The US return to Asia does not close the window on China’s strategic opportunity

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The US return to Asia does not close the window on China’s strategic opportunity

Analysis by Mathieu Duchâtel based on:
– “Interviews with Ma Xiaojun (2) and Gao Zugui; (3) A re-examination of China’s strategic environment,” Xuexi shibao, 10 January 2011.

In late 2010 and early 2011, the Chinese press carried a number of analyses on the “deterioration of China’s regional security environment.” The expression counteracts the notion, disseminated mostly by American analysts, of assertiveness in China’s foreign policy in the region.

In Beijing experts’ point of view, the list of negative developments is long, so much so that Ma Xiaojun even perceives a “new Cold War situation” (新的冷战格局, xin de lengzhan geju). In the South China Sea, parties contesting Chinese sovereignty over some islands have hardened their stance by moving closer to the United States. In China’s maritime neighbourhood, the United States has held the biggest joint naval exercises with Japan and South Korea in the histories of the two respective alliances. In Japan, the Democratic Party quickly shed its accommodating China policy once it came to power. Chinese experts are in agreement that the main factor behind this deterioration is the “American return to East Asia” (重返东亚, chongfan dongya), a classic balancing response to rising Chinese regional influence.

This reaction is part of “offensive defence” (进攻性防御, jingongxing fangyu), a classic balancing response to rising Chinese regional influence. From this, in Liu’s view, insufficient “strategic communication” (战略沟通不够, zhanlue goutong bu gou) amplified the discord between the two major powers by opening a space for perhaps exaggerated interpretations based on suspicions. Liu acknowledges that the Chinese perception of increased US interference in matters of Chinese security interests in East Asia had led Beijing towards a thorough revamping of its Asia strategy. The priority henceforth would be to “throw the Americans out of Asia” (将美国赶出东亚, jiang meiguo ganchu dongya). At the same time, Chinese diplomacy has ceased playing a responsible stakeholder (负责任的利益攸关方, fuzeren de liyi youguanfang) role in major issues of global governance and regional security.

Nevertheless, Liu prefers to see the deterioration of China’s security environment in relative terms. The focus is on problems in East Asia, because in other sub-regions of Asia, China enjoys rather stable relations with its neighbours. In reality, even in East Asian geopolitics, there has been a limited weakening (局部, jubu), far from global (全面, quanmian), of China’s positions. As proof of this Liu cites the strengthening of the Sino-Russian partnership, a development overlooked by many observers, but which gave China elbow room in its dealings with Japan. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev’s September 2010 visit ended with the signing of several cooperation accords and a joint communiqué marking the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II. This text, with marked anti-fascist and anti-imperialist language, forged a Sino-Russian geopolitical front against Japan. In fact, a little after his China visit, Medvedev became the first Russian president to set foot on the Kuril Islands – occupied by Russia and claimed by Japan – striking a heavy blow (沉重的打击, chenzhong de daij) at Japan’s far right and leading Beijing to adopt a hard line on the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

1. Liu Jianfei is deputy director at the Institute of International Strategic Research at the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party.
2. Ma Xiaojun is a professor at the Institute of International Strategic Research at the Central Party School.
3. Gao Zugui is director of the Institute of World Politics at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations.
Further, in Liu’s view, the US return to Asia does not signal a break with Washington’s China policy by any means, and American disquiet over China’s rise might need to be seen in context. US security priorities lie elsewhere, in Afghanistan and Iran, confronting Al-Qaeda and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. American geopolitical activism is focused on the Middle East crisis, and Washington is not seeking to fashion a new security order in East Asia. In this sense, the grand US strategy consists of preserving an upper hand in the international domain. Instead of countering the rising might of one country or another, it is more about refurbishing American domination over international affairs.

After all, no East Asian country that is cosying up to the United States has effected major changes to its China policy. The substantial cooperative ties between China and South Korea have survived the considerable deterioration to China’s image among South Koreans following the Cheonan incident (in which 46 seamen died). Moves to set up an Asean+1 free trade zone have not been stalled by Southeast Asian countries despite tensions in the South China Sea. Even Japanese conservatives set store on mutually beneficial cooperation with China. On the whole, the foreign policy of each of China’s neighbours in East Asia remains independent, far from being wholly subject to US interests. Rather, the countries seek to balance the benefits they gain from the two superpowers active in the region.

In this scenario, Liu arrives at a positive conclusion. Until 2020, Chinese foreign policy might continue riding on its “period of historic opportunity” (战略机遇期, zhànliè jīyùqī). Gao Zuguai hardly differs, saying that it is enough for China to make no changes to its dual policy strategy of good neighbourliness and positive opening to Asian regionalism to continue gaining strength in East Asia. In his view, the series of incidents in 2010 in the Korean peninsula, around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and in the South China Sea have rather undermined the shared responsibility of China and the United States in maintaining peace and stability in East Asia.

Translated by N. Jayaram

Xinjiang and Sino-Turkish Ties

Analysis by Jérôme Doyon based on:

– Zan Tao. (1) “Sino-Turkish relations and Turkey’s point of view on China’s rise,” Alabo shijie yanjiu, no. 4, July 2010.


Violent incidents in Xinjiang appear to the Chinese to be proliferating since 1990, especially after the media focus on the events of July 2009 in Urumqi. Chinese analysts tend to highlight the events’ links to the internationalisation of pro-independence activism through the “East Turkistan movement” (东突, Dongtu). This internationalisation theme has a more general bearing on the issue of “three evil forces” (三股势力) (6) deemed to be growing in Xinjiang via transnational pro-East Turkistan organisations whose numbers have been expanding since the advent of economic reforms in China. Xie Mengcen stresses the formation in the United States in 2004 of two organisations that have emerged as beacons of the political independence quest on the global scene: the “World Uyghur Congress” (7) (世界維吾爾代表大会, shijie weiwu'er daibiao dahui) and the “East Turkistan Government in Exile” (8) (东突厥斯坦流氓政府, dongtujuesan liuwang zhengfu) . Most articles on the internationalisation of the East Turkistan movement fail to mention Turkey, although a pan-Turkic ideological basis (泛突厥主义, fan tuju ze zhuyi) is often attributed to these organisations. On the other hand, Sino-Turkish relations are constantly invoked in discussions of Xinjiang. They stress Turkey’s position as one of the main bases of the East-Turkistan movement. They particularly emphasise the need for Ankara’s clear political support to China’s stand regarding Xinjiang. At the same time, they tend to show that it is through Sino-Turkish collaboration on Xinjiang’s stability that Turkey could retain its influence on Central Asia, where China’s importance is growing, especially after the creation in 2001 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), of which Turkey is not a member.

Even after the establishment of diplomatic relations with Turkey in 1971, China has been unable to improve its image among the Turks, as Zan Tao observes. The Korean War, in which the Turkish army fought alongside the Americans, left a negative impression of Chinese Communists in Turkey. Also, Turkish nationalists have bristled at the support to Turkey’s extreme leftists from the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s. Bilateral relations have developed mainly since the 1980s. It is only recently that Turkish elites have taken note of China’s rising power, Zan notes. Then again, China has yet to acquire the strategic importance that the United States, the neighbouring European Union countries, Central Asia, or the Middle East enjoy in Turkey’s eyes.

Meanwhile, Zan Tao as well as Zhu Xiang point out the eastward shift (向东方, xiang dongfang) in Turkish diplomatic focus since the end of

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2. Zhu Xiang belongs to the Middle-East research centre at Northwest University in Xi’an.
3. Deng Hongying is with the political studies department of the Zhongnan University of Economics and Law at Wuhan.
4. Xie Mengcen is with the Xi’an Institute of Politics.
5. Wei Chaoran is a PhD student at the Institute of politics and Public Administration, Xinjiang University, Urumqi.
6. Expression covering terrorism, separation, and religious extremism.
7. The Munich-based organisation vows adherence to peaceful means and purports to speak for Uyghurs inside and outside Xinjiang. Since 2006 its president is Rebiya Kadeer.