
HOW SHOULD WE VIEW CHINA'S RISE?

A conversation with Christopher K. Johnson, Victor Cha, and Amy Searight



GLOBAL FORECAST: It is evident that China's rise will continue to dominate the geopolitics of Asia. How do the Chinese view this? Do its neighbors view it as inevitable, benign, or concerning? Where is there greatest convergence of Chinese views with that of its neighbors, and where is the greatest divergence?

CHRISTOPHER K. JOHNSON: If China's economic, military, and geopolitical influence continues to rise at even a modest pace during the next few decades, the world will witness the largest shift in the global distribution of power since the rise of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, if China in the next 10 to 15 years surpasses the United States as the world's largest economy, it will mark the first time in centuries that the world's economic leader will be non-English speaking, non-Western, and nondemocratic.

Of course, these are some pretty big ifs. China's leaders will have to demonstrate sufficient foresight and flexibility to respond to immediate tactical concerns while always staying mindful of their geostrategic long-game. They will have to prove that China's political and economic rise will be as sustainable over the next 30 years as it has been over the last third of a century, even though the task they are confronting now, as highlighted by the economy's present struggles with maintaining lift, arguably is much more complex than that faced by their predecessors.

They will have to craft a workable strategic framework for channeling the country's growing wealth and power in a way that facilitates China's return to the dominant position in East Asia without sparking conflict with their neighbors or, more importantly, with the United States. And, more fundamentally, they must find an answer to the nagging question of

what type of great power China wants to be in terms of whether or not to adhere to long-established global rules of the game that they had no hand in shaping. How China manages the tricky balance between the interests that encourage it to be a status quo power and the instinct to be a more disruptive one will largely determine how it interacts with its regional neighbors going forward.

VICTOR CHA: I think if you poll the region's elites (as CSIS has done), two observations become clear. First, every country in the region acknowledges that China will be the dominant power in the region over the next 10 years. However, those same countries poll very differently when it comes to the question of how comfortable they are with China as the dominant power. Indeed, even Chinese are uncom-

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AMY SEARIGHT: China's neighbors in Southeast Asia view China's rise as inevitable and also indispensable to their own economic prosperity. China has been the engine of economic growth in the region for decades, and Southeast Asian countries have sought to hitch their wagons to a China's dynamism, embracing the growing trade and investment linkages that have transformed the region into a growing web of regional production networks. The rise of manufacturing jobs and overall economic growth has lifted a vast number of Southeast Asians out of poverty and created bright economic prospects for many these countries.

At the same time, however, China's growing assertiveness and coercion in the maritime domain and on the diplomatic front are creating great anxiety in the region and wariness over China's regional strategic ambitions. China's self-declared "peaceful rise" is looking a lot less benign to its neighbors as it flexes its muscles in the South China Sea and seeks to divide ASEAN on key issues. In response, many ASEAN countries are seeking to balance their economic dependence on China with stronger security ties with the United States along with other regional powers, like Japan, India, and Australia.

fortable with this thought. For this reason, many of the countries polled felt the U.S. role as a stabilizer and its political leadership was critical to their own sense of security.

The greatest area of convergence, I think, is on regional economic integration. Asia for so long has been economically less cohesive as a community. The 1997–98 Asian financial crisis was a real wake-up call and we have seen increasing integration in terms of trade and investment since then. The greatest area of divergence will be on manifestations of China's growth that impinge on the sovereignty of others, as we are seeing in the South China Sea.

GF: **There is an assumption among some in Washington that the Chinese will become more assertive as their capabilities increase and Beijing increasingly defines its defensive interests in broader terms. Do you agree with this? Is there a possibility they will use their increased leverage in common purpose with the United States on certain issues?**

JOHNSON: I am ceaselessly surprised by how much hand-wringing goes on in Washington on this topic. Of course China will be more active abroad as

its expanding global interests—whether in terms of energy security, trade and investment, or a growing inclination from the international community to seek Beijing's participation in tackling the many challenges that confront the world—pull China in that direction. This is an entirely natural development and should be expected and not feared.

As to how a growing Chinese global role impacts U.S.-China relations, the broad parameters of the policy challenge for Washington remain the same: encouraging China's integration into the rules-based global order while hedging against Chinese behavior that might undermine it. The difficulty, in my mind, is that the complexity of the task facing American policymakers is growing in light of the increasingly multidimensional character of the bilateral relationship at the same time the number of foreign policy issues vying for their attention also is rising.

As such, my sense is that the incoming Trump administration needs to take a hard look at how it wants to approach U.S.-China ties, with a particular focus on the basic mechanics of how we engage in light of President Xi Jinping's rewiring of policy formulation and execution in China. This is especially necessary given that even areas that historically have been clear points of bilateral convergence—such as the economic and trade relationship—are trending toward greater competition.

SEARIGHT: It is only natural for a rising power like China with growing regional and global equities to define its interests more broadly and engage more actively in defense, diplomacy, and power projection. China's maritime military modernization is a case in point. As China's global trade and resource dependence has expanded, it has a growing interest in building the capability to protect critical trade routes without reliance on the U.S. Navy.

In recent years China has invested heavily in its navy and transformed it from a coastal force into a blue water navy, capable of far-reaching operations across oceans. China has used its new naval capabilities to build influence in the region and beyond, and to contribute to global maritime security efforts, most notably its regular contributions to international counter-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa since 2008. China's navy has also become more active in humanitarian missions, deploy-

ing its hospital ship Peace Ark annually for longer duration and great distances. Counter-piracy and humanitarian assistance are two areas where the United States and China already cooperate through naval exchanges and exercises, and there are other areas of potential cooperation as well, such as maritime safety and risk reduction. More broadly, when the interests of the United States and China align, we can expect to see expanded military-to-military cooperation. On the other hand, where interests

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diverge, such as U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, we can expect to see growing friction.

CHA: I do think there is a linear calculation in most of Washington about Chinese power and Chinese intentions. This is not because China is communist, but because China is behaving as most great powers do historically when they rise. So, there will be natural friction, competition that will emerge between the rising power and the hegemon (United States) in the coming two decades. The key for policymakers is to ensure that this competition, which can sometimes be healthy in terms of spurring innovation, does not spiral into military conflict. The greatest areas of most common purpose between a rising China and the United States may be on global issues like climate change, rather than issues in the region.



GF: What do you think the Chinese long-game is in the South China Sea, and what more, if anything, could the United States be doing to preserve freedom of navigation over time?

SEARIGHT: As China has taken increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea—building up artificial islands and turning them into military outposts, threatening its neighbors and harassing U.S. vessels—it has become pretty clear that China’s long-run ambition is to control the South China Sea. Control over this critical waterway and its land features would secure the natural resources for China’s exclusive use and would provide security for maritime approaches to China, enabling it to deny access to enemy forces in the event of a conflict. It would also go a long way to restoring a Sinocentric regional order that features prominently in China’s popular imagination, and would thus help maintain the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.

Although China is unlikely to impede freedom of navigation for international commerce during peacetime, its challenges to military freedom of

navigation and overflight, and its attempts to exercise jurisdiction over rival claimants in disputed areas, will continue and probably increase as its capabilities grow.

Current U.S. policies, consisting of routine presence operations as well as operational assertions under the Freedom of Navigation Program, are probably sufficient to preserve U.S. freedom of navigation during peacetime. The key is to maintain consistency and demonstrate resolve. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), for example, should be conducted like clockwork, challenging excessive claims of both China and other claimants. FONOPs should not be ratcheted up or down according to political considerations, but should be used to establish a baseline communication of the United States’ opposition to excessive maritime claims and its resolve to fully exercise its maritime rights and freedoms.

Preserving U.S. freedom of navigation in the South China Sea during a conflict will become increasingly difficult as Chinese military capabilities grow. Main-

taining deterrence by introducing advanced U.S. capabilities, developing new operational concepts, and enhancing U.S. forward presence through a more distributed, resilient, and sustainable force posture will be important to prevent conflict and avoid a costly struggle to regain access to the South China Sea.

CHA: A scholar recently wrote that the South China Sea is to China what the Caribbean was to the young United States a couple of centuries ago. It was our strategic imperative to remove all European powers from nearby waters. Perhaps that is what China is thinking in terms of the South China Sea. But those were different times. The dollar value of trade that flows through these waters is immense. And countries in the region are not comfortable with China’s harassing vessels in these waters or declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).

The dilemma for the United States is how to deter further Chinese land reclamation and building when these reefs, rocks, and islets cannot be conceived of as a core U.S. national security interest. Building the capacity of other smaller countries in the region is important, but perhaps most important is for China and the region to see the United States as “present” in the region. This means a regular tempo of naval activity and Freedom of Navigation Operations, or FONOPs, but without necessarily a lot of pomp and circumstance. Quietly but deliberately showing the U.S. Navy’s reach is about the best way to convey this.

JOHNSON: I’m glad you asked about China’s long game. So often, it is far too easy for us to get caught up in some new development on a particular island or land feature and lose sight of the fact that all of these developments should be understood against the backdrop of an integrated maritime strategy that China has been unambiguously signaling it would undertake since the 2012 18th Party Congress.

China’s turn to a more robust assertion of its claims in the South China Sea seems motivated by two key drivers, one tactical, and the other more strategic. On the tactical side, Beijing’s activism reflects its assessment that it lost substantial ground to its rival claimants during its long (1996–2008) entanglement in managing heightened tensions across the Taiwan Strait. China’s irritation at being outmaneu-

vered by its smaller, far less powerful competitors, coupled with a growing sense of confidence in its capacity to effect meaningful change, combined to unleash the robust pushback that has characterized China’s actions for the last several—and particularly the last few—years.

More broadly, China’s approach reflects its interest in developing more maritime strategic depth on its periphery as its interests expand well beyond its shores. In effect, China sees its activities in the South China Sea as contributing to its efforts to signal its regional neighbors, and the United States, that its forces intend to operate at times of their choosing, and perhaps, at times, with impunity, out to the second island chain and beyond into the Western Pacific.

GF: Is China a reliable ally in our desire to encourage a more predictable and stable North Korea? What leverage do they really hold over Pyongyang, and under what circumstances would they be willing to use it?

CHA: By any metric China’s future on the Korean peninsula is with the South and not the North. China does about 200 times more economic business with the South than the North per annum. While China has many political and economic benefits to reap from its relationship with an advanced industrialized democracy in Seoul, it throws money down a black hole in its assistance to the mercurial Kim regime. Hope springs eternal that China will choose to cut the albatross off its neck, but the world has been disappointed each time. We should still continue to press, persuade, and promote China to take a more responsible position in its relations with North Korea, but we should not at the same time subcontract the policy over a core threat to U.S. national security to a great power competitor.

JOHNSON: It would be wrong to think of China as an ally on managing North Korea. China can be a partner, and quite an effective one, with the United States in the few areas where our interests on the Peninsula align, but the fact remains that, while China has absolute leverage over the North in the form of food, energy, and other types of aid, Beijing remains absolutely unwilling to use it.

Chinese fears of a regime collapse that precipitates a flood of refugees into northeast China and arguably outdated notions regarding the strategic value of North Korea as a “buffer zone” against U.S. forces in the South seem to be preventing the Politburo from fully grasping how Pyongyang’s advances in its nuclear and ballistic missile programs are dramatically altering the U.S. strategic imperative to get the North to change course.

In fairness, the Chinese leadership’s reluctance to press its erstwhile ally probably stems in part from what seems to be its substantially diminished insight into what is actually happening inside the Kim regime, increasing Beijing’s risk avoidance when it comes to rattling the North Korean leader’s cage. As such, Washington is likely to have to rely on more unilateral measures to move the dial on the North Korean nuclear issue.

GF: How do you think Xi would like to be remembered—what are the legacy issues for him? Do you think his view of ‘U.S. leadership’ is compatible with our own?

JOHNSON: President Xi has been fairly explicit in terms of setting out his primary goals for his leadership tenure. Concepts such as the “Chinese dream,” “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” and the “twin centenary goals” may all sound like vapid Marxist sloganeering to a Western ear, but given that this is the lexicon in which Xi chooses to communicate with his Politburo colleagues, we dismiss it at our peril.

Xi’s innovation with these concepts is his argument that the encapsulation of all of the foundational elements of Chinese statecraft lies in the realization of a future wherein the PRC by 2049 intends to restore itself to a regional position of primacy. Unlike the policy platforms of Western political parties where it is understood that few of the stated goals ultimately will be realized, the Chinese Communist Party views its analogous pronouncements as strategic benchmarks that must be achieved to promote and sustain the legitimacy of continued one-party rule. As such, we can expect Xi to be willing to spend political capital, both domestically and abroad, in seeking to attain them.

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As to the issue of “U.S. leadership,” whether in the region or globally, Xi sees U.S. power as a lesser constraint on China’s exercise of its influence—both benign and coercive—than earlier leaders. In fact, ties with the United States, while still meriting pride of place in the hierarchy of Beijing’s foreign relationships, seem less of a preoccupation for Xi than for his predecessors. This is not to suggest that he is not eager for stable and healthy U.S.-China ties. Rather, Xi seems to prefer a more casual approach to the relationship that lacks the eagerness and rapt attention that characterized the policies of Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. This less awestruck view of U.S. power contributes to Xi’s greater tolerance for risk and has the important side effect of imbuing Xi with greater confidence to more deliberately court China’s other important foreign partners rather than pursuing a single-minded focus on the United States. □