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Fax: +91 (0) 11 2383 0728  
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