



Converging Chinese and U.S. “Gulliver strategies” in Asia: Implications for U.S. Policy by Robert Sutter

U.S. election year politics and policy debate have paid little attention to Asia apart from trade and economic issues. The presidential candidates have largely ignored the obvious and serious implications of China’s rapidly rising power and influence for U.S. interests in Asian stability and leadership in Asian affairs. This could be short-sighted as China remains a dissatisfied power with steadily growing military capabilities that has a long record of using force and confrontational tactics to advance its interests.

Fortunately, a recent convergence of Chinese, U.S., and Asian “Gulliver strategies” has acted to raise the costs and reduce the likelihood of Chinese use of force or confrontation. But the effectiveness of those strategies remains subject to rapidly changing circumstances in the balance of power and influence in Asia. U.S. policymakers need to remain attentive to Asian changes that could upset prevailing stability and require remedial action by the United States.

Dissatisfied China

China has a long history as an aggrieved power – a country whose sovereignty has been violated by other powers. This sense of victimization remains strong today, with Taiwan, protected by the U.S., heading the list of perceived gross violations of Chinese sovereignty.

China also has a consistent tendency to see larger powers along its periphery as real or potential threats to China’s sovereignty and security. The PRC record in both the revolutionary Maoist period and the reform period since Mao’s death in 1976 shows Chinese leaders giving top priority in foreign affairs to dealing with real or potential dangers and pressures posed by the United States or the Soviet Union and their allies and associates in Asia.

In dealing with foreign pressure and for other reasons, China’s leaders have long given priority to developing China’s comprehensive national power. China seeks strong military power backed by economic power, political unity, and firm will in foreign affairs in order to protect its security and to advance its sovereign space, regional power, and international influence.

The record of Chinese foreign policy shows that China has adjusted its tactics and approaches to deal with perceived foreign dangers and pressures involving Chinese sovereignty and security. It has done so in light of changed circumstances that affect Chinese calculations of the costs and benefits of using various military and non-military measures. In the post-Cold War period, China sought to preserve and develop economic and other advantageous ties with the United States, but China was faced with strong U.S. pressure following the

Tiananmen crackdown of 1989. Throughout the 1990s, China adopted a vocal and often confrontational posture in reaction to U.S. pressure. Its strong rhetoric and international activism against U.S. “hegemonism,” “power politics,” and “containment” were complemented by a Chinese military buildup that advanced following the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995-1996 and focused on dealing with U.S. forces that were expected to intervene in a possible military conflict over Taiwan.

By the end of the decade, Chinese leaders came to see this publicly confrontational approach as counterproductive. Asian countries often disapproved of Chinese efforts to force them to choose between China and the U.S. The incoming George W. Bush administration also seemed more ready than the outgoing Clinton administration to push back against Chinese assertiveness in ways that would seriously damage Chinese interests. By mid 2001, before 9/11, China switched to the more accommodating public Chinese posture toward the United States that we see today. China has not moderated its strong military buildup focused on dealing with U.S. forces in a Taiwan contingency, but it has played down public resistance to U.S. hegemonism and containment.

China’s “Gulliver strategy”

What has emerged is a type of Gulliver strategy China uses to tie down the perceived threats to its sovereignty, influence, and interests posed by the United States. Chinese leaders foster ever greater Chinese-U.S. economic interdependence, which has the benefit of curbing possible U.S. moves to pressure China. China builds ever greater economic interdependence among Asian neighbors, including close allies of the United States, with the result that these countries are more supportive of China and less likely to join with the U.S. in efforts to pressure China. Active, adroit, and generally positive Chinese diplomacy strengthens webs of relationships with the U.S. and China’s neighbors in bilateral and multilateral relationships. These curb possible U.S. pressure against China and reduce the danger that Asian countries will cooperate with the U.S. against China. China’s good neighbor policies and growing economic importance also have advanced China’s overall influence in Asia at a time of perceived U.S. inattention and decline in Asia, and they have established norms and practices that make it less likely for Asian neighbors to challenge Chinese territorial claims and sovereign space or China’s growing power and influence in regional and international affairs.

U.S., Asian “Gulliver strategies”

Interdependence by definition works two ways. Thus, Chinese efforts to foster positive interdependence as a type of Gulliver strategy against U.S. power and pressure have served the interests of U.S. and Asian powers seeking to engage China. In particular, the United States and Asian powers

follow Gulliver strategies of their own against China: they use engagement to build webs of relationships with China that will constrain Chinese tendencies toward aggressive or disruptive behavior in Asian and world affairs. Specialists saw the Southeast Asian countries and their main regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), following such an approach toward China since the early 1990s. At the same time, the U.S. Council of Foreign Relations saw U.S. engagement as premised on this kind of enmeshment of China in webs of interdependent relationships designed to curb Chinese aggression and disruption of regional stability.

In sum, the Gulliver strategies of China on the one hand, and the U.S. and many of China's neighbors on the other, seem to reinforce stability in Asia and seem to be in the overall interests of the United States.

Uncertain prospects

Prudent U.S. policy should be aware that changing circumstances could change the direction of China's recent tactics in protecting and advancing its sovereignty, security, and influence. China remains a dissatisfied and aggrieved power, particularly as far as its sovereignty is concerned. On the one hand, China's current positive approach that builds interdependence with the United States and China's neighbors may deepen and make dealing with sensitive issues like Taiwan peacefully through negotiations easier in the future. On the other hand, China continues its rapid military buildup focused on dealing with the U.S. in a Taiwan contingency. There is no guarantee that changes in the balance of forces and influence in Asia, with China rising to greater regional leadership as the United States seems less prominent and influential, won't prompt China's leaders to adopt more coercive means against Taiwan and in pursuit of greater power and possible dominance in Asia.

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