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The Grand Strategy of Xi Jinping

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CHINA spent much of 2014 seeking to revive a concept that Japan proclaimed seven decades ago, when it was an imperial power seeking to impose its will on the region: "Asia for the Asians." But that effort may not end as badly for China as it did for Japan.

International relations tend to become destabilized by rapid changes in the distribution of power. Established powers' resistance to their rising counterparts' demands for a larger role in setting the global agenda fuels tensions and disrupts the existing world order.

That is precisely what has been occurring lately between China and the United States, and is the impetus for China's "Asia for the Asians" policy. Last November, China shook the regional order by unilaterally declaring an air-defense identification zone (ADIZ) over a large swath of the East China Sea that includes disputed territory – notably the Senkaku Islands (known in Chinese as the Diaoyu Islands) that are claimed by China, Japan, and Taiwan.

This amounted to an escalation of China's already assertive stance in the region, with Chinese President Xi Jinping routinely sending maritime-surveillance and fishery law-enforcement ships to the waters surrounding the islands, spurring protests in South Korea and Japan. The US, prompted by its allies' anger, dispatched two B-52 bombers into the ADIZ.

Tensions continued to mount through early 2014, raising concerns about an "accidental war" between China and Japan, which would demand the involvement of Japan's main ally, the US (as

President Barack Obama confirmed on a visit to Tokyo in April). Add to that simultaneous tensions over China's claims to South China Sea islands and atolls – claims disputed by the Philippines and Vietnam – as a clash between China and the US was beginning to seem inevitable.

Before long, however, the US had to turn its attention to Russia, which under President Vladimir Putin's leadership has been seeking to recapture the Cold War-era Soviet Union's geopolitical status. With its regional authority apparently threatened by rising pro-European sentiment in Ukraine, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and began supporting separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, prompting the US and Europe to impose increasingly tough political and economic sanctions.

In this conflict, China has actually become something of a US ally. Though the conclusion of long-negotiated gas deals between Russia and China may seem to reflect a deepening of the bilateral relationship, China extracted an exceedingly low price from Russia for the gas that it will receive. This, together with the fact that China has cut lending to Russia since the Crimea invasion, suggests that, in the longer term, the Chinese envision Russia as a natural-resource vassal, not an equal ally.

Chinese and American policies converged even more clearly on North Korea in 2014. Xi expressed his unwillingness to tolerate any unruly behavior – particularly concerning nuclear weapons – by the country's unpredictable rulers. This drove the North, which depends on Chinese aid, to send diplomatic interlocutors to Japan, Russia, and even South Korea. But, following the United Nations General

Assembly's resolution on North Korea's human-rights situation, the regime announced that it would hold its fourth nuclear test.

This year's power shifts are a result less of Russia's expansionist ambitions or China's military and economic rise than of America's declining international leadership. With Obama unwilling – or unable, due to rising political partisanship at home – to take the lead in addressing crises like those in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, challengers to American primacy took heart in 2014, and US allies took fright. Global power must be allocated somewhere; if the US would not fill its leading role on the international stage, an understudy would have to step in.

But China's recent shift away from muscle-flexing and its confluence of interests with a US-led order offer hope that it will not continue to engender large-scale regional instability next year. Indeed, China withdrew its jumbo oil platform from the waters of the disputed Paracel Islands in July, and it has been sending surveillance ships to the Senkaku Islands less frequently. Chinese officials have also become more willing to discuss the creation of a code of conduct for the South China Sea.

The most important element of China's charm offensive is its effort to improve relations with Japan, initiated at a meeting between Xi and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the recent APEC meeting in Beijing. The long-awaited climate deal that Xi struck with Obama at another peripheral meeting at the same event is no small step, either.

China's new, more emollient diplomacy underpins a nuanced foreign policy. By

offering generous economic incentives to its Southeast Asian neighbors, it has weakened their will to confront China in a coalition. Vietnam, for example, decided to "reset" its relations with China, and not to cooperate with the Philippines in waging a legal battle over China's maritime claims.

Indeed, China has been shifting from hard power to soft throughout the region, and is using its economic power to challenge Western-dominated multilateral institutions. Specifically, China has decided to pour huge amounts of money into establishing new development institutions: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Maritime Silk Road Bank, and the New Development Bank (created by the five major emerging economies, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Furthermore, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang recently offered \$20 billion to finance infrastructure and development projects in the ASEAN countries.

With the US economy yet to recover fully from the global economic crisis, and American politics increasingly dysfunctional, there is a global power vacuum that China, with shrewd diplomacy and economic might, hopes to fill – beginning in Asia. This may not yet mean Asia for only the Asians; but it could mean a reduced regional role for the US – especially as America turns inward during the presidential election season that starts in 2015.

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