Strategic reassurance

Many things could worsen relations between China and America. Here are ten ways to make them better

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Biding your time and hiding your powers makes sense if you are a weak country that expects to become strong. Eventually, though, you will want to take advantage of the opportunities that your new power has created. Has that moment arrived for China? Its military power is, globally, no match for America’s. But the PLA is beginning to deny America’s 65-year dominion over the Western Pacific. Fuelled by nationalist opinion, a debate is under way within China’s elite over whether now is the time for the country to stand up. This will influence China’s leaders, even though the signs are that for the time being they would prefer to concentrate on economic growth and their huge domestic problems.

The outside world is suspicious of China and worried about what sort of power it will turn out to be. Asian countries are torn between looking to China for their wealth and turning to America for their security. If China throws its weight around, they will vigorously resist.

America feels increasingly vulnerable, too. Its armed forces have identified the threat in the Pacific. Its economic diplomacy has become aggressive and unpredictable. This further complicates America’s China policy, an uneasy and potentially confusing combination of
engagement and hedging.

That makes for a highly dangerous mix of forces. After a decade in which America was distracted by terror and China preoccupied with economic growth, China’s foreign relations are now likely to become more difficult. The risk has been underlined in the past few months by a series of disputes, with Japan over some islands, over the sinking of the Cheonan, and over claims to China’s coastal waters.

Those one-off rows must not be allowed to frame China’s relations with the rest of the world. Yet each assumes inordinate significance, because of the fear that China will be aggressive and the suspicion in China that America means to block its rise. Every incident is seen as a test of what will come next.

Prevention, not cure

The solution is to find ways to minimise the mutual mistrust between China and America. This will be difficult but not hopeless. China is not looking for new colonies and it has no ideology to export. It shares many American aims: stability, nuclear non-proliferation and, most of all, a thriving world economy. These goals are best served by peace.

Mistrust feeds upon mistrust, aggression upon aggression. In geopolitics, as in life, the best medicine is prophylactic. If ever the relationship falls into antagonism, it will be hard to pull back. The leaders of America and China talk volubly about their desire for good superpower relations. If they mean what they say, here are ten goals to aim for:

• China needs to be certain of having a nuclear second strike. As Robert Art of Brandeis University argues, both China and America will feel more confident if they know their homelands are secure. China has been spending money to ensure that it could answer a first strike. America should willingly surrender this military advantage because it is destabilising—and instability frustrates the overriding policy aim, which is China’s peaceful rise.

• America should seek to maintain military superiority in the Western Pacific. For the sake of all its Asian alliances, the United States must be able to guarantee the sea lanes and to present a credible threat that it will come to Taiwan’s aid against a Chinese attack. For the time being, it still can. But to retain that advantage, America will need to harden its forward bases, invest in missile defence and submarines and counter China’s capacity in asymmetric electronic, cyber and space warfare. This will inevitably add to Chinese insecurity. On the other hand it will add to the security of China’s neighbours. Just now that is more important.

• China needs to share more of its nuclear and conventional military doctrine with America. Compared with the elaborate cold-war communication between America and the Soviet Union, China and America do not talk. Military-to-military links were among the first things to go when America sold arms to Taiwan earlier this year, just as they were in 2001 when Donald Rumsfeld, then secretary of defence, severed them after that mid-air collision. Military-to-military contacts are not a reward for good behaviour but an essential part of building trust.

• Asia needs rules to help prevent maritime disputes from escalating. Collisions at sea, for
instance, are much easier to manage if the rules have been set out beforehand. Collisions are less likely to happen at all if a code determines what counts as a safe passage. In 2002 ASEAN and China signed an agreement encouraging good behaviour in the South China Sea, but it has been neglected. Only after the recent fuss did China show a renewed interest.

- America and China need to talk now about the things that look likely to lead to disputes later on. That means contingencies for North Korea—in secret if necessary. As Kenneth Lieberthal, of the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, argues, it also means talking about such issues as space and cyber-warfare. The two countries have put a lot of work into their Strategic and Economic Dialogue, but this tends to be dominated by the news of the moment. It should focus on the future.

- America should abide by its own rules—and if it must break them, it should factor in the real cost of doing so. America wants China to be prepared to live with the world as it is. If it breaks the rules, it will feed suspicions in China that, one way or the other, its rise will be denied. In terms of security, keeping the rules means avoiding actions that, in Mr Art’s words, appear “punitive and unprovoked”. In economics it means avoiding protectionism, which is doubly self-defeating as it both undermines China’s faith in the system and makes America poorer and less able to defend itself.

- The Chinese Communist Party should stop using censors and commentators to spread a virulent form of nationalism. Its leaders will find foreign relations easier to manage if they draw less on historic grievances. That will be hard for the party, which craves the legitimacy that comes from having seen off Westerners and the Japanese. But it should eschew resentment if it wants China to co-exist easily with the rest of the world.

- China and America should try to do as much business as they can through multinational forums, such as the G20 and the United Nations. Bilateral dealings are easier and less time-consuming. But they are opaque and they leave the rest of Asia wondering what is really going on. Nothing builds the capacity of the system as does using it successfully.

- Asia needs to sort out the thicket of regional-security organisations. With America and Russia set to join as full members next year, the East Asia Summit looks the most promising place to become the region’s security forum. That will take a leap of faith from countries like Singapore, which has a special place in ASEAN. However, Asia needs to put collective security first for once.

- Asian countries should put more effort into non-traditional security. According to Katherine Morton, of the Australian National University, a lot of work is to be done in such areas as climate change, health, the environment, piracy and terrorism, where threats by their nature cross borders. Just as important, however, non-traditional security presents a chance for Asia’s military forces to learn how to work together without the usual tensions—as when China sent its ships to help an international naval force prevent piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Some Asian countries are squeamish about the effect of non-traditional security on their sovereignty. They should swallow hard.
Time to choose

After King Goujian won his famous victory over the kingdom to the north, he so revelled in his power that he turned into something of a despot. One faithful adviser fled for his life, another fell on his sword at the king’s command. In the 1980s some Chinese writers saw this as an allegory for the cruelty of the triumphant Mao Zedong.

There are many interpretations of King Goujian’s story. It can stand for vengeance, despotism, self-improvement and much else. Likewise, China’s rise is neither guaranteed to be chiefly about the prosperity of 1.3 billion people nor condemned to be about antagonism or conflict with the rest of the world. The future, like the story, is what we make it.

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