

The “New Type of Major Power Relations”: A New Normal in Sino-US Ties

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With an increase in global focus on Sino-US relations of late, there have been concerns as to whether the paths of the United States as the incumbent superpower and China as an aspiring superpower can avoid an inevitable clash. However, recent developments in bilateral relations reveal certain tendencies which can lead to or which can prevent a direct armed conflict between these two powers. An assessment of these developments holds the key towards understanding the possible course of Sino-US relations.

The Case for a Clash

Certain aspects of the bilateral ties between these two powers indicate that they are on a path towards an inevitable or inadvertent war. China's military fortification of the South China Sea islands, which are claimed by the country as one of its core interests, is perhaps the latest and most important of such signs. Since the discovery of China's land reclamation and construction of infrastructure facilities, including airstrips and suspected radar facilities on islands such as the Fiery Cross, Johnson South, Mischief and Subi reefs, there has been a war of words between Washington and Beijing on the ramifications of such activities on regional peace. The US is also planning to challenge China's actions and claims on these islands as “core interests” by sailing its naval ships close to these artificial islands.

China's increasing focus on building an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) system to keep the US forces out of the first and second island chains was very much visible during its maiden display of the DF-21D and DF-26 “carrier killer” ballistic missiles at the military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Beijing on October 3rd, 2015. Also displayed for the first time during this ceremony was the DF-5B ballistic missile, which is capable of carrying multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV), exhibiting China's capability to target the continental US and to challenge its Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system. These displays, in addition to serving as a status booster for China, were also intended to send a clear message to the US to reconsider its plan to increase military deployments in the Asia-Pacific as part of its rebalancing policy initiated in 2011.

China's A2/AD is not just aimed at the conventional fronts. The domains of outer space and cyberspace are also involved in a big way in this power-play. China's militarization of its space program through the deployment of high resolution reconnaissance satellites like the Yaogan series, and its massive cyber attacks on US commercial and governmental sectors highlight this trend. China's capability demonstration and its militarization of the South China Sea islands as well as the US attempts towards testing the former's resolve through symbolic military provocations can lead to a charged atmosphere conducive for an inadvertent conflict. China's A2/AD also has larger political undertones. In the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in May, China's President Xi Jinping called for a New Asian Security Concept wherein “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia”. This can be read as a direct rejoinder to the Asian re-balance strategy of the US. The expansion of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization's membership to include India and Pakistan in July is testament to this signalling.

In addition to this augmentation of capability as well as the display of intent, the future trajectory of relations becomes

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more apparent once the behavioral propensity is taken into account. American strategic culture has been widely viewed as one which has been well reflective of a superpower status, using military and economic assets to shape the behavior expected from the rest of the world. Within this gambit, the US readiness for the use of military force based on the supposed legitimacy of its global leadership has abundant evidence from history. In the case of China, there is a perspective pointing towards a tendency to categorize all offensive actions as defensive due to the decision makers' belief in its persisting ancient pacifist tradition. This means that, ironically, there is more possibility for China to behave aggressively because of a pacifist-defensive strategic outlook. Putting these two strategic cultural motivations in context, the case for a clash can be seen as strengthened.

On a much wider scale, this possibility is emphasized by politico-economic competition. China can be seen to be on a path towards the internationalization of its currency, the Renminbi, at the cost of weakening the dominance of the dollar. This competition is also on display in the ongoing clash between the “Washington consensus” and the “Beijing consensus”. China has recently come up with various measures to challenge the supremacy of the Bretton Woods order, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB). Both these initiatives by China have opened up an alternative to the Western-led global financial system. While the NDB is entirely the product of the BRICS bloc, the establishment of the AIIB by its 57 founding members this June is of special political significance because it saw many prominent Western economies, like Germany, France, the UK and Australia, too, rushing to join a Chinese-led initiative, and doing so against pressure from the US.

This led the US to respond by quickly consolidating significant ground in the form of an agreement on the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) among the 12 prospective Asia-Pacific members. China's similar initiative in the Asia-Pacific, the Regional Co-operative Economic Partnership (RCEP), is still under negotiation among its 16 proposed members. The RCEP is widely understood as a rival to the TPP in the regional race for economic leadership as China is outside the TPP and the US is outside the RCEP. However, China has already started work on its grand “One Belt One Road” project to develop networks for trans-continental development, trade, investment and cultural co-operation, consisting of the land based “New Silk Road Economic Belt” as well as the sea based “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. Thus, the competition for geo-economic gain is gaining momentum and adds to the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, making the bilateral relations inflammable.

The Case against a Clash

However, there are some other factors which needs to be considered before coming to a conclusion as to whether the US and China are on a collision course. Militarily, the US and China are too powerful to get engaged in confrontation – both being powers with nuclear weapons. The chances of strategic miscalculation once locking themselves into even a minor conflict are very high, which both would seek to avoid despite having major conflicts of interests. Even though the US has a strategic tradition of proactive and extensive use of force, the lessons learned from its entanglements in both Afghanistan and Iraq led it to adopt a strategy of leading from behind – or even a reluctant or intermittent use of force on later occasions in the wake of the Arab Spring, during the crises in Libya, Yemen, Syria and the ISIS-controlled Iraq under ISIS. China, on the other hand, has been consistently reiterating only to use force for the protection of its “core interests”. In addition, China has restricted its military activities with respect to even its “core interests” to a mere capability buildup and symbolic deployments.

There appears to be, therefore, a convergence from both sides on maintaining restraint on the use of force and focus on diplomatic efforts. Even with rising tensions in areas like the South China Sea, measures have been taken from both sides to avoid any conflicts – even while conducting risky actions. China's cautionary proclamation and America's symbolic moves challenging it, following the establishment of China's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in 2013 over the disputed East China Sea waters with Japan, can be seen as an instance where such well-calculated risks were taken. The recovery of the American economy and the stabilization of the Chinese economy also provide a constraining effect on the domestic level in addition to structural and cultural factors.

On a larger canvass, the degree of convergence between the US and China also dampens the possibility of a direct conflict. The current global political structure is fundamentally a product of World War II and has been shaped by its victors. China has been categorized as a revisionist state by some; however, it seems to be often forgotten that China

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is as much a part of the foundational leadership of this Post-War World Order as is the US. Rivalry within this leadership system is historically found to have limits. The US' relationship with the erstwhile Soviet Union was marked by the Cold War where there was no direct confrontation between the two superpowers, despite having minimal interactions between them. However, in the case of China, neither is it even marginally as powerful as the Soviet Union, nor is it in any way cut off from the international system under the leadership of the US (as was the case for the Soviet Union). The Sino-US relations are instead characterized by a high level of interdependence. This stands in stark contrast to, and a far cry from, the Cold War era situation.

This interdependence has made possible the establishment of what is called a “new type of major power relations” between the US and China, as proposed by Xi in 2012. This novel approach in shaping the relationship between an incumbent superpower and an aspiring one is characterized by “mutual understanding and strategic trust,” “respecting each other’s ‘core interests’,” “mutually beneficial cooperation” and “enhancing cooperation and coordination in international affairs and on global issues.” Far from being normative rhetoric, this conceptualization has a pragmatic rationale inherent to it, manifested in the recent bilateral developments in Sino-US ties. China and the US have settled for landmark agreements on climate change as well as cyber security co-operation. During his visit to China in November 2014, Obama agreed to cut US greenhouse gas emissions by 6-28 percent below 2005 levels by 2025, and Xi announced that China’s emissions would peak before 2030 and that the non-renewable share in its energy mix would reach 20% by that time. When Xi visited in September 2015, a bilateral agreement was reached to cooperate against cyber threats originating from each other’s territories, with a focus primarily on the sensitive commercial domain. Even military cooperation between the two countries has not remained untouched under this new type of relations.

Even with such bright spots there can be the potential for a clash originating from the actions of third players. Here, too, signs are evident that there is a lack of intent from both the US and China to cross the red lines. As often exemplified, China has not allied with other states against the US, as required by a typical structural realist response, and has instead preferred the development of strategic partnerships with all globally and regionally significant powers. Even in the case of these strategic partners, there is no implicit understanding of an alliance. For instance, China has kept its distance from its close partner Russia’s assertive moves in Eastern Europe. The US, on the other hand, gave a free hand to Japan in relaxing its pacifist constraints. Though this move appears like a move to incite regional tensions, there is also a conspicuous effort by the US in this to delegate more responsibilities to Japan, and thereby to reduce the need for the US to militarily intervene in the region. Therefore, even the effort at rebalancing in Asia is getting transformed by America’s strategic cultural shift towards “leading from behind.” Thus, though there are political, economic and military conditions which can make a direct clash between the two powers possible, there are also certain constraints on all levels impeding on such a possibility from getting realized – thereby creating a “new normal” for “the most important bilateral relationship in the world.”

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