

# USA-PRC Relations as Interacting Grand Strategies

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## INTRODUCTION

### COMPARING STRATEGIES AND ASSESSING IMPACTS

Most discussion of USA-PRC relations starts from direct bilateral relations: past history and current events, distinctive patterns and particular issues. However, USA-PRC relations interact with broader arenas and aims, particularly as expressed in the two countries' global "grand strategies." Given those strategies, what kind of bilateral relations might one expect?<sup>1</sup>

This article compares the two countries' broader strategies, then assesses those strategies' impacts on bilateral relations, as this Introduction outlines. The first third of the article notes some basic strategic characteristics of the USA and PRC. The middle third posits USA global strategy and suggests some implications for the PRC. The last third posits PRC basic strategy and suggests implications for the USA. The Conclusion notes the need to refine and extend the analysis.

Of course, it is a drastic simplification simply to posit some tenets of global strategy and then draw implications for actual relations, without detailing relevant contexts. These contexts include not only region and world, but also internal politics and economy, and national policy-making itself. Fortunately, there are rich literatures – in both English and Chinese – situating bilateral relations amid these various larger dynamics. However, those literatures are not

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rich in succinct discussions of the interaction between the two countries' grand strategies.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout, "grand strategy" refers to guiding principles (*zhidao sixiang*) by which a country relates its Objectives, Capacities, and Environment. Since around 1940, the USA has had a global grand strategy of dominating the Americas while preventing any other power from dominating either Western Europe or eastern Asia. Since 1949, PRC strategy has focused mostly on the regional level, the PRC itself and its immediate neighbors: maintaining the PRC regime, protecting China's territorial integrity, and pursuing China's economic development.<sup>3</sup>

At the regional level, currently both the USA and PRC are adjusting their Asian strategies, which are converging on a large region encompassing both continental Eurasia and the maritime Indo-Pacific. Other Asian countries are "hedging" between economic relations with the PRC and security relations with the USA. The USA still has not fully adapted its global strategy of "American Leadership" to Asia's now distinctive regional dynamics, in which Asian countries, even if they want USA military protection, do not want to openly accept USA leadership. For its part, the PRC still has not fully figured out how to "rise" regionally without frightening its neighbors into counter-alliances, including alliances with the USA.<sup>4</sup>

At the bilateral level too, currently both the USA and PRC are adjusting their strategies toward each other. Some analysts think that neither country has a clear strategy toward the other, which is dangerous because neither country knows what the other might do, over even what it itself might do. Since the 1970s, the USA has not fully applied its global strategy to the PRC: instead of preventing the rise of a potential rival, the USA has actually assisted PRC economic rise. In the future, now that the PRC could become a "strategic competitor," the USA may more fully apply its global strategy to the PRC.<sup>5</sup>

Most accounts of a country's grand strategy start either from the public pronouncements of political leaders or from scholarly analysis of international relations. Instead, as much as possible, this article draws on formulations actually used by the managers

of foreign policy themselves. These practical formulations are less partisan than the politicians' polemics and less theoretical than the scholars' analyses.

Accordingly, for positing USA post-Cold War grand strategy, we start from a 2012 summary by Peter Feaver, a respected American scholar who was a policymaker in both the Clinton and Bush administrations. For recent PRC grand strategy, we start from a 2011 article by Wang Jisi, a respected Chinese scholar with much access to PRC policymakers. For both sides, we then note continuity and change through 2014, highlighting difficulties encountered and adjustments underway by the Obama and Xi administrations.<sup>6</sup>

## STRATEGIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE USA AND PRC <1>

Among strategic characteristics of the two countries, we begin with national characteristics of each country taken separately. Then we consider America and China relative to each other. Finally we note some differences between how they formulate strategies and relations.<sup>7</sup>

### **National characteristics <1.1>**

Taken by itself, the USA displays distinctive strategic characteristics.

Since the 1820s, in the Americas, the USA has been a regional power without regional rivals.

Since the 1940s, the USA has been the major global power, with many allies.

Since the 1940s, the USA has had a fairly clear global grand strategy.

Since the 1940s, the USA has often lacked clear strategies toward particular overseas regions.

In the 2010s, the USA is adjusting its regional strategy for the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia.

Taken by itself, the PRC too displays distinctive strategic characteristics.

China has always been a regional power, amid several regional rivals, without allies.

China has never been a global power and lacks overseas allies.

The PRC still regards regional strategy as most important.

Nevertheless, since around 2000, the PRC has also been “going global.”

In the 2010s, the PRC is adjusting its approach to both regional and global arenas.

Both the USA and PRC share some regrettable strategic characteristics. Both countries believe they are “exceptional”: more important and more moral than other countries. At the same time, both countries contain conflicting views of their true national identity. These internal conflicts strongly affect how each country views the other, impeding realistic assessment of the other country. Both countries can be opaque, self-righteous, and intransigent about their true core objectives. Both countries can be insufficiently sensitive to their impact on other powers, great and small. These flaws are hardly surprising, being true of most human groups, particularly great powers.<sup>8</sup>

### **Mutual characteristics <1.2>**

Within both sides the main recent strategic argument has been whether to Do More or Do Less in pursuit of existing core objectives. Overall, the USA has been moving from Doing More to Doing Less, the PRC from Doing Less to Doing More. This movement is less USA decline and PRC rise than it is each country adjusting its strategy to be more effective. In both countries, the argument over whether to Do More or Do Less has turned into an argument over whether to alter grand strategy itself.<sup>9</sup>

In the USA, the argument over Doing More versus Doing

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Overall, the USA has been moving from Doing More to Doing Less, the PRC from Doing Less to Doing More.

Less has been between those (mostly Republicans) who think an activist foreign policy is needed to maintain USA security and those (mostly Democrats) who think too much foreign activism is counterproductive both abroad and at home. In the PRC, the argument has been between those who have stressed “keeping a low profile” (*taoguang yanghui*) to facilitate economic development and those who now stress “striving for achievement” (*fenfa youwei*) using China’s growing economic resources.<sup>10</sup>

Most discussions of grand strategy assume that it concerns mostly the *external* strategic question of how a nation should cope with an ostensibly objective external environment. However, in both the USA and PRC, grand strategy also addresses an *internal* strategic question, how incumbent elites can maintain mass support. At the *national* level, between external and internal, grand strategy also reflects intra-elite competition and the dynamics of the elite policy process itself.<sup>11</sup>

In both the USA and PRC, each of these levels is becoming increasingly complex and the three levels are becoming increasingly integrated with each other. In response, both the USA and PRC have strengthened policy coordination. Nevertheless, both sides still display divergent policy tendencies, such as between civilians and military and, in the USA, also between the two main political parties. Leaders on both sides know that the other side has such policy politics, but the process is more transparent in the USA than in the PRC.<sup>12</sup>

Understandably, most discussions of USA-PRC relations focus on the changing relative Power of the two countries and on any Threat they pose to each other. So it is worth noting that, fundamentally, USA-PRC relations need not be difficult! The two homelands are far from each other, making it difficult to threaten each other’s existence, which their nuclear postures have chosen not to do. Their economies are mostly complementary and economic competition is normal. Both admire the other’s society and culture, despite official ideological differences.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the two countries have some increasingly divergent interests. Some conventional problems – such as Taiwan and trade – have proved manageable. Other conventional problems – such

as China's maritime claims – may prove more difficult to manage. Certain unconventional threats – such as nuclear, space, and cyber – could prove unmanageable.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the two countries also have increasingly convergent interests, such as maintaining global economic growth, combating global climate change, and even policing maritime security. Progress in USA-PRC relations is most likely through detailed cooperation on specific issues, particularly major global problems that only the USA and PRC can manage, together. Unfortunately, such progress is impeded by differences in how the two countries formulate problems and approach negotiations.<sup>15</sup>

### **Different formulations <1.3>**

To the extent that the USA and PRC have grand strategies, they formulate them rather differently, at least in public. Both sides do state some main principles and identify some main interests. However, formal USA statements of its interests focus on practical ends and means, without much ideological elaboration, as in periodic reviews of defense posture or proposals for new trade agreements. In contrast, the PRC prefers to start by declaring principles and defining relationships. Formal PRC listing of its interests often consists only of cryptic phrases, without elaboration of specifics, particularly defense plans. The two countries characterize their bilateral relations differently as well.<sup>16</sup>

**Security:** Both the USA and PRC favor Peaceful solutions to international problems. But the USA wants to discuss particular security issues in detail, while evidently on many issues the PRC prefers not to do so.

**Economy:** Both the USA and PRC favor Development. But each prefers development under its own auspices, such as the USA's Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and the PRC's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

**Ideology:** Both the USA and PRC have strong Ideals. However, the PRC likes to declare general principles that should govern relationships, while the USA prefers detailed solutions to specific problems.

For both sides, a significant question is whether the other's

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For both sides, a significant question is whether the other's ostensible strategy is actually a deliberate deception ("strategic distrust").

PRC's grand strategy has been to deceive the USA into thinking that China remains weak, requires assistance, and will remain peaceful in the future – until China is strong enough to assert itself.<sup>17</sup>

#### USA GRAND STRATEGY AND PRC REACTION <2>

This Part treats global USA grand strategy, PRC reactions to it, and implications for USA-PRC relations. The Introduction

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The basic premise of modern USA grand strategy has been American Leadership: the USA must remain the overwhelmingly most powerful country in the world, particularly in the most important regions of the world.

ostensible strategy is actually a deliberate deception ("strategic distrust"). Historically, American strategy has not much practiced deception, so most USA analysts are disappointed that Chinese analysts perceive current declared USA strategy toward China as deceptive. Historically, Chinese strategic theory has recommended deceiving one's opponent, particularly an opponent stronger than oneself. Recently some USA analysts have concluded that since the 1970s the

sketches USA global strategy since about 1940. Successive sections then treat first the main *tenets* of USA grand strategy since the end of the Cold War, then *continuity and change* in the implementation of those tenets across recent presidential administrations, then finally *difficulties* currently facing USA strategies.

#### Introduction

The basic premise of modern USA grand strategy has been American Leadership: the USA must remain the overwhelmingly most powerful country in the world, particularly in the most important regions of the world. That

is feasible for the USA because it does not face any rival power within its home region (originally North America, then also South America). So the USA can extend its attention to other major world regions, particularly Western Europe and eastern Asia. In principle, the USA could choose either simply to prevent any potential rival from dominating any of those regions (“offshore balancing”), or it could attempt to dominate those regions itself (“extra-regional hegemony”).<sup>18</sup>

In practice, as *anti-mainstream* critics explain, the onset of World War II alarmed the USA into planning not only to achieve post-war global primacy but also to pursue much “extra-regional hegemony,” in order absolutely to prevent the re-emergence of any threat to USA security from outside the Americas. Thus the strategic premise of American Leadership originated well before the emergence of any threat from the Soviet Union, not to mention China. From this anti-mainstream point of view, the basic premises formulated at the beginning of World War II have continued to shape USA strategy ever since, including during the Cold War and in current USA-PRC relations. Some anti-mainstream critics urge that the USA should adapt to China’s rise by retreating in the Asia-Pacific from “extra-regional” hegemony toward offshore balancing. However, the purpose even of offshore balancing would still be to prevent China from dominating Asia.<sup>19</sup>

*Mainstream* accounts of recent USA strategy begin from the Cold War, when the USA had an overall grand strategy to “contain” the Soviet Union, which succeeded. Containment actively impeded the development of the USSR, not only militarily but also economically (“*preventive*” containment). However, containment was complex. Competition continued between rival policy tendencies: old isolationism, new containment, and proposed “rollback” of Soviet power. Different policies predominated at different times, toward different world regions. Anti-mainstream analysts add that the United States was always much more powerful than the Soviet Union, contrary to what “bipolarity” implies.<sup>20</sup>

Some of this Soviet-American past matters for future Sino-American relations. Many Chinese feel that the USA is currently trying to “contain” the PRC, both militarily and economically.



Americans reply that, since the 1970s, USA treatment of the PRC has NOT been containment in the classic “preventive” Cold War sense. The USA has actually *promoted* PRC economic development and international participation. If there has been any effort to “contain” China’s rise, that effort has been not to prevent it but to try to accommodate it within existing international practices, mostly economic (“*accommodative*” containment).<sup>21</sup>

As for geopolitics, the USA now again has competing policy tendencies. On the right, some defense analysts now regret that America helped China “rise” and advise the USA to take additional measures to protect itself against that rise. In the middle, mainstream security analysts accept China’s rise but think the USA must maintain its existing military presence in Asia to “dissuade” the PRC from any military adventurism. Only a few, on the left, propose allowing China gradually to dominate the region around it.<sup>22</sup>

As for USA global strategy since the end of the Cold War, some analysts think that the USA has not had one, or has had one that has failed. This article accepts that the USA *has* had an overall grand strategy – to maintain American Leadership. Moreover, on balance, until recently, that strategy has been quite *successful* at maintaining USA global primacy – military, economic, and ideological. However, following anti-mainstream critics, this article would add that the “legacy” grand strategy of global American Leadership has also been somewhat *counter-productive*. It has allowed allies to depend too much on American power (perverse “bandwagoning”) and it has provoked others to try to counteract American power (soft “balancing”).<sup>23</sup>

Both American political parties – and most American analysts – regard the USA’s legacy strategy as more successful than counterproductive. Only a few anti-mainstream analysts – on both left and right – argue that American Leadership is more counterproductive than successful and that therefore the USA should switch to a less assertive grand strategy. So far only a few politicians – and neither political party – have considered an alternative. As for the public, many Americans recognize mistakes in how the grand strategy of global American Leadership has been

implemented in particular cases. However, most Americans cannot see, or will not admit, that American Leadership itself has been at all counterproductive. Americans are tired of foreign wars, but they still want the USA to deal forcefully with any new problems that arise.<sup>24</sup>

### **Legacy USA strategy <2.1>**

The post-Cold War version of American Leadership was formulated in the early 1990s by the late Bush and early Clinton administrations, very soon after the USSR suddenly collapsed. The basic idea was that, since the United States was no longer constrained by the Soviet Union, it should expand its leadership from the “Free World” to the whole world and expand from military to economic and even ideological leadership. By the late 2000s, at the end of the junior Bush administration, the legacy strategy included five main tenets, listed below. In brackets, we suggest the main implication of each tenet for USA-PRC relations.<sup>25</sup>

(1) In the long run, prevent the rise of a *Rival Power*, by inducing rising powers to cooperate with the USA, constraining them if they don't. (Because the PRC is now the main potential rival, this tenet poses big problems for USA-PRC relations, if the PRC refuses to cooperate with the USA sufficiently, or attempts to revise the current international system too drastically.)

(2) In the short run, identify and confront any *Great Threat*, such as Weapons of Mass Destruction, originally nuclear and chemical, now also cyber and space. (The PRC is developing the latter, so this tenet is increasingly salient. On preventing proliferation of WMD to other countries, the USA and PRC agree in principle, so may be able to manage any differences in practice.)

(3) Gradually reshape the world to resemble the USA through *Democratization*, convenient for the USA and notionally good for other countries as well. (Here a sub-tenet is *Human Rights*. Obviously the PRC strongly resists Western versions of “democratization” and “human rights.” However, the USA is no longer actively trying to democratize

the PRC.)

(4) Gradually reshape the world to resemble the USA through *Marketization*. (Again, notionally this is good for everyone, creating prosperity. From about 1980 the USA applied this tenet to the PRC, assisting its development. The PRC has joined the global economy and favors further international marketization. However, it demands governance reforms and promotes alternative institutions.)

(5) Since 2001, defend against *Transnational Terrorism*, particularly that inspired by militant Islam. (The PRC too opposes terrorism, particularly by Moslems – albeit mostly in Xinjiang, not abroad. Some Americans worry about PRC treatment of Uyghurs, but the USA cannot object to the PRC combating what the PRC regards as terrorism.)

Obviously the first tenet – preventing the rise of a rival power – is the most important and problematic for USA-PRC relations. The USA can accommodate the rise of new Powers that support a peaceful and prosperous international order, even if they present rival versions of that order. However, the USA will not accommodate a new Power that challenges global American Leadership or that tries to dominate Western Europe or eastern Asia.

Since the 1970s, USA strategy specifically towards the PRC has been to encourage its economic development and diplomatic involvement while “dissuading” any PRC military “adventurism” through a strong USA military presence in the Western Pacific. The Obama administration started by emphasizing encouragement, but later began adding more “dissuasion.” The next administration will probably shift further toward dissuasion, particularly if that administration is Republican.<sup>26</sup>

### **Continuity and change <2.2>**

The *Do More versus Do Less* analysis helps identify continuity and change across successive American administrations. Overall, true to recent party positions, Republican administrations (younger Bush) have Done More, Democratic administrations (Clinton, Obama) have Done Less.

In 1993-2001, Clinton Did Less in the sense of intervening

abroad only from the air, not on the ground. In 2001-2008, Bush Did More by ground invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which failed, militarily abroad and popularly at home. In 2009-2014, Obama tried to Do Less, attempting some Restraint and Retrenchment. Arguably Obama did this in order to reduce the counter-productivity of American Leadership. Unfortunately Obama's strategic minimalism too has often failed both militarily and popularly, at least in the short run.<sup>27</sup>

In 2015-2016, Republicans will press Obama to Do More militarily in particular localities: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya – and China. But mostly Obama will continue to Do Less militarily, taking a long-run, regional, diplomatic approach. Do Less does not mean Do Nothing. It just means using diplomacy in preference to the military, air power in preference to ground forces, and unmanned drones in preference to manned aircraft. It also means strengthening economic diplomacy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>28</sup>

One might expect that the PRC would prefer the USA to Do Less rather than Do More. Nevertheless, the PRC might actually prefer that the USA currently attempt to Do More, if that hastens USA decline. Either way, evidently the PRC will strenuously criticize much of whatever the USA does, regardless of whether Less or More. Overall, the USA doing somewhat Less should be more conducive to constructive USA-PRC relations, since the USA doing much More might often preclude USA-PRC cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

Analyzing *individual tenets* of grand strategy too helps identify continuity and change. On the continuity side, all post-Cold War administrations have tried to manage potentially *Rival Powers* and tried to respond to *Immediate Threats*, including *Terrorism*. On the change side, Clinton tried unsuccessfully to add two new tenets, one on handling *Failed States* and the other promoting *Multilateralism*. Bush abandoned both of those. Obama adjustments have been as follows:

Partly under the tenet of preventing the emergence of a *Rival Power*, Obama has established a new sub-tenet of *Rebalance toward Asia*, which the PRC dislikes but a Republican administration would continue.

Obama dislikes *Anti-Terrorism* as an over-riding strategic principle, but the renewal of terrorism abroad has forced him to continue to fight it. This has slowed but not stopped the Rebalance toward Asia, which the PRC dislikes.

Obama has downplayed *Democratization*, except in countries that seem ready for it. He may wish to avoid excluding the PRC from an international order predefined as only for “democratic” countries.

Democrats have slowed Obama pursuit of global *Marketization*, but in 2015-2016 Republicans may support the economic arm of Obama’s Rebalance toward Asia, the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The PRC dislikes the TPP, which excludes it.

Obama has revived Clinton’s *Failed States* tenet, under the more general rubric of Disorder, particularly in the Middle East, where state failure has spilled across borders. The PRC dislikes USA interventions there but may dislike disorder too.

Obama has revived Clinton’s *Multilateralism*, attempting to transfer strategic tasks to allies (“buck-passing”). The PRC welcomes greater USA multilateralism, but not USA activation of allies, particularly Japan.

In his second term, Obama is trying to establish *Combating Climate Change* as a new strategic tenet, which a Republican administration would reverse. The PRC endorses climate control, but particularly by developed countries.

Other non-traditional concerns, such as maintaining Energy Security and Public Health, may eventually become new tenets of USA strategy. Presumably, the PRC does not much object and may even help.

### **Current USA difficulties <2.3>**

By 2014, Obama strategy was encountering a series of dilemmas, nicely formulated by Hal Brands (a junior colleague of Peter Feaver at Duke University). Presumably the PRC welcomes all of these USA difficulties, as noted below.<sup>30</sup>

The USA should exercise external strategic *Restraint*, but such prudence does not mobilize internal political Support.

Presumably the PRC welcomes both any USA restraint and any lack of domestic support for militarism.

The USA must balance its Budget, but fiscal *austerity* might limit American Leadership. Presumably the PRC welcomes any limitation of American Leadership.

Obama strategy assumed that *Europe* is secure, but new Russian assertiveness demands renewed American attention. Evidently the PRC admires Putin's assertiveness and welcomes his challenges to the USA.

The USA must leave *Iraq and Afghanistan* but can't leave them a mess, as now. Again the PRC welcomes diversion of USA resources away from the PRC. The USA should welcome a constructive PRC role in Afghanistan.

The USA must Retrench, but too much *Retrenchment* could undermine international stability. Presumably the PRC welcomes USA retrenchment, but does not want serious global instability.

Any one of these dilemmas by itself would be *difficult*; all of these dilemmas taken together might prove *disastrous*. Presumably the PRC welcomes specific USA difficulties, even more so overall USA strategic disaster.

## **Conclusion**

Probably the most the PRC can hope from future USA strategy is gradual retreat from "forward positioning" to some strong version of "offshore balancing." Because of limits on USA resources, in effect such a transition may already be underway. Would a USA retreat to offshore balancing satisfy the PRC? Probably not, because the USA's strategic purpose would still be to preserve regional and global American Leadership by preventing China from dominating the EurAsian and IndoPacific regions. Moreover, the USA would probably retain the capacity to attack weapons systems within the PRC, if military conflict occurs and if the USA considers such attacks necessary to protect offshore USA military assets.<sup>31</sup>

## PRC GRAND STRATEGY AND USA REACTION <3>

This Part treats PRC grand strategy, likely USA reactions, and implications for USA-PRC relations. The Introduction briefly traces the evolution of PRC strategy since 1949. Then the first section notes the core interests formulated in the 1990s and 2000s by the PRC's "legacy" strategy. The second section traces continuity and change in that strategy in the 2010s. The third section notes some difficulties in current PRC strategy.

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If the overall theme of USA grand strategy has long been American Leadership, the overall theme of declared PRC grand strategy has long been Peaceful Development.

### **Introduction**

If the overall theme of USA grand strategy has long been American Leadership, the overall theme of declared PRC grand strategy has long been Peaceful Development. As well known, from the mid-1950s, the PRC has often emphasized "peace" as a principle. In the 1980s and 1990s, the PRC considered Peace a precondition for its own Development. In the 2000s and 2010s, as it has become more powerful, the PRC has reemphasized that its Development is Peaceful.<sup>32</sup>

As well known, since 1949 the PRC has followed a series of quite different grand strategies: first to ally with the Soviet Union against the United States, then to go it alone against both, then to ally with the United States against the Soviet Union, then to gradually reassert its own independence. Most recently, the PRC has redirected its attention from great powers to neighboring countries (particularly ASEAN) and strategic allies (particularly BRICS).<sup>33</sup>

Thus in the 2010s, the PRC is intensifying initiatives to integrate Eurasia logistically and diplomatically and to orient Eurasia towards China. One can think of this simply as Doing More to safeguard long-standing PRC interests. However, the quantitative change (from less to more) amounts to qualitative change (from

bilateral to regional, from eastward to westward, and from maritime to continental). That qualitative change gives new meaning to previously announced objectives and principles.<sup>34</sup>

### **Legacy PRC strategy <3.1>**

Like USA strategy, PRC strategy contains specific tenets. During the 2000s, the PRC declared that it must safeguard (*weihu*) three categories of interests:<sup>35</sup>

Regime Security (particularly against foreign subversion). Since 1917, this has been a classic concern of communist regimes in a capitalist world. However, the USA is no longer actively subverting the PRC, but instead is now largely refraining from applying its Democratization strategy to the PRC.

External Sovereignty (against foreign encroachment). This is a classic concern of any country, particularly one that has suffered foreign encroachment. However, the USA is no longer encroaching. Taiwan, for example, is a “legacy” responsibility of American Leadership, inherited from the Cold War.

Internal Development (through external stability). This has been a PRC goal since the 1970s, which the USA has actively assisted, applying its strategy of Marketization. The PRC now endorses Marketization between countries, but wants to pursue it through its own trade blocs.

These three categories of interests were formally announced in 2006 by the PRC’s first foreign affairs work conference and reiterated in 2014 by the PRC’s second foreign affairs work conference. Evidently they are indeed central tenets of a PRC grand strategy. Unfortunately, given their cryptic formulation, the exact meaning of these interests remains somewhat unclear: in particular, which interests are “core” and therefore, evidently, not negotiable.<sup>36</sup>

Publicly, the PRC has said most about external Sovereignty. Within that category, it has formally identified three specific interests as “core”: Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Evidently, this means that, despite the PRC’s general commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes, the PRC reserves the right to use force to



defend those interests if they are seriously threatened. Privately, presumably the Communist Party of China (CPC) is even more concerned to maintain the Security of the regime itself, to which good performance on both Sovereignty and Development contribute. Evidently regime Security and economic Development are not negotiable, whether the PRC formally labels them “core” or not.

Both in principle and in practice, the USA has tried to reassure the PRC about all three categories of PRC interests. Only the PRC category of regime Security strongly contradicts a main USA principle, Democratization. However, in practice the Obama administration has not attempted to Democratize the PRC or to challenge its legitimacy. The USA continues to support PRC economic development, as Obama frequently reiterates. On Sovereignty Obama publicly reemphasized at his November 2014 talks with Xi in Beijing that the USA regards Taiwan as part of One China and Tibet as a part of the PRC (not to mention Xinjiang).<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the PRC’s notion of “core interests” poses major problems for USA-PRC relations. First, the USA worries that, particularly as the PRC’s power rises, it may formally declare additional specific interests to be “core” (such as islands in the East China Sea and South China Sea). Second, the USA cannot accept that just anything the PRC declares to be a core interest therefore becomes “not negotiable.” Third, the USA cannot accept that “respect” for anything the PRC might declare a core interest is a precondition for “a new type of great power relations.” So the USA has stopped using that PRC formulation.<sup>38</sup>

### **Continuity and change <3.2>**

PRC strategy has continued to evolve since the 1970s, first increasing then decreasing reliance on the USA. Overall, this author is impressed by the gradual accumulation of the main tenets of post-Cold War PRC grand strategy. Successive developments do NOT correspond to changes in PRC leadership: under Hu there was much evolution toward Do More, a direction that Xi has continued. Under both Hu and Xi, there has been adjustment between Do More and Do Less. Even under Xi, despite new activism, one’s

impression remains that of cumulative collective deliberation, with some respect paid to the ideological formulations of previous administrations and to currently losing arguments.<sup>39</sup>

The Xi leadership has restored some of Deng's prudence, reducing the abrasiveness of late Hu military assertiveness. Nevertheless, the Xi leadership has continued and even intensified late Hu diplomatic activism, both through bilateral exchanges with numerous countries and through major multilateral meetings. Moreover, the Xi leadership has superceded Deng ideologically, by declaring that the strategic environment has changed and now demands a more proactive stance. The PRC announced this new strategy at the important November 2014 central conference on diplomatic work. A major Xi speech outlined the guiding ideology of PRC foreign policy for a "new period," presumably the rest of Xi's leadership.<sup>40</sup>

According to the excerpts published by Xinhua, Xi's speech began by noting general goals of peaceful development and national renewal. It then reviewed recent PRC diplomatic accomplishments, including a new model for relations between great powers and better relations with regional neighbors. The speech then sketched the complexity of international relations, contrasting short-run difficulties with positive long-run trends. The speech then defined the characteristics and objectives of PRC diplomacy for China as a great power. Overall, evidently the conference acknowledged the insights of those who want a more assertive foreign policy, while at the same time reaffirming the need for continuing prudence.<sup>41</sup>

### **Current PRC difficulties <3.3>**

The new PRC strategy deemphasizes relations with great powers, helping avoid *direct* confrontation with the USA. The new PRC strategy (foreshadowed at an earlier conference in 2013) emphasizes relations with Asian regional neighbors and emerging country partners, in effect intensifying *indirect* competition with the USA. The resulting burst of PRC foreign policy activism in 2014 was a huge success. Nevertheless, current PRC grand strategy contains some internal difficulties. We sort these by Levels, Sectors, and Periods. (Wang Jisi noted many of these points in his 2011

article in *Foreign Affairs*.)<sup>42</sup>

Across *structural levels*, the PRC's goals of external Sovereignty, regime Security, and internal Development can conflict with each other, so the PRC can have no simple overall grand strategy. Maintaining popular support for the regime requires economic Development, but Development requires integrating into the international order, which threatens regime Security. Again to maintain popular support, the regime adopts nationalistic postures on external Sovereignty, which threatens internal Development.

One can also note difficulties *within* each level. Supranationally, despite intensive diplomacy, PRC external aims still face strategic distrust and foreign resistance, not least from the USA. Nationally, despite strong efforts to strengthen organization and process, evidently PRC foreign policy still suffers from inadequate coordination, worrying the USA. Subnationally, elites fear mass public nationalism even while the media continues to stoke such nationalism – though more against Japan than against the USA.

Across *functional sectors*, Security somewhat impedes Economy (limiting communication), and certainly damages Identity (undermining “soft power”). Within Security, the PRC is trying to build regional alliances, but it is not yet clear what “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable” security can mean. In Economy, the PRC has some conflicts with the emerging BRICS with which it wants to ally against the developed West. In ideology, the PRC projects official state ideals, but soft power comes mostly from good governance and a creative society.

Across *temporal periods*, the PRC faces difficulties of Timing: when to shift between short, middle, and long run goals. The short run is vulnerable to unpredictable crises and to the vagaries of USA domestic politics. In the middle run, regardless of difficulties, the Xi administration will strive to maintain “peace and development.” Looking longer, arguably USA-PRC relations will remain transitional and unstable for some decades.

## Conclusion

Globally, much discussion of USA-PRC relations concerns whether the PRC is a status quo power that accepts the existing

international order or a revisionist power that wants to overturn it. Arguably, the PRC is doing some of both. However, the PRC is also pursuing a third path, “going around” existing international regimes to establish alternatives, by collaborating with other countries, particularly BRICs. Such indirect competition may reduce direct confrontation in bilateral USA-PRC relations.

Regionally, the Xi administration has shifted priority away from relations with great powers toward relations with adjacent neighbors. This too may help avoid direct confrontation in USA-PRC bilateral relations. This shift is in line with the PRC view that underlying long-term geopolitical trends will make Asia increasingly central to global politics. Accordingly, for the USA, all around Asia, this PRC shift greatly raises the stakes and greatly intensifies indirect competition.

#### CONCLUSION: REFINING AND EXTENDING THE ANALYSIS

The main analytical point of this article has been that, in approaching USA-PRC relations, one needs a succinct Comparison of the two countries’ overall grand strategies, along with some Assessment of how much those nominal strategies explain the two countries’ actual interactions. The existing literatures – in both English and Chinese – are rich, but not in succinct discussions of how the two countries’ global grand strategies interact.

This article has been able only to sketch the outline of its approach, which needs critique and elaboration in at least three ways. One is to refine the Comparison of the two countries’ grand strategies. A second is to further Assess the extent of the impact of those nominal strategies on actual interaction, across bilateral, regional, and global arenas. A third is to examine whether the two countries are now simply adjusting existing strategies or transitioning to new ones.

*Positing* a global grand strategy for each country is a useful exercise, forcing one to clarify what one assumes. A country may be confused in its strategic thinking, discovering actual strategies only as it tries to enact them. A nominal grand strategy may not, in

the event, guide actual behavior. Or, a nominal grand strategy may be only ostensible, intended to deceive. This article has focused on Objectives, but Capabilities need more attention.

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Comparing the two countries' global grand strategies has identified potential convergences and conflicts in their bilateral relations.

*Comparing* the two countries' global grand strategies has identified potential convergences and conflicts in their bilateral relations. If both countries actively applied all the goals of their overall strategies to each other, both the convergences and the conflicts in the bilateral relationship would be strong. One could not expect the convergences to automatically ameliorate the conflicts, which will continue to require active management.

*Assessing* the impact of nominal strategies on actual behavior has suggested that a main variable is Do More versus Do Less: the selectivity and intensity with which, toward the other, each country pursues its broader goals. To some extent the levels of activity of the two countries will vary together. Nevertheless, further analysis is needed of how the USA can gradually Do Less while the PRC gradually Does More, without sacrificing the security of either.

*Tracing* continuity and change has raised the question of the extent and nature of change. Are the two sides just *quantitatively adjusting* existing grand strategies to Do More or Do Less of those legacy strategies? Or have the two sides begun *qualitatively transitioning* toward significantly different strategies? Arguably, on both sides, some of both.

USA "rebalancing" toward the Indo-Pacific region (an adjustment) may involve some gradual retrenchment from "forward positioning" toward "offshore balancing" (a transition). As the PRC tries proactively to shape its strategic environment (an adjustment), successes and failures should in turn shape the PRC's emerging regional and global strategies (a transition).

In any case, in the future, probably the USA will NOT try to prevent further PRC economic and even military rise. However, it WILL offset further PRC military rise through USA military

buildup and USA Asian alliances. For its part, probably the PRC will NOT directly challenge global “American Leadership.” However, it WILL – indirectly but persistently – try to undermine and reform, circumvent and replace the existing American-centered world order.<sup>43</sup>

Judging from the interaction of the two countries’ grand strategies, probably we are heading into some difficult decades in USA-PRC relations, full of both big opportunities and big problems. There will be crises, hopefully manageable, as the two sides test and learn each others’ limits. Probably actual all-out war is unlikely, because it would be so disastrous to both sides. However, it would be dangerous to assume that war simply can’t happen. The possibility requires serious attention from both sides, in order to avoid it.<sup>44</sup>

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## *USA-PRC Relations as Interacting Grand Strategies*

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