



Dynamic Dilemmas: China's Evolving Northeast Asia Security Strategy

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What are Chinese strategic intentions in Northeast Asia, and how have they evolved in recent years? Scholarly and policy research largely focuses on how domestic political and cultural factors influence China's approach to regionalism, multilateralism, and trouble spots like the Korean Peninsula. But over the past decade, China's military has also made great strides with advancements in technology, equipment, training, and mobility. How are these changes impacting China's strategic intentions vis-à-vis South Korea, North Korea, Russia, and Japan? This paper answers that question by identifying common themes found in authoritative Chinese journals and state-sponsored media coverage and evaluating Chinese observed behavior in the form of its military exercises, bilateral military exchanges, and responses to flashpoints and other countries' defense policies. I argue that Northeast Asia is the foundation of China's strategy to establish its regional preeminence, keep Japan down, and eventually push the United States out. In short, China does not accept the regional order in Northeast Asia and hopes that it can leverage its relationships, specifically with South Korea, Russia and North Korea, to inspire change. This research has important implications for power transition theory as well as contemporary policy debates on managing China's rise and defusing U.S.-China tensions.

Northeast Asia – comprised of China, Russia, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea – is arguably one of the most important regions militarily, politically, and economically. Japan and South Korea are China's top trading partners, only after the United States and Hong Kong. The region is also home to the largest, deadliest militaries with China, Russia, and North Korea possessing nuclear weapons, and Japan possessing a break-out capability.¹ The region poses significant military challenges for China – it has an ongoing territorial dispute with Japan and the memory of a more intense dispute with Russia, and it may feel compelled to intervene in contingencies on the Korean Peninsula. The region also lies at the heart of the U.S.-China strategic competition, given that Japan and South Korea are allies of the United States and lynchpins of U.S. foreign and security policy in the Asia-Pacific.

What are China's strategic intentions toward Northeast Asia? Strategic intent includes three key attributes: 1) a particular point of view about the long-term regional trends that conveys a unifying and unique sense of direction; 2) a sense of discovery, a competitively unique view of the future and the promise to design and achieve new national objectives; and 3) a sense of destiny—an emotional aspect that the Party, and perhaps the Chinese people, perceive as inherently worthwhile.² This definition suggests that actions are insufficient to understand intent; perceptions and strategic thinking are critical to the task. Therefore, this paper attempts to contribute to our understanding of Chinese strategic intent by identifying common themes found in authoritative Chinese journals and state-sponsored media coverage and by evaluating Chinese observed behavior in the form of its military exercises, bilateral military exchanges, and responses to flashpoints and other countries' defense policies.

While a great deal of U.S. scholarly and policy focus has been drawn to South China Sea issues, Chinese leaders still conceptualize Northeast Asia as the most critical region for China's security and stability, as well as the prospects of its rise. Since its founding, China has recognized the strategic importance of the region – Mao Zedong argued that China needed to counter U.S. influence in this area because of its significant impact on Chinese security.³ China's official national assessment of the regional trends is pessimistic, lamenting that the United States “enhances its military presence and its military alliances in this region. Japan is sparing no effort to dodge the post-war limitations on its military, overhauling

its military and security policies. Such developments have caused grave concerns among other countries in the region...certain disputes over land territory are still smoldering. The Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia are shrouded in instability and uncertainty...all these have a negative impact on the security and stability along China's periphery."⁴ Five specific objectives are laid out in a volume about great power strategies published by the PLA publishing house: Maintain national sovereignty, achieve the reunification of China; Promote our own prosperity and maintain surrounding region stability; Promote political multi-polarity, establish stable relations among major powers; Enhance regional economic cooperation, participate in regional security cooperation, and; Make policy independently, adhere to an active defense policy.⁵

I argue that China increasingly sees itself as the key to peace and security, and the United States as the prime source of regional instability. In that context, Beijing sees its relationships in Northeast Asia as the cornerstone of its return to greatness, critical to keep Japan down and eventually to push the United States out.⁶ China's aspirational goal is the eventual removal of the U.S. military presence from the region, although in the nearer term Beijing would be content with a reduced U.S. presence that allows China to exercise dominance. As a result, China is strengthening bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral cooperation mechanisms to create favorable conditions for China in its competition with the United States. In the words of Xi Jinping, "the Asia-Pacific region is becoming a point of military contest from the Game Theory model. Some western countries attempt to contain and encircle [China]. The territorial disputes, competition for the natural resources among the great powers, military security contest, and ethnic conflict intensify the problems, thus increasing the possibility of a military confrontation or war near our border."⁷ This is the context under which China is shaping its broader strategy towards Northeast Asian countries. Below, I evaluate the changing dynamics of China's bilateral relationships with Russia, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan, and the motivations underpinning their evolution. I then conclude with implications for regional stability and U.S. policy.

CHINA'S OPPORTUNISTIC INTENTIONS TOWARD RUSSIA

In 2015, with almost three dozen high level visits, outside observers proclaimed the advent of a new era in Sino-Russian relations. In September 2015, President Vladimir Putin visited Beijing and proclaimed that ties were at their highest level in history.⁸ Some speculated about a "superpower axis,"⁹ Sino-Russian bloc, or an entente.¹⁰ Russian hopes for the relationship drive much of the hype; as Russia pivots east, its ties with China become a central component of its global strategy.¹¹ Chinese strategic intentions towards Russia have evolved in important ways, but more narrowly than these debates suggest. For Chinese leaders, the goal is to improve coordination with Russia on select issues, rather than to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership. In an ideal world, China would have Russia's support in its growing competition with the United States even if it refuses to reciprocate when supporting Russia would harm its relationship with the United States.¹²

Of course, the reality is less rosy, with Russian actions creating negative externalities for China, such as with the Ukraine, and Moscow promoting their own interests at the expense of China such as in the case of on its maritime dispute with Japan and its Silk Road Initiative.

The relationship is often characterized as unequal, with China in the driver's seat and Russia relegated to the role of the lesser partner.¹³ China hopes to leverage its relationship with Russia for three main purposes: to promote an alternate vision of global order; to gain Russian technology and military equipment; and to gain access to Russian energy sources. There is much consensus on these issues, but the discussion is still important to set a baseline for identifying any changes. Though, there is debate about what exact policies will help China leverage Russia against the United States without promoting a strong Russia that could threaten Chinese interests.¹⁴

Garnering Russian support for China's vision for the global order is a central component of Beijing's strategy. In one of his first speeches after becoming Central Military Commission chair and president, Xi called on the two countries to further develop a comprehensive strategic partnership in order to shape a fair global order.¹⁵ Chinese strategists consider Russia to be critical to the success of China's attempts to challenge U.S. hegemony, counter U.S. attempts at containment, and bring forth a multipolar system.¹⁶ Both have national narratives about how their respective states were "unfairly treated in the past" and both resent the current U.S.-dominated international system.¹⁷ And given that western countries see the rise of both countries as a challenge and seek to constrain them, two Chinese professors from Jilin University suggest that uniting together may be the best way to protect their core interests and reduce the costs and risks of rising.¹⁸

China also sees the relationship with Russia as critical to undermining U.S. military dominance in the region. Regular visits occur between ground, air, and naval forces, including at the level of the Central Military Commission. Of all the Northeast Asian countries, China sees military cooperation with Russia as the most critical because it allows Beijing to gain critical military technology and materiel.¹⁹ Russian arms sales to China are currently worth around \$1 billion a year, with China most recently buying 24 advanced multirole Su-35S fighters and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems.²⁰ Russia had initially insisted on selling a minimum of 48 Su-35S airframes, to offset expected losses once China reverse-engineered the technology, but China prevailed, buying only 24 aircraft instead.²¹

Military cooperation with Russia also helps to extend the reach and capabilities of the Chinese military. In 2015, there was a significant uptick in combined exercises, with China participating for the first time in an exercise with Russia in the Mediterranean.²² The fact that the media portray the military relationship in a positive light to the domestic public suggests the leadership hopes to deepen and expand cooperation in the future.²³ China hopes to use its military relationship with Russia to improve its ability to balance against Japan.²⁴ To do so, Xi often builds up the WWII connection—both reciprocal presidential visits in 2015 were to attend WWII commemoration parades and often discussed how they developed a deep bond fighting the Fascists (i.e. Japan).²⁵ Three of the four bilateral naval exercises under Xi took place either in the Sea of Japan or in the East China Sea, which support Chinese efforts to challenge the U.S.-led maritime order and deter Japan.²⁶

Lastly, China hopes to exploit its relationship with Russia to enhance its own energy security. Gaining access to Russian energy resources allows China to diversify its energy imports, building redundancy in case of disruption to energy supplies from, for example, the Middle East. In 2015, Russia overtook Saudi Arabia to become the biggest exporter of oil to China. China is hoping to receive Russian natural gas from new pipeline projects, which would be harder for an adversary to disrupt.²⁷ But these agreements, such as the Altai gas pipeline, have

stalled, largely because of the economic downturn in China and because of the declining price of oil and gas.²⁸ Such developments suggest that while there is a strategic rationale to energy cooperation, the pace of development will be largely driven by economic considerations.

China's strategic community is not, however, unified in its views of Russia, with analysts debating how close China should get to Russia. At the heart of the debate lies the question of whether to abandon historical aversion to alliances. Some argue that the two countries should form an alliance immediately because the combination of their military power would be unassailable, and together they could counter U.S. hegemony. Others oppose an alliance, for ideological and practical reasons. One vice minister of the Foreign ministry asserts that the current transactional relationship is sufficient to enable their goals of establishing a new international order, without standing as a provocative anti-Western bloc.²⁹ Ultimately, China's intentions towards Russia are opportunistic—China is using the relationship to help it manage the challenges of its rise.

CHINA'S COURTSHIP OF SOUTH KOREA

China has historically attached great importance to the Korean Peninsula because of its geo-strategic position in the region, at the intersection of Chinese, Japanese, and Russian interests. Chinese writings suggest that Beijing considers that relationship to be important to its Northeast Asia strategy and was relying mainly on a charmed offensive to strengthen the bilateral relationship. But after the nuclear test in January 2016, Beijing has begun to question whether its approach to Seoul was realistic and may have begun to recalibrate its approach, though it is too soon to tell the ultimate result. Xi Jinping has laid out a vision of deepened exchanges and cooperation with the ROK to achieve their previously agreed upon bilateral goals of common development, regional peace, revitalization of Asia and the promotion of world prosperity.³⁰ While many of China's relationships in the region and beyond are seen largely as temporary, transactional, and based on issues of the day, Beijing's aspirations with respect to South Korea are the closest it has come to seeking a comprehensive strategic partnership. Beijing seeks to build political trust, cooperate on long-term development objectives, respond jointly to complex security challenges, and harmonize their macroeconomic policies.³¹

Closer cooperation on regional security issues is also designed to present an alternative to the U.S.-led regional order. Significantly, South Korean President Park designated Beijing as her first state visit in June 2013, while Xi reciprocated with a summit meeting with Park in July 2014 in Seoul. Traditionally, new Chinese leaders have visited North Korea before South Korea, while South Korea usually visits Japan before China. In December 2015, China and South Korea held talks on delimiting their overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs) for the first time in seven years.³² As Premier Li Keqiang notes, China and the ROK can together contribute to regional stability and should begin to cooperate on non-traditional security and rescue missions.³³ High-level defense exchanges have become routine and currently more than 30 groups of military delegates visit each other every year for regular meetings and exchange programs.³⁴

The events of 2015 suggested China hoped to leverage its relationship with South Korea to balance against Japan. In 2015, the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII provided China with an opportunity to make symbolic advances with South Korea, at the expense of Japan. President

Park Geun-hye attended China's commemorative parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II as a guest of honor in September 2015,³⁵ which was widely criticized as an anti-Japan event. A ROK stealth destroyer also made its first port call to Shanghai on August 28, 2015, on the anniversary of the end of Japan's colonial rule over Korea.

However, South Korea's reaction to the DPRK's January 2016 nuclear test and February 2016 rocket launch have caused consternation that the charmed offensive is not gaining enough traction in Seoul. South Korea reinforced its alliance with the United States and is deliberating deploying THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) to establish better defenses against incoming ballistic missiles in their terminal phase. Chinese media and official criticism of the potential THAAD deployment have been harsher than those reserved for DPRK missile launch.³⁶ *A China Youth Daily* article warned the ROK that its security was being 'hijacked' by the US 'rebalance to Asia' strategy – and that the alliance is no longer in ROK's best interest. According to Chu Shulong, a professor of international relations at Tsinghua University, "the belief that deploying the THAAD system is aimed principally at solidifying America's position in Northeast Asia is widespread in Beijing, where officials fear the ultimate goal is to contain China."³⁷ A Xinhua article presents the official position that U.S. pushing of THAAD is another example of how "hostile U.S. policies" are "a major contributor to the regional predicament," and thus that THAAD deployment would only spark "a vicious cycle on the Korean Peninsula."³⁸

China's reluctance to punish the DPRK for its recent provocations likely undermined support in South Korea for President Park's policy of building stronger ties with Beijing. The fact that President Park was unable to arrange a phone conversation with Mr. Xi after the test suggests that China's focus on South Korea throughout the year may be ephemeral. North Korea most likely unexpectedly complicated China's efforts to strengthen cooperation with South Korea. Additionally, Beijing may also have realized that its hopes to exploit history to leverage South Korea against Japan were unrealistic as well. Time will tell whether these changing factors will lead to a reduced focus on the bilateral relationship or a change in tactics.

CHINA TREADING WATER WITH NORTH KOREA

Historically, China has refused to entertain the possibility of a world without the DPRK because of its political sensitivity, hindering any talks that would facilitate contingency planning. Moreover, China fears that a denuclearized Korea under American dominance would pose a threat to China's northeastern border stability, and limit China's quest for regional power.³⁹ However, in the past year, China has been surprisingly vocal about its support for Korean reunification in the long term. Xi himself has articulated China's support for "self-reliance and peaceful unification of the peninsula" as well as multilateral diplomatic efforts to solve the nuclear issue.⁴⁰ One article in an influential journal by an academic and a think tanker articulated five stages that move through stability, to security (lack of confrontation), to peace (normalization of relations), then harmony (denuclearization through a regional effort) and finally, denuclearization.⁴¹ These priorities are consistent with official Chinese statements that a reunified peninsula is best, and capture Beijing's best-case scenario – a gradual, incremental peace.⁴² However, it is unknown when China would perceive the Korean Peninsula stable enough to denuclearize the DPRK and to peacefully unify with the ROK.⁴³

Despite the increasing importance of the ROK to China, the Sino-DPRK alliance remains in effect as the DPRK serves as an important geostrategic buffer between China and the United States.⁴⁴ While China supports reunification in the long run, it is determined to ensure that the end result is an even stronger buffer state, expanded Chinese influence on the peninsula, and profitable economic arrangements.⁴⁵ The only way China believes this end state can be accomplished is through peaceful, gradual, and incremental change. Therefore, Chinese officials disapprove of policies that could destabilize the Pyongyang regime.

Once again, China believes U.S. policy is needlessly exacerbating security concerns regarding North Korea. Beijing therefore continues to push for countries to buy into a multilateral diplomatic process, such as the Six-Party Talks.⁴⁶ The hope is that multilateral cooperation will discourage any of the relevant actors, but especially the United States, from enacting unilateral measures that could destabilize the region.⁴⁷ China also is cognizant that its relationship with the DPRK creates a negative image, but to date Beijing has been unable to successfully mitigate this consequence of its foreign policy.⁴⁸ Moreover, Chinese thinkers believe a nuclear DPRK is the only legitimate justification for stationing American troops in Asia, so successful denuclearization may buttress Chinese challenges to the U.S.-led alliance system.⁴⁹ China argues the United States is the source of instability because it wants to maintain a divided peninsula and engages in provocative actions itself, like joint military exercises with the ROK, that stoke tensions.⁵⁰ Moreover, according to Beijing's strategists, South Korea's dependence on the United States is damaging the chances of making peace with North Korea – South Korea should therefore rely more on China for its security.⁵¹

In this context, China seeks to manage routine North Korean provocations, most frequently by urging restraint. In January 2015, U.S. sanctions imposed in response to an alleged North Korean cyber attack on Sony Pictures caused Chinese officials to call for caution and peace on the Korean Peninsula. The Chinese Foreign Ministry urged restraint after three provocations in 2015 – after North Korea fired seven missiles into the East Sea, after it announced a successful submarine-launched ballistic missile test, and after it test-fired three more missiles. The Chinese Foreign Ministry called for an easing of tensions after the two Koreas exchanged artillery fire, while the Chinese Defense Ministry denied rumors that the PLA had sent large troop reinforcements to the Chinese-North Korean border in August 2015 amidst inter-Korean tensions.⁵²

On occasion, bilateral relations have been more strained, and China has not been afraid to chastise North Korea, but in its own, private, way. For example, in September 2015, China called for North Korea to abide by a UN resolution banning the North from conducting ballistic missile tests, a day after Pyongyang hinted it would conduct a long-range rocket test.⁵³ By October, China embarked on a high profile attempt to repair strained ties between the two nations by sending Liu Yunshan of China's Politburo Standing Committee to join Kim Jong-un during a military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party.⁵⁴ The Chinese effort appears to have borne fruit, as Pyongyang refrained from following through on a long-range rocket or a fourth nuclear test in November of 2015.⁵⁵ China again snubbed a North Korean diplomatic effort in December, however, by canceling a performance by Kim Jong-un's favored girl band, reportedly over lyrics that might provoke the United States.⁵⁶

The biggest blow to Chinese attempts at maintaining stability on the peninsula was North Korea's test of an alleged hydrogen bomb the first week of January 2016 – 50 miles from the Chinese border. Despite strong criticism from the ROK and the United States on China's apparent tolerance of the test, a few details of Chinese behavior suggest the possibility of an evolution in policy. First, China claims that it was not informed by North Korea prior to the test.⁵⁷ Although it is uncertain if it was the first time that North Korea failed to notify China, it is the first time that China acknowledged the absence of the notification.⁵⁸ Second, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that the repeated nuclear tests are not benefitting the normal development of Sino-DPRK relations.⁵⁹ Although it has been known that Sino-DPRK relations have deteriorated since Kim Jong-un's ascent to power, it is the first time that China publicly expressed a warning to North Korea. These two statements reveal desire to avoid being associated with North Korea's belligerent image and the nuclear program, even as China is lukewarm on harsher actions to punish provocations.

Undoubtedly the bilateral relationship has suffered as the result of these, and the previous, provocations. In 2013, China publicly denied that it had an alliance with North Korea and argued instead it had normal relations. The leaders have not been meeting – instead favoring relations with South Korea.⁶⁰ According to Cheng Xiahe, an associate professor of international relations at Renmin University, it was humiliating for China for Kim to continue with its rocket test on the Chinese lunar new year after Beijing had sent an envoy to persuade them to desist. China believes its long-term strategy requires a stable DPRK to allow for reunification, but in the short term, its behavior is strengthening the U.S. alliance system, domestic support for its DPRK policies is waning, and China is afraid of turning an unpredictable and unreliable ally into a dangerous enemy.⁶¹

Because of this, China is continuing to push for the prioritization of talks—in spite of South Korea, Japan, and U.S. insistence on tougher targeted sanctions. But editorials previewed a shift in policy when it argued that North Korea “deserves the punishment” of new sanctions, but China should “cushion Washington's harsh sanctions to some extent.”⁶² Indeed, in a phone call with President Obama, President Xi pushed the idea that denuclearization would only be achieved through dialogues and consultations, though he agreed to ‘safeguard’ relevant UNSC resolutions.⁶³ In late February, the U.S. presented harsher sanctions, including a longer list of banned items and a requirement that UN members inspect all cargo passing through their territory to or from Korea to look for illicit goods.⁶⁴ Chinese official statements stress that China supports the UNSC as a responsible member of the international community, but sanctions alone cannot denuclearize the peninsula—negotiations remain the fundamental means to managing the nuclear issue.⁶⁵

China also used the test to reinforce its standard message that the U.S.-led alliance system is the source of instability in Northeast Asia. Op-eds published in the state-approved newspapers were clear that Beijing's criticism was directed towards the United States, and intimated that North Korea develops nuclear weapons to mitigate its insecurity caused by U.S. politics.⁶⁶ In the case of previous tests, China remained relatively silent while other states speculated about China's intentions or criticized Beijing's inaction. The fact that China now finds the need to justify its policy to international as well as domestic audiences suggests pressure for policy change is now stemming from multiple audiences. Additionally, China likely criticized America's prompt responses after the nuclear tests because of concerns the United States will exploit the crisis to increase its military influence in the region and facilitate the development of a functioning U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral alliance.⁶⁷

Ultimately, China intends to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula until a reunified Korea under China's sphere of influence becomes the most likely possibility. Beijing works to prevent the United States from taking actions that it thinks will lead to the consolidation of the U.S. position at the expense of China's rise. China also argues that the DPRK will only isolate itself more from the rest of the world if faced with UN sanctions and greater international pressure. The Chinese position is that North Korea's nuclear problem will be more difficult to resolve than Iran's because of its nuclear capabilities, the complexity of this issue, and the fact that it is a low priority in American foreign policy.⁶⁸ Chinese official statements refer to the belief that U.S. attention will soon drift away and China cannot afford to "be swayed by specific events or the temporary mood of the moment."⁶⁹

CHINA'S REGIONAL POWER COMPETITION WITH JAPAN

Maritime disputes, defense buildups and history issues cast a shadow on Sino-Japanese relations in 2015. Both countries engaged in more muscular defense posturing over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, with the Japanese announcing plans to deploy ground troops to outlying Japanese islands, conduct joint drills with the Japanese Coast Guard in the East China Sea, and install anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles on Japanese-held islands.⁷⁰ The Japanese Diet also passed legislation to expand the definition of the Japanese right to collective self-defense.⁷¹ China, for its part, is reportedly building a large-scale base with hangar facilities and a large training area in Zhejiang, approximately 356 km from the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.⁷² The rate of PLA Air Force and Navy exercises continues to accelerate, as evidenced by Japanese fighters scrambling to intercept a particularly large flight of eleven PLA Air Force aircraft in November 2015.⁷³

Chinese media and popular opinion continued to focus on "history issues" – Japan's continued reluctance to account for wartime atrocities – and Beijing is increasingly leveraging that opinion for political purposes. Chinese officials express the desire to improve diplomatic relations with Japan, but only if Japan is "honest on the historical subject, sincere to the victim states in Asia, and responsible for the related issues" – a message that has been promulgated through scholarly writings as well.⁷⁴ At a meeting with Abe Shinzo, Xi Jinping stressed that the historical issues are essential for the political foundation of the Sino-Japanese relationship, and hopes that Japan will send out correct messages on history.⁷⁵

China seems to be using the history narrative to achieve three parallel purposes in its relationship with Japan: domestic, regional, and international. First, while some Chinese people, including officials, are undoubtedly outraged by Japan's handling of its past, the Party exploits this for its own purposes. In August-September 2015, major news outlets published one selection per day from a compilation of written confessions of "the Japanese invaders" detailing their crimes against humanity and the Chinese people.⁷⁶ China is attempting to garner domestic political support, perhaps even to justify its military modernization to the Chinese people. Many articles, including some factual reports, include provocative or emotional titles or content, whose sole purpose is to make Chinese people more hostile towards Japan. Evidence suggests the strategy is working – according to a public opinion poll conducted in Summer 2014, 86.8 percent of respondents expressed negative feelings toward Japan, citing Japan's failure to reflect on history (59.6 percent) only slightly less

frequently than territorial issues (64 percent).⁷⁷ A few articles criticized the United States for not stopping Japan from passing the constitutional revision or for not pressuring Japan to issue a sincere apology to its Asian neighbors for the war crimes.

Second, China most likely hopes to create a more hostile atmosphere against Japan to justify its own aggressive actions in the region, especially with respect to the disputes in the East China Sea. China wants to put the burden of maintaining peace and stability in the East China Sea on Japan, urging Tokyo, “to stop creating anxiety and confrontation, and to contribute more to the peace and stability of the region.”⁷⁸ During Abe’s November 2014 visit, Xi called upon Japan to “follow a prudent military and security policy, make more efforts to increase mutual trust with neighboring countries and play a constructive role in safeguarding regional peace and stability.”⁷⁹ Chinese official statements insinuate that Japan is not working to prevent the repetition of history, and is therefore a threat to the region.⁸⁰ China is also seeking to delegitimize Japan’s vocal concerns about the threat of a rising China.⁸¹ By focusing on Japan’s bloody past, China seeks to isolate Japan from the region, and convincingly argue to other countries that any future aggression towards Japan is unique, and would not be a harbinger of Chinese belligerence as a great power. Some Chinese professors and think tankers suggest that Japan is intentionally seeking disputes to create an excuse to eliminate constitutional and normative obstacles to military expansion.⁸²

There is no doubt that China exploits history, but at the same time, China has real security concerns regarding Japan’s expanding military capabilities and relaxed restrictions on their use. Many fear that Japanese politicians are striving to restore Japan’s economic and political power from the pre-war era and that Japan still aspires to be a great power.⁸³ Indeed, China compares the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute with other territorial disputes Japan has with Russia or South Korea, in order to show a broader pattern of Japanese hostility to other countries in the region.⁸⁴

Third, Japan serves as a proxy in China’s ongoing competition for regional dominance with the United States. China is determined to undermine any U.S. attempts to bolster Japan’s position or its own regional position through its alliance with Japan – highlighting Japan’s sordid history serves this purpose. For the Chinese, Japan is a clear-cut case for how the U.S. role in the region is destabilizing and harmful to the peaceful development of China. The United States welcomes a more militarily capable and active Japanese military not because it is good for regional stability, but because it helps the United States maintain its regional hegemony, of which countering China is a part.⁸⁵ But Chinese writers voice their concern about U.S. ability to rein in Japan.⁸⁶ The United States is seen as either naïve about Japan’s intentions, or unconcerned that a remilitarized, and even nuclear Japan, could bring harm to U.S. interests.⁸⁷ Chinese strategists blame the United States for the state of Sino-Japanese relations – instead of accommodating China’s rise, Japan has the option of leveraging its relationship with the United States for prestige and power status.⁸⁸ For this reason, Chinese strategists believe that a Japan more independent from the United States best serves China’s interests.⁸⁹

CHINESE STRATEGIC INTENTIONS IN NORTHEAST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

The contours of China's strategic intentions towards Northeast Asia can be derived from China's policy, practice, and strategic thinking on its bilateral relationships with Russia, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan. First, China understands that it must attain the strategic support of Northeast Asian countries in order to achieve the goal of "national rejuvenation."⁹⁰ Second, Beijing recognizes that it needs Northeast Asian countries to accept its role as regional leader for it to be able to achieve regional preeminence. China hopes to gain this recognition from Russia and South Korea through positive inducements, but this may be because of current estimates of this strategy's eventual success and the difficulties of coercion given the balance of power. If these factors change, as they did in Southeast Asia, China may move towards coercing compliance, as is already the case with Japan. Chinese official and academic statements suggest that the U.S. military presence is the greatest obstacle to realizing this second goal because it offers attractive alternative pathways to Northeast Asian countries.

Lastly, while China may more ostensibly be challenging the United States in the case of maritime disputes in the South and East China Sea, Northeast Asia is the real linchpin of China's strategic challenge to the U.S.-led regional order. Chinese official statements clearly present regionalism with Chinese leadership as an alternative, and argue that a more Sino-centric regional order would positively contribute to regional security. Specifically, Chinese writings highlight how Japan would embrace a more responsible attitude towards its WWII history, thereby easing tensions in the region, if not for U.S. unwavering support. Also, the United States exacerbates North Korean insecurity, further delaying denuclearization needed before peaceful reunification. China believes the maturation and intensification of bilateral security ties with its neighbors, especially Russia and South Korea, will not only contribute to its own military modernization efforts, but also can serve as a geopolitical instrument against the United States.

This analysis suggests that U.S.-China strategic competition in Northeast Asia is likely to heat up significantly in the future in the military, political and economic realms. A weakened U.S. position may serve China's interests, but contrary to Chinese arguments, it is clearly not in the general interest of Northeast Asian security and development. While the United States prefers to strengthen its partners, China prefers weaker ones so that it can more easily impose its will. A strong, prosperous and stable Northeast Asia is critical to global security – hopefully the rebalancing accurately captures U.S. strategic intentions to maintain its regional position, even in the face of the growing China challenge.

ENDNOTES

- * The author would like to thank John Chen, Lynn Lee and Yilin Sun for their expert research assistance
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