Biding and Hiding
No Longer: A More Assertive China Rattles the Region

By Nick Bisley

China’s newfound assertiveness, particularly in its maritime disputes with its neighbors, has disturbed the region and reawakened US attention to a part of the world it had largely been neglecting.

Some observers see the robust US response to China’s behavior as a victory for America, but Nick Bisley argues that great-power rivalry between the two could produce a more unstable and crisis-prone region unless they can work together to forge a new order that accommodates the interests of both nations and the rest of Asia.
SINCE THE MID-1990S, China’s strategy in Asia has been to play a cautious long-term strategic game. Its domestic economic program, by far its greatest priority, required it to pursue a “status quo” strategic policy as it focused on opening up and strengthening its economy. This meant making peace with its neighbors, signing up to multilateral institutions and tacitly welcoming the free ride provided by America’s military predominance. China’s own ambitions could wait, its leaders reckoned. For some observers this rational approach showed the benefits of one-party rule in implementing strategic policy.

By contrast, the US approach to the region seemed to be the polar opposite. Its costly commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan took Washington’s eye off the ball in Asia and, as these conflicts wore on, led some to question the credibility of America’s military commitments. Moreover, the country’s alliance partners were increasingly being pulled into China’s orbit by their economic interests; America’s underlying strategic purpose seemed anachronistic to some and uncertain to others. China’s approach conforming to Deng Xiaoping’s dictum to bide one’s time calmly, because the country’s long-term ambitions for regional strategy, even if it is not as assertively executed as in the recent past, will, alongside America’s alliance-focused approach, produce an unstable and increasingly uncertain region in which conflicts over relatively marginal matters have the potential to escalate in unsettling and potentially destructive ways.

BREAKING OLD HABITS
Since the normalization of relations with the United States and the launching of its economic modernization program in 1979, China has adopted an increasingly status quo approach to its foreign policy in general and an explicitly non-threatening attitude toward the region in particular. As its stratospheric growth began to unsettle the world, China sought to calm incipient fears by adopting Zheng Bijian’s notion of a “peaceful rise” as its foreign policy aim. Indeed, so concerned was it by how others might perceive its growth that under President Hu Jintao it further trimmed its sails by adopting “harmonious society and peaceful development” as its policy lodestar.

China’s regional strategy will, alongside America’s alliance-focused approach, produce an increasingly uncertain region in which conflicts over relatively marginal matters of strategic significance will become more frequent and have the potential to escalate in unsettling ways.

THE LONG GAME
Since the accession of Hu Jintao, if not before, Chinese foreign and security policy has, with few exceptions, displayed most of the hallmarks of a normal member of the international community. More directly, its regional strategy has sought to avoid conflict with the United States. Indeed, while never explicitly admitting it, China saw, in the short term, considerable benefits in accepting the strategic status quo of US military supremacy as it provided the stability needed for economic prosperity. Yet its longer-term ambition to be free
of the constraints that this dominance imposed (to say nothing of America’s support for Taiwan) did not sit comfortably with this short-term convenience. China’s strategy was to play a long-term game, one in which, as a resident Asian power, it had considerable structural advantages. In essence, China was content to accept the basic parameters of the existing regional order while only very slowly working to increase the strategic costs to the United States for maintaining the existing arrangements. China was very cautious. It would support regional organizations that excluded the United States, but it would not go to the wall over the matter. The diplomatic dealings prior to the first East Asia Summit in 2005 over whether Australia, New Zealand and India would join the new forum were typical. China wanted a more narrow East Asian focus, but ultimately accepted the ASEAN-majority view. The underlying strategy seemed to be to avoid conflict, keep assertiveness in check and let history work in its favor.

In its basic structure, America’s approach to Asia has remained remarkably stable. After some uncertainty in the early 1990s, American policy-makers determined that it would continue to pursue the basic character and organization of its Cold War posture in the region: a substantial forward-deployed military presence organized around a series of bilateral alliances. This basic approach remains the key organizing principle of American policy in Asia, confirmed by just about every senior official who visits the region. The problem for the United States is whether what is in essence a Cold War policy is suitable to the dramatically changed circumstances in the region, America’s own domestic political and economic constraints and its broader global challenges.

Where China is thought to be playing a successful long-term game, the United States, in contrast, has been the subject of considerable concern and criticism at home and abroad. Concerns have focused on two main complaints: attention and credibility. For many, the United States has not been sufficiently focused on its interests in the region. For example, some argue that the manipulation of foreign policy for domestic political advantage by the administration of US President George W. Bush was particularly damaging to US policy on Asia, while others argue that America’s position has been fundamentally weakened by the region’s changing landscape. The other problem relates to the underlying credibility of its alliance commitments.

The strategic mess that the US made for itself in Iraq and Afghanistan has had a number of implications. First, there are questions about just how willing the United States actually will be to use force in the region. The ability to maintain regional stability is predicated on the logic of conventional deterrence, where even a marginal reduction in credibility can alter the deterrent effect. Second, where the Bush administration was seen as overconfident in its use of force, President Barack Obama’s administration is perceived to be overly cautious, possibly even weak. In the very slow decisions on Afghan policy or the Libyan intervention, so goes this line, one sees strategic timidity. More recently, the considerable fiscal problems that the United States has brought upon itself have served to underline the perception of weakness and uncertainty.

The dominant power thus appeared to be increasingly a dangerous combination of overcommitted and under-confident. In contrast, China, the aspirant power, was pursuing a smart policy of “biding and hiding,” carefully cultivating new networks, not causing offense and waiting for the eventual erosion of US power.

**GETTING TOUGH**

Then, almost unexpectedly, China seemed to adopt a much more assertive approach to regional policy. In response, America appeared to reaffirm its importance both to the strategic interests of its allies and to the stability of the existing order. So what happened? At the start of 2010, the United States signaled that it would, as usual, go ahead with arms sales to Taiwan. As usual, this irked China, but the reaction was much stronger than in the recent past. China threatened sanctions on US companies, suspended military exchanges and threatened to limit co-operation on international issues such as those related to Iran and North Korea. After the March 26 sinking of a South Korean Navy corvette, the Cheonan, presumably by a North Korean torpedo, China took a month to express condolences to South Korea. It also refused to accept the findings of an international commission that was established to determine what had sunk the Cheonan and it prevented a statement from the United Nations Security Council from even naming North Korea. In the lead-up to joint US-South Korea and US-Japan military exercises — held to demonstrate resolve in the face of this action — China strongly condemned the exercises and held its own live-fire exercises.

Further ratcheting up its more assertive approach, a Chinese official told US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a private meeting in March 2010 that China now viewed its claims in the South China Sea as a “core interest” — that is, a strategic priority of the highest order.
Although subsequent comments by Chinese officials appeared to back off a bit from that position, in diplomatic dealings over ongoing disputes in the South China Sea it is clear that China has begun to place much greater emphasis on this issue than it has in the past.

Finally, China’s reaction to North Korea’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea on Nov. 23, 2010, and the subsequent international condemnation of North Korea is perhaps the most revealing example of China’s break with recent diplomatic form. China’s response to the attack, which killed two civilians and two South Korean marines, was the diplomatic equivalent of a shrug, making bland remarks calling on the international community to help reduce tensions, and trying to get the Six-Party talks to address the issue. In essence, it chose to support its North Korean ally in the face of considerable international criticism. Where in the recent past China had sought to pressure North Korea, it now seems, as Thomas Christensen put it, to have “doubled down on its economic and political ties with the Kim Jong Il regime.”

Recent events appear to mark a clear move by China away from “biding and hiding” to a more assertive approach to its regional strategic interests. In particular, China now appears to be less concerned about maintaining good relations and building up goodwill with its neighbors than in signaling its resolve to protect and pursue its interests. In 2010, China displayed a willingness to act in ways that unsettled its neighbors and fueled regional strategic uncertainty. Chinese action in that year seems also to have played directly into America’s hands. The Obama administration has since made a considerable effort to focus on its East Asian policy and has invested in a range of regional initiatives, in particular its alliances. 11 This would seem particularly shrewd given China’s changed behavior.

WINNERS AND LOSERS?
What are we to make of these developments? Has China turned a strategic corner, emboldened by a sense of American weakness, and found new confidence to make good on its long-term ambitions? Or will China perceive that 2010 was a bad year in which it squandered the strategic gains of the previous decade and reinforced America’s position as the region’s most important power?

The most obvious interpretation is to see the United States as the unequivocal winner of this strategic interaction. From this perspective, China’s actions revealed not just clumsy diplomacy and questionable strategic thinking, but some of the structural problems that beset China’s regional policy. In 2010, the events showed the huge gap in strategic capacity between the United States and China, from military hardware to the infrastructure of alliances. As Brendan Taylor and Benjamin Schreer observe, the two crises that year on the Korean Peninsula made plain “China’s limited capacity to effectively use its growing economic power in the service of grand-strategic objectives.”

More importantly, this view also underscores the domestic constraints on Chinese strategic policy. These include the frictions surrounding the leadership succession, as well as the difficulty China faces when trying to pursue long-term strategic objectives that do not mesh easily with the requirements of domestic economic growth. In short, this interpretation sees US regional predominance reinforced by the events of 2010 and it implies that the strategic stability that America offers is likely to be maintained over the medium term because China lacks the ability to overturn that order.

But strategic actions are open to a range of different interpretations. A second view recognizes that China came out of 2010 with a weaker strategic hand, but does not see America’s position as necessarily strengthened by this process. Here China’s actions have undermined its regional position, especially in relation to Vietnam and South Korea, by increasing the sense of uncertainty over its economic might and military modernization. While this interpretation does not rest on a view of China as aggressive or threatening, it sees recent behavior as confirming the view that a more affluent and confident China produces increased regional instability. Moreover, China’s capacity to provide regional leadership has been undermined by its assertive challenges to the interests of Southeast Asian nations, and its ability to act as an honest broker on the Korean Peninsula is similarly damaged.

But has China’s loss been America’s gain? This perspective prompts a more measured assessment. At a basic level, events have shown that America’s efforts to emphasize its ongoing commitment to Asia and its military credibility have not deterred North Korea or China from engaging in destabilizing behavior. While alliance partners have been reminded of the value of the security America provides, they will nonetheless be concerned that the US presence appears unable to prevent destabilizing actions. Moreover, America’s decision to move the location of military exercises to reduce the regional security consequences makes plain the limits of American influence. To be clear, it is not that the United States has been rendered impotent, but rather that recent developments show the ways in which American dominance is beginning to reach its strategic limits.

More broadly, even if one were to agree that America has reaped a strategic advantage at China’s expense by reducing doubts about its regional posture, it is hard to share the view that 2010 signals a return to the past in which regional stability is fostered by unquestioned American supremacy. While China may not be quite so clumsy in its strategic policy in the coming years, it is very unlikely that it will go into strategic retreat — the domestic political costs of such a move, during a time of leadership transition, are simply too high for that to occur.

NOT A SHORT-TERM ‘BLIP’
Both of the above interpretations, in my view, are overly optimistic. A third perspective is both more realistic and more depressing: the events of 2010 are a harbinger of a new, evolving regional order in which friction and conflict among Asia’s major powers will increasingly become the norm.

There are three main reasons why the recent change in China’s approach is indicative of the pattern that regional relations are likely to take in the coming years. The first relates to the qualities of strategic interaction. Rather than showing the value of America’s military presence while underlining China’s weakness, the events of the recent past instead show how points of strategic difference are becoming militarized. Asia’s growing economic prosperity has led to an increase in intersecting and overlapping interests among many Asian states. This prosperity has also provided greater resources for states to advance and protect those interests. Although Asian states have recently shown considerable interest in building multilateral security mechanisms, these have thus far had scant impact on actual policy choices. Rather than using these multilateral mechanisms to resolve, for example, the competing claims in the South China Sea, states are emphasizing military tools to defend their interests alongside broader diplomatic discussions in multilateral venues. China’s behavior is in this sense indicative of a broader trend.

Also, those hoping that China will realize the error of its ways and moderate its approach are going to be disappointed. The character of the strategic interaction in the region, especially on the Korean Peninsula, is unlikely to encourage mod-
eration in Beijing but will be seen as further evidence of the need to continue military modernization and advancement. It will do so because, as Jonathan Holslag convincingly argues, China’s approach to its strategic policy is strongly shaped by the sense that it is “trapped.” China seeks to secure its interests, but due to this feeling of vulnerability it acts in ways that produce classic security anxieties among its neighbors who feel threatened by the measures China perceives necessary to defend its interests. More broadly, it has also served to reinforce a growing sense that strategic policy choices are likely to be zero-sum choices for middle-range powers. Although Chinese policymakers are fond of “win-win” approaches, the actions of both the United States and China in 2010 reinforce the view that regional interests cannot be collectively advanced or problems collaboratively resolved; in these clashes of interests, one has to choose sides.

China’s assertiveness may have shown the value of America’s alliances to its partners, it also showed the limits of America’s strategic effect. The US capacity to use its military power to achieve its policy goals is being reduced in two ways. First, America’s military is beginning to have its strategic advantage eroded, thus constraining its policy choices. This is primarily evident in China’s growing capacity to deny the US navy free navigation of the Pacific ocean, and with China continuing to develop asymmetric tactics to negate US military advantage (such as the use of ballistic missiles to attack aircraft carriers), this is likely to continue. Second, non-allied states increasingly feel confident that they can resist US pressure due to their improved military capabilities, the perception of American weakness caused by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and US domestic economic troubles. While this perception may be somewhat misplaced, it was an important contributor to recent events because it boosted the confidence of China and North Korea.

Strategically then, Chinese behavior in 2009-2010 was not a “blip” marking a short-lived deviation from what had hitherto been an increase in strategic heft with minimal regional consequences. Rather, it marked the beginning of a longer-run period in which the frictions and conflicts that come from overlapping interests, growing military capabilities and a regional tendency to conduct strategic policy in a militarized fashion, will become a regular feature.

The second reason for seeing a longer-term pattern relates to the domestic sources of Chinese behavior. As David Shambaugh argues, a more assertive stance in foreign policy is not the sole property of a right-wing fringe of the People’s Liberation Army that has been emboldened by wrangling over the leadership succession, but reflects something of a domestic consensus among policy elites. As he puts it, “What the world has seen from China since 2009 is an increasingly realist, narrowly self-interested nation, seeking to maximize its own comprehensive power.”

Chinese opinion on its foreign and strategic policy is increasingly diverse, and differences are more openly expressed than in the past. Yet, while the peculiarities of any one action, such as the shelling of Yeonpyeong, may bear a greater imprint of one or another of these groups, collectively, Chinese policy in East Asia since 2010 has conformed to a domestic consensus that is broadly realist, assertive and confident about a state that will not be beholden to outside conceptions of its interests nor constrained by multilateral institutions or processes. While the leadership transition has so far tended to strengthen this sentiment, it is unlikely to be diluted any time soon.

Third, these developments are a sign of things to come because they reflect not just clashes of interest among states in the Yellow Sea or
Southeast Asia, but also because they are part of a larger contest over the form and content of Asia’s emerging regional order. It has been evident for a long time that the basic parameters of Asia’s order were being changed by the rapid economic growth of India and China, as well as other states. This has led to region-wide increases in defense spending as well as efforts to try to institutionalize many aspects of regional relations. The effects of the global financial crisis and the perceived decline of the United States have accelerated this change.

Where in the past, US military dominance was seen as necessary to keep the regional peace, the changing context has meant some newfound uncertainty about the consequences of America’s military presence. The post-Cold War pattern of relations is being transformed, but it is not yet clear what will take its place. China senses an opportunity to increase its security and advance its interests in ways that challenge the old order. This is not only for immediate benefit — ensuring North Korea does not collapse, for example — but also because of the ways in which it can establish new patterns of influence that will be of longer-term structural advantage. China has long sought to ensure that it is not constrained by the United States and its network of military alliances, which it perceives as a threat to its security and autonomy.

In relation to the broader contest over the regional order, the events of the recent past show two things. First, China is prepared to draw strategic lines in the sand that it previously avoided in the interest of stability. Second, it wants to signal to the United States the increased cost that America will have to bear if it wishes to maintain its current regional posture. The consequence of this is to reduce the benefits of regional stability that American strategy produced in the past. China’s approach to the region since late 2009 was symptomatic not of incoherence in strategic policy but of an emerging power seeking to take advantage of opportunities to build the foundations of an order that more suits its interests. It may not necessarily succeed in doing so, but it is unlikely to retreat to a more cautious approach.

RESPONDING TO A MORE ASSERTIVE CHINA
Perhaps the biggest mistake the United States could make would be to interpret the events of the past year or two as an unalloyed win for America’s regional policy. America’s position is not nearly as strong as one might think. More importantly, it is far from clear that continuing to pursue the same basic strategy in the region — military predominance through bilateral alliances — will continue to produce regional stability. Given the extent to which this fuels a longstanding sense of vulnerability within China, as well as the solid consensus within Chinese policymakers circles for its newfound assertiveness, such an approach looks risky.

There is a temptation for America and its allies to treat China’s new assertiveness in kind, what Shambaugh describes as “meeting Chinese realism with American realism.” Such an approach would produce the self-fulfilling prophecy of the China-threat thesis, turning Asia into a highly contested region in which the nascent trends of great-power competition would become the central feature of the region’s order. It is not in the interests of the United States, China or the region as a whole to go down that path. What can it do to respond to a more assertive China whose recent behavior looks likely to continue?

In the first instance, recent experience should galvanize efforts to establish crisis management procedures akin to those that existed between the former Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Most obviously, Asian states need to devise an “incidents at sea agreement” to reduce the risks of maritime conflicts escalating. As 2010 has shown, it is at sea that the frictions between the major powers are most evident, not just the United States and China, but also Japan, South Korea and the Southeast Asian nations. It is here that the action-reaction cycle will need to be kept from spiraling out of control. Cold War crisis management procedures provide a model that can be readily applied to these circumstances. Such a move would also help to build badly needed trust between the powers.

As liberals often point out, Sino-American strategic rivalry is not pre-ordained, and the two have a wide range of common interests, most obviously their economic interdependence. The United States and its allies need to take the cue of a more realistic orientation in Beijing to communicate to China the risks that such a policy poses to their common interests. The United States and China have shared interests in keeping the sea lanes open, ensuring freedom of navigation, the reliability of energy and food supplies and a range of other things such as combating the illicit drug trade, environmental degradation and geopolitical stability. Rather than engaging in tit-for-tat demonstrations of resolve, both need to work together to use these shared interests to build the foundations of a new regional order. This need not entail constructing new regional institutions, but there is a pressing need to establish diplomatic processes to ensure that the drift toward strategic contestation is prevented from becoming the default setting of a new order.

Finally, the third and most difficult thing that the United States and its allies need to do is recognize that China will not be content with the regional order if American predominance remains as it is now. This does not necessarily imply a strategic retreat by the United States nor does it require caving in to every Chinese demand, but it does mean coming to terms with the fact that America will not be able to pursue an Asian policy in which it is forever the dominant player. The events of 2010 showed the increased price that the United States and its allies will have to pay to maintain the current regional arrangements. As China continues to develop economically and militarily, and as it becomes more confident and more capable, that price will continue to increase.

That process will become unsustainable unless something gives. China’s recent behavior could turn out to be beneficial to all if strategic policy-makers on both sides of the Pacific can learn the right lessons and take steps to produce a more stable regional order. If China and the United States, on the other hand, continue on their current paths, then the region is likely to be distinctly worse off.