

SINO-US RELATIONS: PARTNERSHIP, COEVOLUTION, OR COMPETITION?

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A turbulent history has taught Chinese leaders that not every problem has a solution and that too great an emphasis on total mastery over specific events could upset the harmony of the universe.⁽¹⁾ — Henry Kissinger

Introduction

China and the United States are two of the most significant global players of the 21st century. Pakistan considers its relations with both central to its foreign policy. Several important developments have taken place in Pakistan's relations with them over the past few years. While the relations with the US have ebbed since the raid of a US Navy SEALs team in Abbottabad in May 2011 that killed Osama bin Laden, relations with China have greatly improved recently. The signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Pakistan and China for the development of an economic corridor between the two countries in May 2013 was a milestone achievement.⁽²⁾

While Pakistan's bilateral relations with China and the US individually are important, it is also important for Pakistan to understand the dynamics of relations between these two countries. Any turmoil in Sino-China relations not only could upset global stability but would also force Pakistan to make some tough foreign policy decisions. On the other hand, substantial improvement in the relations between China and the US could have a significant impact on world politics as well as Pakistan's bilateral relations with each of the two countries.

In the wake of increasing Japanese assertiveness in East Asia following a row with China over what the Chinese call Diaoyu Islands and the Japanese Senkaku Islands, in 2012, and the Chinese dispute with Vietnam over the Spratly and Paracel Islands (known in China as Nansha and Xisha Archipelagos, respectively) around the same time, maritime tensions are building up around

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China. The US strategy of 'Asian Pivot', its enhanced military cooperation with Japan and Vietnam, its tacit support for rearmament of Japan,⁽³⁾ and its lingering differences with China over military sales to Taiwan create a spectre of world power rivalry if not confrontation in East and Southeast Asia. At the global level, the competition between the two world powers has taken a different shape wherein the US wants to assimilate China into the existing world order while China seems to be resisting it, pending the reform of the international system. The global dimension of the competition has also permeated into the ideological realm with differences between the two countries over international value systems emanating out of the domestic circumstances of each country. This paper attempts to analyze the trends in Sino-US relations at the bilateral, regional, global, and ideological levels in order to gauge the potential for a global change with or without an associated crisis.

Inevitable confrontation?

At an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) foreign ministers' meeting on 23 July 2010, the then US secretary of state, Hilary Clinton, claimed that the US had a national interest in the South China Sea justifying her argument on the basis of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a treaty the US has, rather ironically, not even ratified.⁽⁴⁾ The statement corresponded with the initiation of the 'Asia Pivot' strategy, the diplomatic dimension of which was announced by the then US secretary of defence, Leon Panetta, in 2011 assuring the Southeast Asian allies about long-term presence of the US in the region.⁽⁵⁾ While the policy is criticized in itself as overemphasizing the threat emanating from China Beijing and heightening its sense of insecurity,⁽⁶⁾ it has led to suspicions within China as an effort at its containment.⁽⁷⁾ The Asia Pivot has also combined with re-emergence of China's maritime disputes with neighbouring countries like Japan and Vietnam with which China has a history of acrimonious relationship. Some Chinese scholars attribute Japan's aggressive posture over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands squarely to US military overhang in the region.⁽⁸⁾ Vietnam's claims on the Spratly and Paracel islands is also seen by some quarters in China as an attempt to create a wedge between China and ASEAN countries.⁽⁹⁾

Besides the 'Pivot' and regional developments in East and Southeast Asia, Taiwan continues to be another major irritant in the Sino-US relations, having the potential of turning into a military confrontation between the two great powers. Since Taiwan is an emotive issue in China and is not only considered a part of China in the mainland but is also recognized as such by the US under the One China Policy, military sales to Taiwan on the part of the US is a tricky issue. The issue of US military assistance to Taiwan especially takes centre stage whenever relations between the mainland and Taiwan drop to a low. For instance, when the then Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui tried to get recognition for Taiwan at international forums like the UN in the mid-1990s, China was forced into a show of force with missile exercise in March 1996.⁽¹⁰⁾ Or when in the mid-2000s, after the then president of the island, Chen Shui-bian, made repeated hints at Taiwan's independence from China, an Anti-Secession

Law was passed in China in 2005, which called for the use of non-peaceful “and other necessary means” in case Taiwan asserted its independence.⁽¹¹⁾

Some US observers even believe that the threat from China could be more immediate and unforeseeable than the eruption of lingering differences over Taiwan or America’s long-term strategic ambitions in Asia Pacific embodied in the Asia Pivot strategy. Avery Goldstein argues that ambiguity about vital interests of China and the US, and huge asymmetry in conventional military power between the two could in itself lead to a serious military confrontation.⁽¹²⁾ He further argues that the imbalance in the conventional forces could even complicate the deterrence of a nuclear war as both would be under the impression that escalation to nuclear level is rather improbable.⁽¹³⁾ Goldstein maintains that the precision and lethality of modern conventional weapons give a tremendous advantage to the side that attacks first, which has an inbuilt mechanism of incentivizing an attack during a crisis.⁽¹⁴⁾ Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press have also argued that the only Chinese policy that would not result in an escalation of conflict with the US is a policy of strong economy and weak military like that of Japan.⁽¹⁵⁾

Henry Kissinger has summed up the dilemma well in the following words:

“China would try to push American power as far away from its borders as it could, circumscribe the scope of American naval power, and reduce America’s weight in international diplomacy. The United States would try to organize China’s many neighbours into a counterweight to Chinese dominance. Both sides would emphasize their ideological differences. The interaction would be even more complicated because the notions of deterrence and preemption are not symmetrical between the two sides. The United States is more focused on overwhelming military power, China on decisive psychological impact. Sooner or later, one side or the other would miscalculate.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Some Chinese scholars have also alluded to the dangers inherent in the United States containment of China policy. For instance, Niu Xinchun views the increasing reliance of US allies in the Asia Pacific on American security presence — despite their economic reliance on China — as constraining China’s freedom of action.⁽¹⁷⁾ He also underscores the friction created by the modernization of Chinese navy, and its ability to assert itself in the South China Sea and beyond.⁽¹⁸⁾ Niu even emphasizes the differences between the two countries over political and economic issues such as: the US support for Dalai Lama (the Tibetan spiritual leader currently living in exile) and Rebiya Kadeer (a Uyghur activist currently living in exile), and the position of Chinese yuan in the international economy vis-à-vis the US dollar.⁽¹⁹⁾

Inflated fears?

Despite all these problems in bilateral relations, the diplomatic relations between the US and China since their resumption in 1971 have not only sustained but flourished. If trade data is any indication of their increasing interdependence, bilateral trade in goods between the two countries has

increased from around \$ 7.7 billion in 1985 to about \$ 404 billion in 2013 (January-September) according to the US trade data.⁽²⁰⁾

There is no denying the fact that there have been several lows in Sino-US relations since their resumption in 1971, as mentioned in the previous section. They have usually found a way out of the crises that would come their way with a clear implicit intent of not letting the crisis overtake the long-term interests of the two countries served by continuing with the relations. The diplomacy between China and the US during the Tiananmen Square crisis is a good case in point. Even though the US Congress imposed several sanctions on China at the height of the Tiananmen crisis, the then US president George H.W. Bush struck a conciliatory tone when he impressed upon Deng Xiaoping in a letter that the US reaction was in response to internal pressure in support for upholding certain principles rather than “a reaction of arrogance.”⁽²¹⁾ President Bush even proposed sending a high-level envoy to Beijing to speak to Chinese leadership in total confidence and went to the extent of calling on the Chinese leadership to not let the events undermine the long-term bilateral relationship.⁽²²⁾

When the then US national security advisor Brent Scowcroft secretly visited Beijing, Deng expressed his deep concern over the over-involvement of the US in the affair, and stressed upon US leadership to undertake efforts in mending fences with the PRC.⁽²³⁾ In response, Scowcroft only reemphasized the point earlier made by the president that the US reaction was an outcome of domestic compulsions.⁽²⁴⁾ Although the bilateral relations did cool down, the intent for moving toward normalcy was clear on both sides. The Chinese side was equally eager to normalize its relations with the US and end its international isolation, as was evident from the proactive manner in which Deng Xiaoping pursued the issue of Fang Lizhi, a dissident Chinese political activist who had taken refuge at the US embassy in Beijing in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis.⁽²⁵⁾

The relations have suffered several hiccups even after the Tiananmen Square incident, but those were also resolved in the end with little impact on the overall relations of the two countries. For instance, the various debacles in the 1990s — such as the MFN conditionality debacle in the first half of the decade, the Third Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1995-96, and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy by a US B-2 in Belgrade in 1999 — could not upset the improving economic relations, with mutual trade quadrupling by the end of the decade, and Chinese exports to the United States increasing sevenfold.⁽²⁶⁾

Later, the incident of collision between a Chinese fighter jet and a US reconnaissance plane on the border of Chinese territorial waters in 2001 was also contained before it could escalate into a full-blown crisis.⁽²⁷⁾ Once again in 2003, when the president of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian, proposed a referendum on applying for UN representation as “Taiwan,” US supported China in opposing the move as it was in violation of the three communiqués signed between the two countries.⁽²⁸⁾

It is usually argued that Sino-US competition actually goes beyond these bilateral upheavals, and that the possibility of a confrontation between them emanates from China’s potential to overtake the US as the world leader.

Rooted in the realist theoretical framework, the argument is that advent of a contender for global hegemony could result in a serious confrontation. In the face of such theoretical assertions, China is trying to strengthen its credentials as a 'peaceful rising power.' It is trying to convince the world that even though it is rising in terms of economic prosperity, military power, and global stature, this rise is non-threatening.

It has tried to convey this message by taking measures such as joining the Treaty of Southeast Asian Friendly Cooperation (2003) — and thus agreeing to forfeit the threat of the use of force in resolving conflicts with ASEAN countries — as well as acceding to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), engaging in multilateral diplomacy over prickly regional issues like North Korea, moving towards a rapprochement with India, and forming the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁽²⁹⁾ Besides joining the Treaty of Southeast Asian Friendly Cooperation in 2003 (which was only acceded to by the US in 2009), China has also entered into a free trade agreement with ASEAN, operational since the start of 2010, and a currency swap arrangement involving China and ASEAN as well as South Korea and Japan called the Chiang Mai Initiative. Many Chinese scholars have tried to downplay the fears associated with the rise of China as well. For instance, Liu Liping argues that since China has moved a long way from its Communist economic system, the dynamics of Sino-US relations have moved towards a competitive partnership like the one between two business people.⁽³⁰⁾ Another Chinese scholar, Yuan Peng, emphasizes the margin for structural cooperation within the structural contradictions for an emerging power and a hegemonic power amidst the complexity of modern times.⁽³¹⁾

Some observers, who tend to agree with Chinese assertions of a peaceful rise, also believe that despite its reservations, "China does not wish to overthrow global system or push the US out of the Asia region."⁽³²⁾ And that China has embraced the existing international order "as a supporter."⁽³³⁾ The real problem they believe is that China has not been able to contribute to the global governance as actively as desired of it, leading to frustration.⁽³⁴⁾ Some have alluded to the great potential for cooperation between China and the US in dealing with traditional security challenges such as nuclear non-proliferation, North Korea, regional security architecture; and non-traditional security challenges such as weak states, humanitarian assistance, and climate change; as well as in the field of protection of global commons.⁽³⁵⁾ Such cooperation, however, has still not reached the desired levels, despite the fact that China has not only assimilated into but has also benefited from the existing international order.

Partnership, coevolution, or competition?

So what is China's outlook on international relations, global governance and structural change? Is it a fully co-opted member of the international governing elite? Is it content with the role that it is playing right now in the international arena? Is it willing to play ball with the US with respect to the existing international structure? Would it want to subvert the existing

order at some point in time? Would the US be willing to accept China into the international governing elite? If yes, on what terms? And would those terms be acceptable to China? These are all tricky questions, but worth finding an answer to, especially for developing countries like Pakistan that need to ascertain their roles and positions in the evolving international order.

In the previous section of this paper, it is argued that China and the US have well managed the crises that have emerged over the years in their relationship, and that China has tried its level best to convince the world about its peaceful rise. There still, however, are question marks about the long-term orientation of the relationship and the perceptions within the two countries about the other. In the case of China, those question marks also pertain to its own self-understanding. Granting that the US seems to have broadly reconciled with the idea of a rising China, it does not necessarily want China to have a smooth sailing towards its rise as a real contender for global power. This is precisely the reason behind US security involvement in the Asia Pacific and its meddling in conflicts involving China in that part of the world.

In addition to the usual pin-pricks in the way of a 'peacefully rising' China, the incumbent world power also wants a rising power to play by the rules of the international structure developed by it over the years. Ideally it would want China to be fully assimilated into and compliant with the existing rules of the game. Incorporating China into the global order is, thus, a priority for the US

There appears to be a concerted US strategy at 'streamlining' China's behaviour as a 'responsible global stakeholder' ever since the enunciation of the 'responsible stakeholder' concept by the then US deputy secretary of state, Robert Zoellick, in 2005. The concept was taken a step ahead almost exactly four years later by the then deputy secretary of state, James Steinberg, when he called for a "strategic reassurance" from China for not compromising the 'well-being' of other states while ascending in its global role.⁽³⁶⁾ He also urged China to "cooperate" with the US in handling international issues and in defusing suspicions about it in the West.⁽³⁷⁾

The two concepts have generated a great amount of interest in China. According to Yuan Peng, "[B]oth the "stakeholder" and "strategic reassurance" policies seemed to be intended to regulate China's internal and external behaviour so that "peaceful rise" was the only path available to it.⁽³⁸⁾ Yuan also criticizes the concept of "strategic reassurance" for not only ignoring the US side of the bargain but also attempting to "westernize" China.⁽³⁹⁾ The repeated calls in the Western capitals as well as in the Western media for political reform and the safeguarding of human rights are also viewed as arrogant chastisements of China's internal affairs. The continuous ideological assault on China's political system and some of its values has made the Chinese rather touchy about issues pertaining to their internal situation. No wonder president George H.W. Bush was forced to convey it to Deng Xiaoping at the height of the Tiananmen Square Crisis that US response emanated from domestic compulsions rather than being "a reaction of arrogance" (as mentioned above).

At the diplomatic level, China tries to evade such attempts at its 'westernization' by engaging with non-western major powers through

multilateral instruments such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) mechanism. With its increasing global economic weight and its great sense of pride, China is not prepared to play second fiddle to the US in particular and the West in general in the global management. In a recent article in *Qiushi*, a journal of the Communist Party of China, China's Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ma Zhaoxu, demands a greater role for the emerging economies in global economic governance.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Alluding to the growing North-South gap, Ma seems to champion the cause of the Third World countries in the following words:

“As an active participant in global economic governance, China will work to make the international order and system more just and more equitable... As the largest developing country in the world, China will continue to be a reliable friend and sincere partner of the developing countries. An important basis of China's participation in the global governance is to strengthen unity and cooperation with other developing countries and firmly uphold their legitimate rights and interests.”⁽⁴¹⁾

Ma Zhaoxu portrays China as a developing country despite having the second largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world. He highlights the “injustice” and “inequality” of the existing international order as well. In doing this, he is not only attempting to win the support of the developing countries but is also asserting its disapproval of and resistance to the existing order.

By refusing to be co-opted as a “responsible stakeholder” or giving “strategic reassurance” to any Western country about its course of action, China makes it very clear that it would not become a Western country. China's resistance to becoming a Western country has a single very strong internal determinant, that is, a political system very different from any Western country. While Deng Xiaoping — the architect of pragmatist path for China as opposed to the revolutionary ideological discourse encouraged during the Cultural Revolution — advocated emancipation of thought, he wanted such emancipation to be restricted to the realm of making China prosperous rather than exploring political options.⁽⁴²⁾ He openly condemned the overtures towards political liberalization by certain groups in China.⁽⁴³⁾

Successive Chinese leaders, following in Deng's footsteps, have refused to embrace a Western-style democracy. Zhang Weiwei, a leading professor of International Relations at Fudan University and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Asian Studies in Geneva, has summed up the Chinese ambivalence to political reform on Western patterns well in a recent interview. He judges political reform as secondary and subservient to economic development. “Of course, China will not denounce its political system in its future reform, as Gorbachev did. Instead, the first thing it will do is to affirm the role of its system in bringing about the country's success.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ Zhang even goes on to criticize the Western democratic system as non-meritocratic, inequitable and given to its own shortcomings and share of crises.⁽⁴⁵⁾

This internal push against the Western value systems naturally has a bearing on the foreign policy of China that attempts to repel any Western overtures at ‘streamlining’ its foreign policy for the sustenance and even

promotion of the existing world order based on the values inherent to Western societies. This gravitates China toward building long-lasting partnerships with the developing countries as well as other non-Western rising powers. To sum it up, instead of being political reformed internally on Western lines, China would ideally like the international system to be reformed in such a way that it reflects and tolerates the political cultures and value systems of non-Western nations rather than exporting Western value systems to the whole world for greater harmony.

Niu Xinchun puts it exceptionally beautifully and subtly when he argues that China will take some time assuming the role of a responsible great power because its policy philosophies are yet to get international acceptance as mainstream values.⁽⁴⁶⁾ This is a classic example of Chinese refusal to go along with becoming part of the governing elite of an international system that it considers devoid of its own political philosophies. It also implies that China would instead popularize its international policy philosophies as ‘mainstream values’ over the longer term rather than getting completely sucked into an existing governance structure based on Western value systems. This stands as another classic example of the long-term Chinese view towards international politics. In short, China calls for reform of the international governance structures to promote greater pluralism, while simultaneously cooperating to uphold the existing order for the time being. This falls exactly in line with China’s perception of the future international order.

While the Chinese strategy appears quite remarkable, its own self-understanding and its international role is far from perfect. There are certain ambiguities about it that bedevil certain Chinese minds as well. Zhu Feng has beautifully exposed some of the contradictions in China’s policy toward the US at the bilateral, regional, and global levels.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Zhu points out that not only is the rise of China and decline of US misunderstood, but its fallout is misinterpreted as well. “With the rise of China, the world has increased, rather than decreased dependence on the United States,” he argues.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Zhu highlights that China’s understanding of self as a “medium power or a rising power, [and] a regional power or a global power” is rather confused, and so is its understanding of what it wants to achieve and the means that it has at its disposal to get there.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Zhu has pointed out some interesting gaps in the seemingly well-orchestrated and well-planned long-term Chinese strategy, which are discussed in the concluding part of the paper.

Conclusion

Diplomatic relations between China and the US have remained relatively stable since their resumption in 1971, despite several upheavals. Sino-US cooperation, however, is not as deeply rooted as the ties between the US and its European allies. There has always been an element of competition — with a not so distant history of actual military confrontation — in the relationship. This sense of competition has been — to borrow from the Samuel Huntington lexicon — civilizational. That is, it has been emanating out of the differences in value systems and political organization of the two countries. These differences have

led each, on occasion, to find flaws in the internal affairs of the other (Chinese scholars have also been quite vocal recently about the faults they find with Western liberalism and democracy).

More importantly, however, the differences in value systems and political organization of the two countries have also shaped their diplomatic interaction, foreign policies, and outlooks on the international order. This atmosphere of competition with a potential for confrontation worries the world. It has led the US to adopt a proactive strategy of checking China's assertiveness in Asia through security arrangements with China's smaller Eastern and Southeastern neighbours, as well as reinforcing its military presence in the region under the 'Asia Pivot' strategy. At the structural level, the US is also trying to co-opt China into the existing international order as a junior partner rather than a challenger or equal.

China, on the other hand, is trying to counter US assertiveness in East and Southeast Asia through military — especially naval — modernization and expansion of cooperation with regional countries at the multilateral level. Chinese outreach to ASEAN countries is especially notable in this regard. At the structural level, China is unwilling to become a junior partner in the international management. Chinese scholars advocate conditioning China's willingness to play a proactive global institutional role on the incorporation of some of Chinese values and aspirations into the international system. This includes, as mentioned above, greater international pluralism. Until that is achieved, however, China is willing to play by the existing rules as a passive compliant rather than an active participant. This Chinese — and to an extent Russian — indifference towards the Bretton-Woods system has spawned several regional organizations as well as the growing preference for the informal mechanisms of G-8, G-22, etc.

The potential for Sino-US confrontation in the South China Sea as well as the growing regionalism and 'informalism' at the structural level amplify the uncertainty of the system and the anxieties of the smaller players. Therefore, it is important that effective mechanisms for dealing with future crises in East and Southeast Asia are in place. As a short-term measure, Avery Goldstein recommends effective communication — including an effective use of the hotline — between China and the US, and increased military-to-military contacts for effectively managing any future crisis.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Lack of a multilateral security arrangement in Asia involving both China and the US is another source of friction that leaves the region vulnerable to conflict in the long term.⁽⁵¹⁾ To address this, Henry Kissinger recommends realization of the concept of the Pacific Community — including China and the US — to forestall the advent of confrontation between the two world powers.⁽⁵²⁾ To achieve this goal, however, the US might need to concede some space to China in its policy towards East and Southeast Asia. Besides the strategic aspects of that bargain in that region, the United States may also have to acknowledge the limitations of the appeal of its values, and the zeal with which it tries to promote them across the globe. And that too in situations where it does

not seem to have the means to effectively pursue its ideals and ends up on a course detrimental to its own interests.

Kissinger argues that domestic economic and demographic challenges would keep China from getting “into a strategic confrontation or a quest for world domination.”⁽⁵³⁾ This does not necessarily mean, however, that it would also keep China from challenging a similar quest by another country. This is exactly what China is doing: refusing to submit to US domination and, perhaps, waiting for its time. This is why Kissinger counsels the government of his country to improve its economic growth patterns to arrest speculations about its imminent decline.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Meltdowns and shutdowns would not help, obviously.

China must also recognize that despite efforts to convince the world about its peaceful intentions, the smaller countries in its vicinity as well as in the West would continue harbouring doubts about the ‘rising dragon’. The suspicions are intensified by the paranoid reactions of China to the recent maritime disputes with Japan and Vietnam. Actually, over the years, the US seems to have found it quite easy to tick China off. Compounding the fears of its neighbours, such abrupt escalations could — as discussed in the previous section — lead to an increased dependence on the US rather than decreasing it.

Zhu’s point (see previous section) about the gap between Chinese aspirations and means is also an important one. While China is a great economic power, it is also a very large and still developing country with huge internal economic disparities to address. Moreover, it still lags far behind the US militarily. Although China is quietly and successfully biding its time for global prominence while discreetly developing non-Western alliances, it is easier for the US to push China’s buttons and distract it from its long-term strategy over a given period of time.

While both China and the US work on rediscovering and developing their internal strengths, it is also important for both to continue cooperating and not waiting for the weakening of the bargaining position of the other side. The United States must tread cautiously about the predictions of an imminent Chinese decline owing to the perceived lack of transparency and accountability in its governance, and the resultant corruption and public discontent. It would be prudent for both the countries to continue to deepen their cooperation rather than waiting for the weakening of the bargaining position of the other for whatever reason. That is, China should not wait for the US to proceed on its perceived path to decline; and the US should not wait for China to fall under its own weight based on the perceived internal weaknesses of the Chinese socio-economic and political system.

Moreover, notwithstanding the distinct value system and political structure of China, its demands for an international structural reform must be heeded, given the inherent merit in the case for the reform. If the rise of global networks or terrorism or the recent upheavals in the Middle East with global implications are any evidence, the international institutional structure has failed to react effectively. There is one major problem for Pakistan, should China succeed in promoting reform of the Bretton-Woods system. China alone would not stand to gain from it; India as the largest democracy of the world, with a

growing world economy, and a newfound partnership with the US, might also see its international status elevated despite all its differences with China.

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53. Ibid., pp.524-525.
54. Ibid., p.525.