Not Backing Down: China Responds to the US Rebalance to Asia

By Wu Xinbo

Predictably, the last US presidential election campaign featured the usual competition between candidates over who would be “tougher” on China, a ritual political exercise that is almost always followed by even greater American engagement with China once the new presidential term begins. Chinese officials know this well. But with its rebalancing toward Asia, could the US be on a path to conflict with China? Fudan University Professor Wu Xinbo examines China’s response to the new US strategy.

AT THE BEGINNING OF US President Barack Obama’s first term, China welcomed the US administration’s intention to pay more attention to Asia in the conduct of its foreign policy. China felt the policy adjustment signaled US recognition of Asia’s growing economic and political importance as well as Washington’s desire to develop closer relations with the region, particularly with China, given its growing economic power and international influence. This initial view in Beijing was confirmed during US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit in February 2009 when she stressed the need for more co-operation between the two countries. Beijing saw further positive signs at the first meeting between Chinese President Hu Jintao and Obama in April 2009, when the two sides agreed to develop a “positive, co-operative and comprehensive” relationship.

However, as the Obama administration’s Asia strategy unfolded over the past four years, Chinese perceptions changed. China began to see in the so-called US pivot, or rebalance, toward Asia a shift of focus from economic and diplomatic engagement to one more centered on security issues. Beijing also could not help noticing what seemed to be a strong element of counterbalancing against China’s growing power and influence in the region. The concern peaked in the fall of 2011, when the Obama administration said that it would push the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a top priority of its trade agenda (China is not a member of the TPP), announced its rotating military deployment of US Marines in Australia and tried to insert a security agenda into the East Asia Summit (EAS).

COUNTERING THE PIVOT

While concerned, Beijing was not alarmed or fearful. Instead, given the comprehensive rise in its national power in recent years, China feels more confident in confronting the US rebalancing strategy. Since 2012, China has taken a series of measures to deepen its dialogue with the US, launch diplomatic and economic initiatives in the region and dilute US political and security pressure.

When senior Obama administration officials — Clinton, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta — visited Beijing, their Chinese counterparts pushed them to explain the new US strategy and clarify American intentions. To be sure, the Chinese officials certainly didn’t believe all they were told, but the American explanations may have helped Beijing better understand the rationale behind the strategy and assess its possible impact on China.

At the same time, China has also tried to shape the future contours of Sino-US relations by proposing to build “a new type of relationship between major countries” based on “no confrontation, no antagonism, mutual respect, mutual benefit.” From Beijing’s perspective, if China and the US are going to avoid repeating the tragedy of destructive past major power politics, they need to adopt new thinking consistent with the changing international circumstances of the 21st century, as well as with the deep interdependence between the two countries. Beijing has also tried to convince Washington that China is serious in sticking to the path of peaceful development, a choice determined externally by a globalized and interdependent world, and internally by China’s culture, history and fundamental national interests.

In the face of the US push to accelerate TPP negotiations, China has so far neither expressed a willingness to join nor ruled out doing so in the future. Instead, Beijing has moved to enhance its economic co-operation with South Korea and Japan by launching negotiations for a China-Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and a China-Japan-Korea FTA. Despite a flare-up of Sino-Japanese tensions over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and a cooling down of their bilateral relations since September, the three countries agreed in November to open negotiations for a trilateral FTA. Meanwhile, China has also joined hands with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand to establish the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which promises to become the world’s largest FTA, covering an area with a population of about 3 billion and combined economic output of $20 trillion.

ASSERTING CONTROL IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Further irritating China-US relations, in the summer of 2010, the Obama administration took a hands-on approach to the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, citing its concern over freedom of navigation in these waters. China reacted by rejecting the involvement of non-claimants to the disputes, suggesting that would only further complicate the problem. Beijing also tried to reassure Washington that hindering freedom of navigation was not part of its agenda and stressed that freedom of commercial navigation had never been a problem, implying that US concerns were either groundless or disguised other intentions.

As both the Philippines and Vietnam try to take advantage of the US pivot to push their respective claims in the South China Sea, Beijing is applying a tit-for-tat strategy. For instance, in the spring of 2012, when a Philippine Navy ship harassed Chinese fisherman around Huangyan Island, which is known outside China as Scarborough Shoal, China reacted by taking a series of diplomatic, economic, law-enforcement and
As China continues to pursue a peaceful rise and becomes more interdependent with the rest of the region, including the US, Washington should not view China’s growing power and influence as a challenge or threat to its interests, but rather as a positive force for regional stability and prosperity.

After their annual meeting — for the first time in the history of the organization — due to disagreements over inclusion of the South China Sea issue in a final joint communiqué.

POWER, INFLUENCE AND THE FUTURE

In response to the US application of more diplomatic, security and economic resources to Southeast Asia, in part to undermine China’s growing influence, China has stepped up efforts to strengthen ties with ASEAN countries, especially Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Such efforts include offering economic assistance, engaging in economic, military and security cooperation, stepping up diplomatic contacts and promoting cultural exchanges.

To be sure, an important element of the US rebalancing strategy is to strengthen its military presence in the Western Pacific in order to cope with China’s growing military power and expanded naval activities in the region. China has responded by continuing to develop its “area denial” and “anti-access” capabilities, so as to maintain a reliable deterrent against US forces within the so-called first island chain, which stretches from the Kuril Islands in the north to the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia, mostly as a contingency in the event of conflict over Taiwan.

When it comes to regional affairs marked by shared power and responsibility, it will help prevent their relations slipping into a zero-sum game, thus better serving US interests in Asia in the long run.