



DECIPHERING CHINA'S SECURITY INTENTIONS IN NORTHEAST ASIA

INTRODUCTION

Countries active in Northeast Asia differ in how they interpret China's intentions in regard to security. Does China seek regional domination? Is it defensively resisting the aggressive designs of other states, especially the United States? Is it satisfied with a balance of power that will persist for a considerable time? We begin with a close-up of Chinese thinking, then turn to snapshots of the views of the four other countries active in the region, excluding only North Korea. This introduction offers a summary of the chapters that follow, focusing as well on comparisons of four cases.

From China one often finds mixed messages about its real intentions. While attention has been most heavily concentrated on the South China Sea, where China's militarization keeps moving forward, its intentions on the Korean Peninsula, toward the Russian Far East and Mongolia, and toward Japan (beginning with the East China Sea) matter as well. High expectations were visible in 2014-15 when Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin were showcasing increased cooperation and even integration of their economies, reaching to the Russian Far East. Anticipation rose as well when China on March 2, 2016 supported tough new UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea and, soon afterwards, appeared briefly to suggest that it is amenable to five-party talks to coordinate versus the North. Considering that Xi is finally meeting with Abe Shinzo, including the renewal of the China-Japan-Korea summit in November 2015, China's views on Northeast Asia appear more cooperative in managing crises and supporting more economic cooperation than in recent years. Yet, the five chapters in Part I cast doubt on such optimism, pointing to suspicions in China and elsewhere about prospects. The chapter on China's thinking points to a pessimistic outlook; that on U.S. thinking finds the mainstream to be warning against Chinese plans to establish a sphere of influence in Northeast Asia; and that on Japan foresees some dangerous unintended consequences of China's intentions to change the status quo by force. The chapter on Russian thinking, despite differentiating three schools with different ideas about the impact on Russia, largely confirms the impression that China is poised to challenge the United States, which many welcome even as they may doubt other Chinese aims. Only the chapter on South Korean thinking was decidedly doubtful about intentions of this sort, but North Korea's nuclear test in early 2016 shifted the terms of debate.

CHINESE STRATEGIC THINKING

Oriana Mastro focuses attention on advances in China's military that impact its strategy in Northeast Asia. She argues that this area is the foundation of China's strategy to establish its regional preeminence, keep Japan down, and eventually push the United States out. Given that this is the home of two major U.S. allies and one of the most important regions—militarily, politically, and economically—China's designs should be of critical concern. Mastro, thus, pinpoints this as the heart of the Sino-U.S. strategic competition, emphasizing its military aspects, giving it higher priority for China than the South China Sea. In her review of Chinese sources, she finds a pessimistic view of the region: while some states are doing things that have a negative impact on the security and stability along China's periphery, the United States is seen as the prime source of regional instability. She evaluates the changing dynamics of China's relations with Russia, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan and China's motivation in each case before concluding with implications for regional stability and U.S. policy.

As Mastro writes, China hopes to leverage its relationship with Russia for three main purposes: to promote an alternate vision of global order; to gain Russian technology and military equipment; and to gain access to Russian energy sources. With a lack of unity in China's strategic community on how close Beijing should get to Moscow, she finds this bilateral relationship to be opportunistic, undermining U.S. military dominance in this region. On South Korea, she calls the country the lynchpin of China's Northeast Asian strategy, based on a clear strategic vision. Beijing's courtship of Seoul is aimed at presenting an alternative to the U.S.-led regional order and to balance against Tokyo, while regarding ROK-U.S. ties as the greatest obstacle to China's regional objectives. Strategic thinking toward North Korea reflects treading water, Mastro adds, to retain it as a geopolitical buffer between China and the United States while expanding China's influence on the peninsula. The purpose of multilateral cooperation is to prevent U.S. unilateral moves. In this view, the United States is the main source of instability, and South Korea's closeness with it makes peace on the peninsula more difficult to achieve. In the case of Japan, Mastro discerns a regional power competition. China leverages history issues for political purposes, creates a more hostile atmosphere to justify its own aggressive actions in the region and to isolate Japan and make Japan a proxy for competition for regional dominance with the United States. This analysis suggests that U.S.-China strategic competition in Northeast Asia is likely to heat up significantly in the military, political and economic realms. A weakened U.S. position may serve China's interests, but contrary to Chinese arguments, it is clearly not in the general interest of Northeast Asian security and development. While the United States prefers to strengthen its partners, China prefers weaker ones to impose its will.

U.S. VIEWS OF CHINA'S INTENTIONS

Mark Tokola begins our coverage of the efforts outside China to decipher its real security intentions with thinking in the United States. While finding diverse opinions in the United States on China's approach toward its neighbors, he argues that the general U.S. attitude towards China's policy regarding its peripheral region is one of suspicion. He finds China's goal of creating a "common security circle" and a "community of common destiny" is more reminiscent of current Russia's *realpolitik*, or even of the earlier Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc, than of the benign and consensual nature of the EU. Chinese statements regarding "Asia for the Asians," or of "favoring those who side with China," fuel the suspicion that China's aim is to dominate and exclude. Looking beyond the military balance, if China's self-perceived requirement to ensure that the countries on its periphery will not counter Chinese interest is an irresistible force, and the U.S. insistence that it will not accept the emergence of regional spheres of influence is an unmovable object, how can we expect their relationship to develop, Tokola asks. The United States ought to be able to appreciate China's interest in promoting stable and economically successful countries within its periphery, while in the interest of long-term global stability and harmonious relations among the Pacific Rim countries, China needs to recognize that sovereignty and self-determination among its neighbors might lead them to act in ways other than it would prefer, creating a sphere of restraint on the part of China.

Focusing on the idea of “spheres of influence,” Tokola finds a range of views in the United States on China’s intentions but widespread consensus that attempting to forge such a sphere would arouse its neighbors against it and make relations with Washington more contentious. This single concept encapsulates the central concern being raised in many circles and the failure of China to provide suitable reassurance.

JAPANESE VIEWS OF CHINA’S INTENTIONS

The Japanese debate over China’s intentions resembles that of the United States. Michishita Narushige differentiates Japanese political leaders, the Ministry of Defense, the media, and the general public in their thinking about threats to Japan’s security and national interests. While the two main parties in Japan have distinct policy platforms on security challenges posed by China, there are shared concerns over China’s intensified activities in the maritime and aerial domains in the region, he finds. Issues such as China’s military buildup, Beijing’s activities in the South China Sea, and developments in the East China Sea dominate the media debates. Conservatives and progressives have disagreed, and domestic political imperatives further widened the gap between the LDP and the DPJ. In July 2015, Abe broke his reticence and began publicly discussing security challenges posed by China. While he initially avoided explicit mention of China out of diplomatic considerations, he faced criticism at home for failing to explain the rationale behind the new security legislation debated in the Diet, and subsequently shifted his approach. Paradoxically, opposition critiques of the new security legislation ended up encouraging the Abe administration to discuss the “China threat” more explicitly.

According to the Ministry of Defense, China’s attempt to fulfill its unilateral demands without compromise could produce dangerous unintended consequences and is raising concerns over its future direction. The problem is not the lack of transparency but the destabilizing nature of the security policy goals, conservatives argue. Taking a middle ground position, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* was more sanguine about Xi, attributing his tough stance on Japan to the “hardliners” in China, particularly those in the military, and even suggesting that Xi might have misunderstood the nature of Japan’s new security legislation. When it talks about Chinese policy, “China” is the subject, an interesting contrast to *Yomiuri Shimbun*, which often uses “Xi” as the subject. Similarly, *Asahi* treated Xi’s role as secondary, stating that “Xi Jinping’s government” is responsible and avoiding identifying Xi himself as the source of the problem. *Yomiuri* discussed China’s increasingly visible attempt to drive the United States out of Asia and establish China’s hegemony there. *Asahi*’s more progressive inclination was visible when it pointed out the danger of an arms race and inadvertent escalation. It expressed concern that Southeast Asian countries were strengthening their naval forces in response to China’s military buildup, and that actions by the United States could also increase tension. Its response to the construction of oil rigs in the East China Sea was quite different from that of the other two papers. It faulted the Japanese government’s attempt to use this issue to marshal political support for the new security legislation, Michishita concluded. Finally, while public opinion on Sino-Japan relations slightly improved in 2015, Japanese citizens recognized that the relationship would remain difficult in the foreseeable future.

RUSSIAN VIEWS OF CHINA'S INTENTIONS

The official mainstream under Vladimir Putin has heralded China's peaceful rise and strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing, which has become increasingly anti-American (at least rhetorically) after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, in private many Kremlin officials had deep suspicions about China's security intentions in Northeast Asia, most notably in the Russian Far East. Yet, these doubts are hard to detect in writings and statements..

Moscow has sided with Beijing's position on North Korea, was silent on any Chinese moves regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and has joined hands with Chinese voicing concerns about U.S. plans to install components of the American missile defense system in Northeast Asia. At the same time, Moscow has refrained from directly supporting China's territorial claims in the East China Sea, was cautious about selling Russia's most advanced weapon systems to the PLA, and has invested a significant effort in upgrading its military posture on the eastern flank, observes Alexander Gabuev. Yet, one result of growing conflict between the West and Russia was a redoubling of Moscow's "turn to the East" policy, centered around China, which dramatically changed its strategy towards China and many underlying assumptions. It also dramatically influenced the mainstream analysis of Chinese security intentions in Northeast Asia. Many of the country's China-watchers in 2014 and 2015 started to cover positive aspects of the Russian-Chinese relationship while entirely downplaying the risks. Deliberate silence in public writings on negative scenarios between Moscow and Beijing can be found even in the works of Russia's best China-hands. There is an unofficial ban on all government employees airing negative comments on China. Public comments from Moscow on what China's grand strategy is, or what Beijing's intentions in its neighborhood are, simply do not exist.

Most important is the change in Putin's tone: notions of possible threats or risks associated with China entirely disappeared from his public remarks and interviews. In a May 2014 interview with leading Chinese media he called Russia-China relations a "model partnership" and stated that both countries "don't have any problems which can have a negative impact on strengthening our cooperation." Many interpret China's overall strategy in Northeast Asia as shifting the military balance of power to the point it would be dangerous for the United States to interfere. Beijing will force other countries to negotiate on territorial disputes and make concessions allowing China to claim it has overcome its "century of humiliation," while avoiding direct military conflict. This process, it is believed in Moscow, will not call the Russia-China border treaty into question, and, thus, Russia can remain a neutral observer. Beijing's security intentions in Northeast Asia play a marginal role in the Russian expert debate on China, in which three schools of thought can be identified, says Gabuev. The alarmists, remaining from the legacy of the 1990s, see China as an aggressive rising power aiming to change the status quo in the region and globally. The realists see China's goal in Northeast Asia as attempting to acquire the status of regional major power able to fend off any invasion, as well as to become dominant in the local balance of power in the long run. Representatives of this group argue about details, such as whether China has the ambition to challenge the United States as the primary security provider in Asia. The quasi-realists narrow China's interests down to opposing the United States. They believe that Beijing's policy in the region is a reaction to U.S. attempts to limit its rise and maintain global dominance, and thus conflict between the two powers is imminent, and a clash is a matter of time. Chinese

policy, they state, can be seen as self-defense, and Sino-American conflict is inevitable. The quasi-realists claim that the crisis over Ukraine has marked the breaking point in Russia's relations with the West, and now Beijing is Moscow's only true ally.

SOUTH KOREAN VIEWS OF CHINA'S INTENTIONS

Lee Dong Ryul argues that South Korea is witnessing an intensified debate on what are China's emerging strategic intentions. Naturally, the North Korean issue, newly exacerbated by its early 2016 nuclear and long-range missile tests, figures heavily in the way they visualize what China has in mind for their country. As the competition over Asia between the United States and China hit its stride, many discussions centered on South Korea's dilemma, Lee said, as it sought to keep its ally close and steer China away from North Korea. Such discussions cover the expansion of rising China's role, how its influence in Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula affect the North Korean nuclear issue and reunification of the peninsula, and South Korea-China relations. The case of the AIIB illustrates that the public is paying attention to the economic aspects of the rise of China, which is perceived as an opportunity and a challenge rather than a threat. In contrast, there are concerns about a security threat due to the rise of China. The public's threat perception of China is not higher than that of experts, Lee notes, concluding that both have had a positive perception of South Korea-China relations. The "U.S. for security, China for economy" cannot actually be a strategy, considering international politics where economic and security issues overlap. Nonetheless, discussions on it reflect how seriously South Korea is worried about the dilemma between its alliance with the United States and its relations with China.

South Korea was more trusting of China than the United States or Japan before early 2016 when clashing responses to North Korean actions caused a sudden downturn in the level of mutual trust. In 2015, major decisions such as joining the AIIB, attending the Victory-over-Japan Day parade, and ratifying the FTA between South Korea and China, were seemingly brought to the fore through requests by China, and South Korea consequently "responded" to them. On other matters, South Korea refrained from doing things that China strongly opposed, above all, the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system. It appeared that the South Korean government was just waiting for China to "repay" it for such decisions, expecting active cooperation on resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. After North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test, the major media decided that China is not actively pressuring North Korea as expected and is even hesitating to cooperate with South Korea, and some conservative media brought up China's responsibility in the North Korean nuclear issues. *Chosun Ilbo* editorialized that "The best South Korea and China relations in history turns out to be fictitious." Yet, Lee warns, the media made the mistake of exaggerating Park's attendance in the parade by focusing on the exceptional respect given by China. The opposite extreme of defining the bilateral relationship by focusing solely on the disappointment felt right after North Korea's fourth nuclear test could also be a problem. Each party, however, has its own position on what China's expected role should be, on the way to get China to play that role, and on China's responsibility beyond its role. The hopeful mood about its intentions was shifting, but that did not lead to consensus on the sort of negative view seen in Japan.

COMPARISONS OF VIEWS OF CHINA'S INTENTIONS

Reasoning about China's strategic intentions starts with calculations of how they relate to individual countries, not the Northeast Asian region as such. Russian approval for assertive intentions stems from widespread, but not complete, agreement that China means no harm to it and is strongly committed, if not right away, to take vigorous action against the United States—now broadly considered Russia's enemy. South Korean hesitation to view China's intentions as malign stems from optimism, at least before North Korea's nuclear test in January 2016, that China had become a partner ready for cooperation in managing the North's belligerence. The U.S. position, considering cooperation on a global scale as well as intensifying competition in East Asia, carries a mix of suspicion about China's real intentions with a modicum of hope that in Northeast Asia, especially on the Korean Peninsula, common ground can be found. The most negative thinking about China's real intentions prevails among Japanese conservatives, although the divisions in that country appear to be greater than in the United States. The divisions in Japan narrowed earlier and in South Korea are narrowing of late, while divisions in Russia were sharply reduced and stifled after the Ukraine crisis erupted in 2014. U.S. analysis takes a broader perspective, as in overall concern about establishment of a sphere of influence in Northeast Asia.

The central focus of strategic intentions in this region is North Korea. While one might think that debates in the four countries would all weigh China's intentions toward controlling North Korean provocative moods and reunification, and that developments in early 2016 would test earlier points of view, this has happened mainly in South Korea. In the United States and Japan, many already were pessimistic about China's intentions on the peninsula, and in Russia little is written on them as attention centers on undesirable U.S. intentions. Given the agreement finally reached at the UN Security Council on tough sanctions, South Koreans may be inclined to revive hope in China's role, as others choose to wait and see. Yet, polarization of thinking has spread, including even to South Korea.