Growing Power, Security Paradox, and China's Security Strategy

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Abstract: China's rapid rise has characterized the decades since the end of the Cold War. China's growing comprehensive power has obviously given it more leverage and resources to pursue its goals and national interests. However, more power does not naturally translate into more security. To a great extent, China is facing a paradox between its security governance and increasingly broadened and complicated security agenda. Against this background, there are some changes in China's security governance approach which are seen by some observers as China's attempt to seek global hegemony and expansion. The author argues in this article that China's security practice still remarkably maintains its continuity and stability with Chinese characteristics and is mainly driven by the needs of its own development rather than an ambition for global hegemony.

Keywords: China's security strategy; comprehensive power; security governance; regional hegemony.

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China's rise in recent years and its growing power has brought many implications to the international community. With regard to security governance, will China's role as an emerging great power bring more peace or instability to the world? For many other countries, will a full-fledged China be more aggressive, as predicted by theories like balance of power, power shift, and hegemonic war? Optimists argue that a growing economy will make China more interdependent with the world as a beneficiary of the current international institutions, which will motivate China to defend world peace and stability, thus other countries will be safer and benefit from China's economic growth. On the contrary, pessimists argue that China's recent assertive actions like accelerated land reclamation in the South China Sea have demonstrated that it is likely to seek regional or even global hegemony by ultimately overthrowing the exiting institutions, even if not by means of war.

This article argues that China's growing power has given it more leverage to defend its interests, but has also presented some security challenges to the Chinese leadership. In this light, China has to address these challenges through better security governance, instead of seeking hegemony by coercive means. The article will first discuss China's growing power and its security paradox, and then elaborate on the complicated security concerns and changing environment that China is facing. It concludes that China will endeavor to address these security challenges with sound security governance rather than by seeking hegemony.

China's Growing Power and its Security Paradox

Since the launch of reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, China has enjoyed rapid economic growth and become the second-largest economy in the world, accumulating growing capabilities ever closer to those of the only superpower today, the United States. China's neighbors are experiencing both appeals and pressure for a rejuvenating China. How China projects its growing power will directly affect these countries, while in turn, its peripheral areas are also vital to China's development in both economic and security terms. Ironically, China has found itself in a situation where more power does not generate a proportionate increase in tangible benefits or a decrease of security problems, but instead creates even more challenges and vulnerabilities, especially in its peripheral areas. Similarly,

economic interdependence does not naturally result in sound relations with other countries, not even those which have shared long-time friendships with China in history.

Despite its rapidly growing power, China is facing ever more daunting security challenges.

China is facing three dilemmas due to its fast development and growing power. The first is the security dilemma. China's rapid rise has changed the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Some regional countries are feeling fear and uncertainty and regard China as a potential threat. China's military modernization and its measures to defend or promote interests in sovereignty

issues are met with growing suspicion and opposition. Disputes between China and neighboring countries have become more and more complicated and thus difficult to resolve. The deteriorating relations with regional players are undermining China's security-promoting efforts. As a result, China is more pressed to invest resources into its military modernization.

Second, China's leadership deems China not powerful enough to defend its expanding interests, especially such vital interests as secure supplies of energy and raw materials, which may become unavailable when critical sea lanes are cut off in the event of major conflicts or in other extreme scenarios. How to manage stability across the Taiwan Strait, ameliorate the North Korea nuclear crisis, or settle the sovereign disputes over the Nansha (Spratly) Islands are all major security challenges for China. To make things more complicated, China finds it impossible to stop the U.S. intervention, thus faces difficulties in pushing forward its "dual-track" approach, i.e. trying to settle bilateral sovereign disputes through bilateral negotiation and addressing broader security issues on multilateral platforms.

Third, interwoven factors at the domestic and international levels have also posed challenges for the Chinese leadership committed to promoting security governance. On one hand, growing power has brought more prestige and legitimacy to the Communist Party of China (CPC), and raised higher public expectation about China's role on the world stage as well. On the other hand, China's leadership remains alert to the spillover effect of international security threats. For example, the proliferation of extremism and terrorism has already worsened the security situation and inter-ethnic relations in west China. Furthermore, how to protect diverse interests and

meet various needs in diplomacy is another question that the Chinese decision-makers have to consider. The great achievements China has made over the past decades have given the Chinese public a strong sense of pride and triggered growing nationalist mentalities, whose demands or opinions cannot be overlooked by the Chinese leadership in foreign policy decision making.¹

Challenging Security Environment for China

China's growing power has not only strengthened its status in the global arena, but also generated more security concerns as Chinese investment, trade, and citizens are moving globally. In terms of security agenda, the following issues constitute China's major concerns in its security governance and diplomacy along its peripheries.

The Taiwan Issue and National Reunification

Undoubtedly, the Taiwan issue is part of China's core national interest which concerns its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and thus remains a top priority in China's diplomacy and military strategies. Tensions across the Taiwan Strait have been substantially eased since Mr. Ma Ying-jeou took office in Taiwan in 2008. As the Taiwan authorities have endorsed the principle of "One China" on the basis of the "1992 Consensus," economic and social exchanges between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan have been expanded steadily and military confrontation across the Strait has been cooling down. Hence cross-Strait relations have been developing peacefully.

Though some kind of "status quo" has been achieved, the Taiwan issue can only be considered as effectively managed instead of being resolved: both sides are still politically separated and the sentiment to seek

China's major security concerns include the Taiwan issue, the major-power game, territorial disputes, regime security, the Korean Peninsula stability and salient non-traditional security issues.

¹Zhang Yunling *et al.*, "zhongguo Waijiao de Ruan yu Ying [Interview: The Soft and The Hard in China's Diplomacy]," *People's Tribune*, No. 12 (2013).

independence or at least permanent status quo still has a large market in Taiwan. Confrontation, or even major crises, may recur if the traditionally independence-seeking Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) comes into power in Taiwan in 2016. The U.S. and other nations could also interfere at this juncture, which will undermine the mainland's reunification efforts. In this sense, the Taiwan issue will continue to draw political attention as well as strategic resources of the Chinese mainland.

Realpolitik and Power Competition

China's stunning rise has influenced the global and Asia-Pacific chessboards in the new century, and also injected tensions into Sino-U.S. relations. Although the Obama administration has articulated on various occasions that the United States welcomes a prosperous, strong, and responsible China, and both sides have tried to avoid the Thucydides' Trap² by establishing a new model of major-power relationship, their power transition is making the bilateral relationship more delicate. As a result of China's increasing voice and weight in the international community, the U.S. is becoming more sensitive and keen to sustain its regional supremacy and global leadership. China is obviously among the major considerations that have driven the Obama administration to adopt its rebalancing strategy. More American military troops and cutting-edge weapons are expected to be deployed to China's peripheries soon, and America's alliance system will also be reformed and consolidated, with China as the biggest potential rival.

Many analysts believe that the U.S. rebalancing strategy is intended to contain China, which the U.S. has officially denied.³ Whatever the purpose, the strategy has aroused growing suspicion and concerns among Chinese political elites who hold the firm belief that the U.S. is exploiting the territorial disputes between China and its neighboring countries to contain

²Graham Allison, "Thucydides's Trap has been Sprung in the Pacific," *Financial Times*, August 22, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5d695b5a-ea3-11e1-984b-00144feab49a.html>.

³Robert S. Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot: Obama's New Asia Policy Is Unnecessary and Counterproductive," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6 (November/December 2012), pp. 70–82; and Lanxin Xiang, "China and the 'Pivot,'" *Survival*, Vol. 54, No. 5 (October/November 2012), pp. 113–128.

China's development.⁴ America's growing military presence and strengthened alliance diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific have also put great pressure on China, which will not only complicate the situation and undermine China's position in its negotiation with neighboring countries, but increase the chance of direct military confrontation between the U.S. and China as well.

Power transition in the Asia-Pacific has also affected China's relations with other regional powers. For example, China's rise has eclipsed Japan in Asia and spurred Japan's jealousy and fear about a powerful China. Longstanding discord on some historical issues as well as disputes over the Diaoyu Islands have already poisoned the diplomatic relations between the two nations. At the same time, Japan is stepping up its effort to become a "normal power." The Shinzo Abe administration has attempted to reinterpret Japan's peace constitution and the defense-oriented policy. Furthermore, Japan is strengthening its traditional alliance with the U.S. by expanding its role in the U.S.'s mutual defense arrangements. With grievous memories of the Japanese atrocities in World War II, China naturally feels extremely indignant about Japan's aggression-prone policy changes, and worried about Japan's real intention.

Another example is China-India relations. Up till now, India has been falling behind in its economic competition with China, although its great potential of development should not be underestimated. The territorial disputes between India and China remain unsolved with some minor clashes or confrontation along the borders every once in a while. Although the leaders of both countries recognize the significance of a peaceful and cooperative relationship and have put much effort into improving their strategic relations, a sound relationship with mutual trust is far from established. India is still disgruntled over the strategic ties between China and Pakistan and keeps an eye on China's growing presence in South Asia, which India has traditionally treated as its own backyard. Similarly, China is cautiously watching

China's biggest strategic concern is a potential coalition of neighboring countries against its rise.

⁴"Q&A: China's Ambassador to the U.S. on the South China Sea, Trade and Security," *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-ambassador-to-the-u-s-on-the-south-china-sea-trade-and-security-1432935890>.

India too, worrying that it will join hands with the U.S., Japan and other powers to constrain China's rising influence.

Territorial Disputes

China is deeply involved in many territorial disputes with its neighboring countries, such as India, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia. Also, China holds different definitions about its lines of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) adjacent to those of South Korea and Indonesia. Although growing capabilities have granted China more leverage in the territorial contests, these disputes are still difficult to solve. When its neighboring countries are anxious and uncertain about how China will use its increasing power, any imprudent action on the part of China will be seen as evidence of the Chinese bully of smaller countries in the region, which will frighten these countries into America's arms. This is why these neighboring countries have been increasingly embracing American involvement to balance China's influence. Moreover, some countries obviously feel the pressure to preserve the status quo before the situation turns more unfavorable and have thus taken opportunist actions to draw the U.S. into regional geopolitical competition. As a result, the territorial disputes are not merely confined between China and other claiming countries. Instead, they are entangled in the balance of power in the region.

Regime Security

Maintaining the rule of the CPC is certainly the topmost concern of the Chinese leadership who tend to believe that the West is still attempting a "peaceful evolution" of China and scheming to sabotage the CPC's governing status. Western censures and policies with respect to China's allegedly underdeveloped conditions of human rights and democracy, and their support for vocal Chinese dissidents and separatist movements, have provided obvious evidence in this regard. In particular, the color revolution in some former Soviet republics and the so-called "Arab Spring" movement in the past decade have both been regarded as warning signals by the Chinese leadership.

China is now undergoing fundamental social transformation, with diverse opinions among various communities and social groups. Indeed, corruption and abuse of power of some government officials have undermined the CPC's legitimacy and capability; separatist movements in Tibet

and Xinjiang are also trying to ignite confrontation between the local population and the central government in the name of religious beliefs or rights of self-governance; besides, extremism and terrorism are reviving in Central Asia due to the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Afghanistan, whose spillover effect on China's northwestern provinces poses yet more challenges to the CPC's governance of China.

The Korean Peninsula Issue

On the Korean Peninsula, China once fought a costly war for the sake of North Korea, one of its few formal allies during the Cold War era. Since the end of the Cold War, the Korean Peninsula has remained a flashpoint in world politics because of North Korea's ambition to become a world-recognized nuclear power. China understands well that North Korea's nuclear ambition may not only catalyze a series of dangerous reactions among other regional countries, but is also a potential threat to China given the fickle leadership in North Korea. Meanwhile, unification of the Korean Peninsula still seems to be far into the future, with potentially more war risks and chaos during the yet-to-begin reunification process. As a traditional ally of North Korea, China has been under constant criticism from international society for not doing more to curb North Korea's nuclear ambition. However, in the eyes of many Chinese, China would lose a critical buffer zone once it discards its unpopular ally. As a result, China has been taking immense efforts to maintain stability of the Peninsula and encourage both the North and the South to work together by an incremental approach, so as to minimize the risks of any drastic changes to the security situation on the Peninsula.

Non-Traditional Security Issues

Since the 1990s, China has gradually adopted the concept of comprehensive security based on its evolving security vision. Pressing challenges like terrorism, energy security, cyber security, and climate change have been included into its national security agenda as so-called non-traditional threats, especially with the advent of shocking events in the new century such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the outbreak of SARS.

On the list of these new security threats, terrorism is of the most salient significance to the security of China. Domestically, several terrorist attacks in the past years have shocked Chinese society and sparked widespread

panic; the revival of Islamic extremism in the Middle East and Central Asia has also created serious security challenges to China. It is reported that hundreds of Chinese recruited by Muslim radicals have traveled to the Middle East to fight for the "Islamic State (ISIS)". In the same vein, some extremists trained in the Middle East have also been sent back to China to deliberate terrorist attacks. In addition, some international terrorist groups have already posted their threats to China on the Internet. In this light, China's overseas and even domestic assets and personnel have increasingly become potential targets of terrorist attacks, which are intertwined with the strained ethnic relations in Tibet and Xinjiang. Hence the Chinese leadership perceives terrorism as an issue closely related to China's security and territorial integrity.

Since China's economic development relies heavily on its engagement with the rest of the world through trade and investment, secure and stable supplies of raw materials and free access to the international market are extremely vital to China. In actuality, China's resource supplies depend heavily on many countries that are plagued by armed conflicts, and its international lifelines are very susceptible to piracy and other attacks. As for issues like environmental pollution, ecological degradation, epidemics and natural disasters, China has many vivid and bitter experiences as well. With more public awareness and pressure on the Chinese government, China's newly launched *Scientific Development Outlook* (SDO) and *Overall National Security Outlook* (ONSO) have put much more emphasis on such non-traditional security issues.⁵

In summary, although China has managed to maintain a peaceful environment for its development in the past three decades, it is now facing much bigger and more complicated security challenges than ever before.

Is China Enhancing Security by Seeking Hegemony?

With increasing economic engagement with the world, China's economic growth is more and more dependent on international markets and the

⁵See Xi Jinping's Remarks on the First Meeting of the CPC's National Security Committee, April 15, 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0416/c64094-24900492.html>; and Xi Jinping's Remarks on the 14th Session of Collective Study of CPC Politburo, April 25, 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0427/c1024-24946690.html>.

stable supply of raw materials, which entails greater Chinese efforts to safeguard its overseas interests.⁶ At the same time, with its growing power, China is also expected by the international community to play a more active role and take on more responsibilities in the global arena. Therefore, China has begun to adopt a more proactive strategy to address its security challenges and augment its global influence since the new leadership took office three years ago. Such changes have brought about growing doubts among international society as to whether China is trying to mitigate various security pressures by seeking “absolute safety” or even regional hegemony, which may lead to a final clash between China and the U.S., the predominant power in the Asia-Pacific.

To some scholars, the answer seems self-evident that a rising power has an intrinsic drive to extend its strengths to the fullest extent, constantly testing the bottom-line of the prevailing status-quo power, and eventually causing a show-hand between the two.⁷ China’s policies or behavior on such issues as territorial disputes, the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and launch of the “Belt and Road Initiative” are widely thought of as evidence of pursuing hegemony. However, this author argues that China will not seek hegemony or rely on hegemonic approaches to deal with security challenges and protect its interests. Although China’s security governance does take on some new implications, it shows apparent continuity in its grand strategy, which has been demonstrated by the distinct Chinese approach to security governance.

Seeking regional
hegemony is neither
realistic nor
conducive to China’s
security position.

First of all, a peaceful and stable international environment is in China’s national interests. Therefore, it is socio-economic development, rather than hegemony, that determines the characteristics of China’s foreign

⁶Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräunerand and Zhou Hang, “Protecting China’s Overseas Interests: The Slow Shift away from Non-interference,” SIPRI Policy Paper 41 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2014), <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRIPP41.pdf>.

⁷John J. Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2010), pp. 381–396.

policy and behavior. In other words, China's foreign policy is made to serve its socio-economic development and national rejuvenation. For China, how it can defend its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and other vital national interests is still its first priority,⁸ which has been demonstrated by China's limited and restrained involvement in many of the most outstanding political and military issues in the world like the refugee crisis in the Middle East. Although China has been trying to make some adjustment to the current international system, it does not intend to overthrow the established world order.

Even its rapid military modernization in recent years cannot serve as sufficient evidence of its growing hegemonic ambition, for it is rather an endeavor to make up for China's retarded military upgrades during the previous decades. To be more specific, despite its apparently fearful military budget of US\$138.5 billion in 2015 (official Chinese figure), it accounts for less than 1.4 percent of China's total GDP, thus the widely held image of a China determined to seek hegemony with military primacy is largely imaginary.

China's strategic focus in the foreseeable future will still be centered on domestic development rather than enhancing international status.

Second, China will further promote its friendly relations with neighboring countries. Although China seeks to expand and deepen cooperation, especially economic cooperation, with those neighboring countries, there are still some difficulties to overcome. The territorial disputes have undermined China's diplomatic relations with Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and India, arousing wide suspicion and distrust in the region. Furthermore, power politics is increasingly

involved in China's bilateral relations with regional countries. A few regional countries are taking substantial steps to balance against or even contain China's influence in the region, which poses grave challenges to China's peripheral diplomacy. The misinterpretation of China's efforts at settling territorial disputes as a kind of assertiveness is prevailing. On one

⁸"China at a New Starting Point," Statement by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the General Debate of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 27, 2013, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceie/eng/ztltdiplomacy/t1084198.htm>.

hand, China believes it has legitimate sovereign rights over the disputed islands. On the another hand, China today is definitely in a better position to safeguard its interests in the disputed waters with its growing power. Yet, even when China occasionally takes punitive or coercive actions against other claimants, it acts with great caution and restraints, trying to avoid direct conflicts or frightening these nations into an anti-China coalition.

Third, China's relations with great powers, especially the United States, have been prioritized in its overall diplomacy. Since 2013, China has been engaging with the United States for a new model of major power relations. China knows all too well that its relations with the U.S. will to a large extent define the regional security environment. China certainly has many differences and even severe contradictions with the U.S. and other big powers. Nevertheless, it has been trying to maintain strategic patience to manage these relations.

Finally, the new Chinese leadership has defined national security from a broader perspective. Issues like terrorism, energy shortage, epidemic diseases, and ecological deterioration have been incorporated into such new security concepts as "comprehensive security" and "overall national security." Yet China usually takes different approaches to handle traditional and non-traditional security issues. For these non-traditional security issues, China tends to take joint actions with international partners in an open and cooperative posture. In the past years, China has made great contribution to the global endeavor in humanitarian aid, disaster relief, counter-piracy, counter-terrorism and peace-keeping; in traditional security, China has been promoting collective security and refraining from building any formal alliance. Its insistence on a non-aligned policy is a case in point. Though more confident and resolute in safeguarding its core interests, China has been seeking peaceful resolution of various disputes through diplomatic channels, and is proactively taking non-coercive approaches to promote its international image. Meanwhile, China has refrained from interfering in the

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domestic affairs of other countries. In most cases it prefers voluntary and consensus-based actions rather than forced obligations.

Promoting Security with Restrained Exercise of Power

China's growing national power has shaped a new landscape for its security governance, complicating its security environment at the international level and raising more domestic expectations and ambitions. How will China deal with this dilemma?

Recently, China has been more confident and active in defending its positions and interests. According to some Western observers, China is becoming more aggressive while frequently bullying its much smaller neighbors.⁹ This observation is understandable based on China's growing power and global presence. However, it is imprudent to jump to the conclusion that China is now an aggressive empire with the ambition for regional hegemony. Such assumption is based on pure theoretical inferences and flawed generalization about the history of major power relations. If we take a closer look at China's foreign policy since its reform and opening-up began 36 years ago, as well as its practices in security governance in the past years, the so-called potential threat from China's growing power can be found to be over-exaggerated.

It is true that China is taking a firmer stance to promote its position in negotiations over territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea, and directly expressing its discontent over the U.S. surveillance and reconnaissance along its coastlines. Yet China's actions are virtually reactionary to the external infringement of China's national sovereignty and it is unfair to merely blame China. Furthermore, although many of the disputes are listed as core national interests which are related to national reputation or even the CPC's legitimacy, the Chinese government is willing to make compromise in the negotiations. For example, although China insists that the South China Sea disputes be resolved through bilateral ways, it has agreed on the ASEAN's constructive role in maintaining stability of relations between China and other claimants, and adopted the dual-track

⁹Avery Goldstein, "China's Security Challenges and the Evolution of Grand Strategy," *Journal of International Security Studies*, No. 1 (2015), pp. 14–31.

approach to the South China Sea disputes. It has also been downplaying the role of the military in protecting its land features on the South China Sea.

Some observers would thus argue that China's foreign policy is far from seeking regional dominance by intimidation and that China is not preparing to overthrow the established international order. The changes in China's security governance are a synthesis of increasing interests, complicated challenges, augmenting capabilities, and broadening understanding of national security. The Chinese usually have a vivid understanding of the Thucydides' Trap. China's humiliating history since the mid-19th century has made many Chinese believe that might makes right and there is no real security and dignity under weak and backward circumstances. However, they have come to realize that might does not make right automatically and growing power cannot solve all problems.

Today, China's decision-makers have to deal with more complicated security challenges under the fast evolving environment, with multiplying means and resources as well as constraints, while they are trying to defend expanding interests and meet various security demands. China has taken a set of measures to streamline its decision-making practices concerning security governance, like the establishment of China's National Security Commission in 2014.

To reinforce its image of a stabilizing power, China must keep projecting its rising strength in a sober and restrained way.

How should China defend and promote its security interests then? Probably the first thing is to realize that there is no short cut to getting rid of the challenges and difficulties. Patience, prudence and a sense of realism, rather than arrogance, recklessness or grandiosity, would remain necessary characteristics for Chinese leaders to possess. In principle, it is wise for China to keep pursuing the goals set by the grand strategy in which national development and modernization should be pushed forward under peaceful, stable and favorable international conditions, instead of being interrupted by pursuits of short-term interests. In the coming years, China should adapt itself to the changing security landscape, and be more confident as a great power to defend its security interests and shoulder its international responsibilities, while this kind of adaptation should be incremental, negotiated and based on mutual understanding.

It is easily neglected that the formulation of China's future security strategy will not only depend on itself but also on how the neighboring countries and other major powers react to China's rise. Too much distrust and fear will make the regional situation touchy and dangerous, and a rashly erected wall against China will not lead to peace or stability. It will be wise for other regional countries to accept and accommodate China's increasing influence while China keeps trying to understand other countries' concerns and act with great self-restraint. This sort of positive interactions can only be promoted by persistent communication, effective management of discrepancies, and reciprocal arrangements on trade and investment.