

**The Regional Perspective:
Asian Attitudes Toward the Taiwan Conflict and Future Implications**

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This brief paper aims to reprise Asian regional attitudes to a potential conflict in the Taiwan Straits in the context of larger issues relating to China's growth as a great power, and it seeks to tease out the implications of such a conflict for the future of the Asia-Pacific region. Toward that end, it is divided into three parts: the first section summarizes the most recent turn in China's grand strategy as perceived in the United States; the second part describes regional views of China and the China-Taiwan crisis; and, the third part speculates about the consequences of a conflict over Taiwan for the larger Asia-Pacific region and for Chinese grand strategy.

A China-Taiwan conflict, obviously, could emerge for a variety of reasons and could take different forms, although most Chinese analysts would argue—perhaps correctly—that the use of force by Beijing would occur only if the prospect of permanent Taiwanese separation from the mainland appeared imminent. In any event, the only China-Taiwan conflict that is relevant for purposes of this paper is one that involved active hostilities, including major combat operations, and which involved the United States and its military operating on behalf of Taiwan. While many other kinds of conflict scenarios are undoubtedly possible, only this contingency will be relevant to the analysis that follows.

CURRENT CHINESE GRAND STRATEGY AS PERCEIVED IN THE UNITED STATES

When Deng Xiaoping unleashed market reforms in 1978, neither he nor his successors could have imagined how revolutionary those decisions would be for China's geopolitical fortunes. Freed from the constraints of a controlled Soviet-style economy, China would experience over the next two decades, what *The Economist* called, “the most dynamic burst of wealth creation in human history.” This achievement would transform China into a rising power in world politics and—if its economic growth continues uninterrupted—would enable it to recover the geopolitical preeminence it last enjoyed under the Ming dynasty and become a true great power akin to the United States in the international system. The incredible success of this strategy—as witnessed by the unparalleled growth in China's power, influence, and importance over the last twenty years or so—brought with it however another unintended consequence: increased regional and global fears about Beijing's long-range goals and intentions. Specifically,

growing concerns materialized throughout the Asia-Pacific region and in the United States that the continual growth of Chinese power would produce over the longer term a regional hegemony that threatened the physical security and political autonomy of other states that might get in Beijing's way. The strengthening of such perceptions would lead inevitably to the rise of new balancing coalitions against China. This outcome would only exacerbate security competition and compel Beijing to pursue the one course of action it sought most desperately to avoid: being diverted from economic growth into strategic rivalries at a time when Chinese efforts at accumulating comprehensive national power are by no means complete.

If such contentiousness were to be averted, a further evolution of Chinese grand strategy would be required. Clearly, the quest for comprehensive national power could not be abandoned. That objective remained, and still remains, the bedrock on which China's rise to greatness would be constructed. Without the wide-ranging power deriving from economic growth, technological modernization, political stability, and growing military capacity, China would be unable to recover geopolitical preeminence. A modification of the Chinese geopolitical approach manifested during much of the 1990s was therefore necessary. The new objective of China's grand strategy would be to assure the continued growth of its power-political capacity broadly understood, while simultaneously preventing the emergence of balancing coalitions that might arise in response to such growth.

The intellectual efforts associated with the doctrine of "peaceful ascendancy" since 2003 suggest that China has in fact appreciated the need of reassuring the international community about the implications of its growth in power. Instead of stressing Chinese claims in territorial and maritime disputes as it did during the 1990s, China today has made a special effort to assure its neighbors that it is a responsible and constructive partner. In general, China has refocused its energies on expanding trade and cooperation with all its neighbors and, in another sharp departure from the past when China emphasized bilateral negotiations that accentuated its own strength, Beijing has now demonstrated a willingness to engage in multilateral diplomacy where its own power is relatively eclipsed (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Regional Forum). In some—very important—instances, it has even taken the lead in

complex multilateral negotiations on issues of high politics (e.g., the “Six Party” talks on North Korea). In general, the objective of these new good neighborly policies has been to increase confidence and develop friendly relations with all the major states on China’s periphery—Russia, Japan, India, and the Central and South East Asian states—that are potential balancing partners in any future U.S.-led anti-Chinese coalition in Asia.

Beijing has also gone out of its way to mollify Washington that it has “neither the intention nor the capability” to challenge U.S. leadership in Asia, even as it seeks to gently promote a regional environment where an American political-military presence will eventually become unnecessary. After the September 11 attacks, China has used the global war on terrorism to position itself as an American partner, going out of its way to express solidarity with Washington. Viewed in their totality, therefore, the new inflections in Chinese grand strategy suggest a deliberate effort to convey a kinder, gentler face abroad, even as Beijing works to shape the international environment to expand the opportunities for increasing its great power capabilities and status.

REGIONAL VIEWS OF CHINA AND THE CHINA-TAIWAN CRISIS

In general terms, almost every state in the Asia-Pacific region has welcomed this new turn in China’s grand strategy. Beijing’s acceptance of Asian concerns about its growth in power, and its response to these concerns by emphasizing doctrines of peaceful cooperation are welcomed by most Asian states even if there are lingering questions about whether China’s current emphasis on peaceful development is merely transient and tactical or in fact represents an enduring, strategic, shift in international orientation. Even as this debate continues within Asian capitals, however, most regional states are content to focus on the more profitable dimensions of their relationship with China, namely trade and commerce, because China’s rapid economic growth and technological modernization can function as the engine of prosperity for much of the Asian continent.

This willingness to focus on the economic aspects of the relationship—where there are joint gains to be realized—as opposed to distracting themselves by security fears—which are corrosive and enervating for bilateral relations—is conditioned by several considerations. To begin with, almost every Asian state today is convinced that China will become a great power eventually, but equally that the process of its

ascendancy will not be an easy one. Both clauses are equally critical, and they are read as providing opportunities for the regional states to shape China's objectives by active engagement. In this context, all the major states of the Asian continent, including potential rivals of China, such as Japan, India, and Russia, currently believe that China should be integrated into the political and economic life of the region: such integration gives them opportunities to benefit from China's growth and economic expansion, while producing in the process a kind of enmeshment that would hopefully make Beijing responsible and cautious in its politico-military behaviors, including those related to Taiwan.

While all the major Asian states are, therefore, happy to profit from deepened economic interdependence with China—even as they recognize that such interdependence will only further fuel Beijing's growth as a great power—they are equally desirous of not seeing the rise of a new local hegemon within the Asian continent. This political objective subsists, obviously, in some tension with the goal of profiting from China's economic growth, which it is well understood will lead inexorably to Beijing's appearance as a great power. The fundamental contradiction that all Asian states are currently confronted with, therefore, is that those economic process that make themselves and China rich also end up making the latter more powerful than they might prefer; yet, any attempt to arrest China's growth in power by constricting economic intercourse not only runs the risk of failing abysmally but also may end up immiserizing Beijing's regional partners even more than it does China.

To cope with this difficult and not easily resolvable dilemma, China's Asian neighbors have adopted different but complementary strategies. The strongest neighbors, such as Japan, India, and Russia, are pursuing strategies centered on “internal balancing” as a means of dealing with the potential threats posed by a rising China, even as their growing economic ties with China are often critical to success of such balancing to begin with. The weaker neighbors, while emulating their stronger counterparts in maintaining robust economic ties with Beijing, compensate for their weaker strategic weight by welcoming the rise, presence, and activism, of the major Asian regional powers—Japan, India and Russia (where relevant)—in their own geographic confines as a counterweight to growing Chinese capabilities, so long as the presence of these more capable neighbors

is not overbearing, does not lead to importing their own security dilemmas with others, and results in exacerbating security competition with China. Both kinds of neighbors, however, agree that because of all the complications and uncertainties that beset internal and external balancing, the role and presence of the United States is critical for a peaceful Asian environment and for stable Chinese-Asian relations. In effect, Washington becomes in many ways the *deus ex machina* that allows the Asian states to enjoy the full benefits of tight economic interdependence with China without having to suffer any of the political consequences arising from China's growth in power.

For this strategy to work best, however, three conditions must obtain in perpetuity: the United States must always remain the strongest and most potent military power in the Asian continent capable of discharging its security obligations without question; U.S.-Chinese relations must be stable, predictable, and not subject to acute and active rivalry that compels any Asian state to choose between Beijing and Washington; and, there must be no intra-regional precipitant of conflict that provokes a Sino-American clash, which could threaten the currently growing web of economic interdependence and compels the regional states to take sides with China or the United States in destructive security competition.

The China-Taiwan crisis, unfortunately, remains the perfect example of a contingency that could subvert the second and third conditions necessary for the success of the Asian strategy outlined above, even if it is assumed that the United States would always maintain the political-military superiority necessary to make good on the first condition. It also represents the most important contingency that could undermine the kinder, gentler turn in China's own grand strategy that Beijing has assiduously sought to institutionalize since the turn of the century.

Although all Asian states formally take a position on Taiwan that ought to satisfy Beijing—that Taiwan is part of China and not an independent state—the substantive positions of many of these countries are a trifle more complex. Of all the major states on China's periphery, South Korea today represents the best example of where declared and private positions on Taiwan more or less perfectly coincide. Japan, on the other hand, represents a good example of where the divergence between declared positions and private preferences might be greatest, namely that Tokyo, however publicly acquiescent

of China's claims of Taiwan, would probably be content with the de facto separation subsisting indefinitely, with even an endorsement of de jure separation becoming possible in some circumstances. Australian, Vietnamese, and Indian attitudes probably fall somewhere in between: while all three accept the formal Chinese position that Taiwan is not an independent state, they would strongly prefer that the current de facto separation survive indefinitely or at the very least would prefer not to be put into any situation where they might have to choose between one or the other (and the United States).

Regional attitudes on Taiwan, therefore, are far more complex than the stated positions of all sides might appear at first sight. The first preference of all Asian states obviously is that the status quo not be disturbed not only because of the issues that are relevant to China, but because in many cases several key Asian states enjoy profitable economic ties with Taiwan as well. An indefinite continuation of the status quo would thus suit many Asian countries—and perhaps China as well. The problem arises, however, because whatever the preferences of the Asian states may be, they have lesser control over the changes occurring in Taiwanese politics—which appear to be transitioning from the “One China” perspective of the former government toward variations of a de facto “One China, One Taiwan” perspective that is reflected in the policies of all major political parties—and the attitudes of the United States—which are influenced by the complex history of its own evolution on the China-Taiwan question, political divides about China in American domestic politics, and concerns about China's growing power and its political objectives in East Asia. Any one of these drivers could therefore engineer a change in the status quo and force the Asian states to take positions that would prefer to avoid—at least for a while longer.

Thus, although all Asian powers recognize that China is determined to achieve the status of a great power—which implies building a strong economy, developing a competent military force, and completing national reunification (which, in turn, involves at the very least preventing Taiwanese separation and possibly restoring the disputed territories of the South China Sea to Chinese sovereignty), *most of the Asian great powers would prefer that China abdicate the last objective if it cannot be attained peacefully*. In some cases, this is because some of China's neighbors may wish to preserve privileged economic relations with Taiwan, or because a Taiwan separated from

Chinese sovereignty serves their geopolitical interests. The one argument that unifies most Asian states, however, on this question is that any forceful unification attempts by China, however justifiable these may appear to Beijing, would destroy the momentum underlying the current growth in regional economic interdependence and, by implication, destroy their hope of utilizing China as the engine of their own growth.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF A CONFLICT OVER TAIWAN

A crisis in the Taiwan Straits would have serious consequences for the Asian region, for the United States, and for China. As previous discussion suggested, all the Asian states—no matter what their private views about the China-Taiwan relationship—would prefer to avoid a military conflict that destroys regional economic integration and forces them to take sides in a way that they would prefer not to. If a conflict does break out, however, China's Asian neighbors would expect that the United States would have both the capacity and the wisdom to handle the problem well. In various Asian capitals, and particularly among U.S. allies—meaning South Korea, Japan, and Australia—this usually implies preventing a military conflict to begin with. If that is not possible, however, and American military intervention is inevitable for whatever reason, the fundamental preference of the allies would be that the United States intervenes quickly and effectively to constrain the conflict—with limited or no allied participation.

In this context, U.S. partners would no doubt be heavily conflicted themselves. While they certainly do not wish to become involved, at least publicly, and they absolutely do not want to be asked to participate in any U.S. military operations against China, they also—simultaneously and with some contradiction—view the American willingness to protect Taiwan as a test of larger U.S. commitment and credibility. Although the precise circumstances that gave rise to American military operations would clearly influence their judgment in the particulars, the fact remains that any American request for active political-military assistance would put them in the most difficult situation imaginable. For the allies involved, this would be the moment of truth. Because U.S. forward presence has been the critical element in their own protection and because the continued health of their bilateral alliances in the post-conflict period would be at stake depending on their response, it is most likely that at least Japan and Australia would

respond, however reluctantly, to an American demand for support in military operations relating to Taiwan. Depending on the evolution of the conflict, it is not unreasonable however to presume that all sides could begin to evaluate the value of continued alliance affiliations: the crucial variables that would determine the outcome here would be, first, the prognosis for China's own future growth in power, and, second, the ability of these alliance relations to handle contingencies involving differences in commitment between various partners.

For the United States, a conflict with China over Taiwan would have profound consequences for the future of global geopolitics. For starters, such a clash would decisively end the current debate within the United States about whether China is a strategic partner or a strategic competitor in favor of the latter. Depending on how the conflict evolved or was terminated, it would also accelerate ongoing military modernization within the United States, modernization that would now be focused on increasing extant U.S. power projection advantages vis-à-vis China, developing robust escalation domination capabilities at the nuclear level, and extending current U.S. operational advantages to new warfighting areas such as space and information warfare. At the political level, a Sino-US conflict over Taiwan would spur the United States to refurbish its alliance structures in the Asia-Pacific to involve more Asian states as partners against China; even when formal partnerships are not at issue, the United States would be strengthened in its conviction that more independent centers of power ought to be encouraged on China's periphery as a means of constraining the latter's growth. The impact of military and political competition would inevitably have effects in the economic realm as well: a even greater tightening of China's access to critical civilian, dual-use, and military technologies would be likely and, depending on the attitudes of various European and regional partners, a steady constriction of general trade itself would not be implausible. All in all, a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan that inaugurated a new cold war in Asia would have profound implications for both the future of Sino-American relations and the future world order.

The consequence of such a concatenation of developments would be felt most importantly in China itself. Any war that ends up replacing the current trend of growing economic interdependence between the United States and China, and China and Asia,

with high entropy security competition would be disastrous for Beijing's objective of peaceful ascendancy. It would undermine the pacific regional environment that China would need for continued economic growth and, by implication, its rise in power. A deteriorating regional environment would force China to increase even more dramatically its military spending and the acquisition of advanced military capabilities. Such developments would exacerbate region-wide security dilemmas and force China's major regional competitors—Japan, India, and perhaps even Russia—to pursue hard-edged balancing policies that, while leaving all worse off as a result, would have their greatest impact on China's ability to continue the export-led growth strategy that hitherto has been responsible for its superior economic performance. An acute security competition with the United States that ends up denying China access to the world's most lucrative market would put paid to Beijing's dream of rapid economic growth and would require it to shift to painful alternate strategies that could increase internal dislocations, social unrest, and ultimately domestic political crises. Most fundamentally, however, a conflict that inaugurated a deteriorating regional environment that undercuts China's goal of returning to greatness through the peaceful accumulation of comprehensive national power would be a pivotal event in the broad sweep of history: it would interrupt the ongoing shift of power from Europe to Asia and could force a bitter postponement of the day when China became a true great power in the international system.

If these disasters ensue from a conflict over Taiwan—however unwanted by all sides—the fundamental question of whether Taiwan is worth fighting for ought to occupy China's attention before it is too late.