

Four Visions of US Strategy on China

This paper discusses these four different schools of thought on US policy regarding China.

Introduction

What is current US strategy towards China? This is a basic question and yet there is no consensus as to the answer. Even the architects of the Obama administration's approach, the so-called "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, have been inconsistent in their description of US objectives. Observers are often perplexed by seemingly frequent US changes in direction, from embracing China's proposed "new model of great power relations" to rejecting its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or Air Defense Identification Zone. Some have suggested that "it is difficult to discern a clear consensus [in Washington] on strategy for managing order in East Asia." Indeed, different US leaders have different visions of regional security and therefore favour strategies as varied as containment, accommodation, balancing, and integration. This paper discusses these four different schools of thought on US policy regarding China.

Conceptualising Security

Most scholars and policymakers view the world through multiple lenses that shape their views of both the United States and China. Avery Goldstein observes that "the long-term prospect of a new great power rivalry between the United States and China … ultimately rests on debatable claims about the intentions of the two countries and uncertain forecasts about big shifts in their national capabilities." Improving our understanding of US views of these two factors – Chinese intentions and the trajectory of Chinese power – provides a window into US strategy vis-à-vis China.

We broadly categorise US perspectives on Chinese intentions and the trajectory of China's growth as either optimistic or pessimistic. As Thomas Christensen explains, "Pessimists exaggerate China's national power and the actual or potential threat of Chinese hegemony in Asia and beyond Optimists, for their part, note that Chinese power will not catch up to that of the United States anytime soon." Similarly, Dale Copeland suggests, "Hawks will tend to reject engagement because they are more pessimistic about the depth of the US fall." Aaron Friedberg provides another perspective on optimists and pessimists as related to China strategy.

Figure 1: Four US Perspectives on China Strategy

		Assessment of Chinese Intentions	
		Optimistic	Pessimistic
Assessment of Power Trajectory	Optimistic	Integration	Containment

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Pessimistic	Accommodation	Balancing

In focusing on Chinese intentions and the trajectory of Chinese power, we describe four alternative US strategies. There is some overlap between these categories, but as Barry Posen and Andrew Ross have argued, different strategies tend to contain fundamental disagreements about strategic objectives and priorities, the extent to which the United States should be engaged in international affairs, the form that engagement should assume, the means that should be employed, the degree of autonomy that must be maintained, and when and under what conditions military force should be employed. Some combinations just do not go together.

Thus, we describe objectives, strategies, and policies for each distinct US strategy.

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The paper was presented at the Conference: "The South China Sea in the Broader Maritime Security of the Indo-Pacific Conference", 28-30 September 2016, Canberra, Australia.

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