**Geopolitics and China’s Response: Be a Co-operator and a Competitor**

By Zhu Feng

The presumed rise of geopolitics as a result of China’s growing strength and assertiveness in maritime disputes is now a topic widely discussed. But China’s stronger posture does not herald a new Cold War or represent Beijing’s desire to overturn the liberal world order led by the United States, writes Zhu Feng. Nonetheless, China will not reverse its new posture, but if both sides keep domestic politics and agendas in check, the process of adapting to a rising China can be managed to mutual benefit.

**GEOPOLITICS is striking back at the world, Walter Russell Mead proclaims in a widely discussed article in a recent issue of Foreign Affairs and expands in this issue of Global Asia.**

**His view is not a new addition to the understanding of geopolitics. In fact, geopolitics never disappeared after the end of the Cold War. The nuance is that sometimes geopolitics intensifies, such as when Moscow annexed Crimea and is now threatening to use military force to intervene in Ukraine’s domestic unrest, and sometimes geopolitics wanes, such as when international terrorists prove to be a new common enemy.**

Given lingering instability in Ukraine, the Middle East and East Asia, shall we conclude that geopolitics has been reactivated? It’s certainly a debatable question. The role of China and its future behavior undoubtedly stands at the center of such a debate.

The significance of the debate has been heightened by the seemingly epic incompetence of US President Barack Obama’s administration in handling a number of flashpoints in the world: Syria, Ukraine, Iran and the Middle East. Critics of Obama’s foreign policy contend that China, along with Vladimir Putin’s Russia, are exploiting America’s weakness to seek expansion, or at least to act more assertively. Tensions in the East and South China Seas seem to delineate the picture, and thus justify Mead’s assumption that the “revenge of the revisionist powers” is under way.

In contrast to Mead’s view, John Ikenberry at Princeton University is closer to the mark. He does not dwell on the distress that might be occasioned by the behavior of China or Russia in a given moment. Instead, his confidence rests persuasively on the solidity of the liberal world order led by America and its numerous allies, and driven by comprehensive supremacy. China might spoil things on some issues, but it is in no position to staunchly challenge that order. It is quite misleading to view China as revisionist and thereby allocate a return of geopolitics. Ikenberry, however, does not go deeper into the possibility that China might defect from the liberal world order due to either its resurgence as a revisionist power or America’s strategic weakness.

To push the debate further, we need to look into the case of China to see which of their assumptions better fit global affairs. To take the measure of global turbulence in general, and China’s behavior in particular, since the end of the Cold War, I have to say that Mead’s fear that there is no “post-historical moment” in China is unsubtle. Compared to the US and the countries of the EU, China’s system of one-party rule is not overwrought. In contrast, China might prove to be a new common enemy.

For Beijing, geography is not over when history yawns. Flare-ups between China and Japan over territorial disputes, most recently the incident involving Chinese jets of US surveillance planes indicates a growing tension between Beijing and Washington. China is being more assertive in asking the US to suspend its maritime surveillance around China, but the US, for its part, insists that it is only aiming to safeguard its freedom of navigation at sea and on air — and thus, there is another round of geopolitical boxing. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) explicitly states that maritime surveillance is legitimate, but the high frequency of American military surveillance of China looks to Beijing like clear-cut bullying. The irritation of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at America’s vastly increased military surveillance could inadvertently lead to a mid-air collision, and thus unnecessarily complicate Chinese-US relations. The US should reconsider its bullying conduct, which is no doubt the result of a broad geopolitical matrix from the Pentagon.

For Beijing, geography is not over when history yawns. Flare-ups between China and Japan are especially more historical than geographical. The wounds of historical grievances are particularly worrisome, because there is increasing brutality. Beijing has been grappling with its own “phased-out history,” which ideologically and politically involves two distinct Chinasthat is a “revisionist China” focused on “socialist internationalism” without grappling with the country’s maritime features, and a “reformist China” attempting to embrace maritime entitlements as much as it possibly can. Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea, which it argues are based on “historical rights,” are challenging the contemporary maritime legal system.

**US BULLYING**

Yet it’s unfair to say that it is only China’s historical entanglements that are exacerbating geopolitics in East Asia. Recently, the interception by Chinese jets of US surveillance planes indicates a growing tension between Beijing and Washington. China is being more assertive in asking the US to suspend its maritime surveillance around China, but the US, for its part, insists that it is only aiming to safeguard its freedom of navigation at sea and on air — and thus, there is another round of geopolitical boxing. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) explicitly states that maritime surveillance is legitimate, but the high frequency of American military surveillance of China looks to Beijing like clear-cut bullying. The irritation of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at America’s vastly increased military surveillance could inadvertently lead to a mid-air collision, and thus unnecessarily complicate Chinese-US relations. The US should reconsider its bullying conduct, which is no doubt the result of a broad geopolitical matrix from the Pentagon.

For Beijing, geography is not over when history yawns. Flare-ups between China and Japan are especially more historical than geographical. The wounds of historical grievances are particularly worrisome, because there is increasing brutality. Beijing has been grappling with its own “phased-out history,” which ideologically and politically involves two distinct Chinasthat is a “revisionist China” focused on “socialist internationalism” without grappling with the country’s maritime features, and a “reformist China” attempting to embrace maritime entitlements as much as it possibly can. Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea, which it argues are based on “historical rights,” are challenging the contemporary maritime legal system. **1 Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” Foreign Affairs, May/June 2014, pp. 69-79.**

speculation that China and Japan might end up in a military clash over their disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. China’s naval buildup is magnifying concerns in the US and Japan over Beijing’s move southward to boost its strategic presence in the South China Sea. If China were to take over the entire Spratly Islands, and push for construction of artificial islands and facilities there, its military presence in the South China Sea would seem to significantly increase. That is obvious to most Chinese. However, this does not necessarily mean that the liberal world order can always impose decisive structural constraints on China’s behavior. As long as the liberal world order stands, with America’s central role in world affairs, geographical temptations for China will be — as they have been — quite limited, a point that Ikenberry powerfully demonstrates.

The Xi Jinping administration has few plans to directly challenge the US. Any new Cold War, such as a geopolitical split in East Asia, would have fatal consequences for Chinese interests. That is obvious to most Chinese. However, this does not necessarily mean that the liberal world order can always impose decisive structural constraints on China’s behavior. As long as the liberal world order stands, with America’s central role in world affairs, geographical temptations for China will be — as they have been — quite limited, a point that Ikenberry powerfully demonstrates.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the liberal world order can always impose decisive structural constraints on China’s behavior.

Generation Chinese leader characterized by his strong personality and confidence. Despite Xi being in office less than two years, his foreign policy reflects his personal traits. His approach to foreign policy seems to reflect some sort of Chinese “self-righteousness” — China does not want to strategically expand or challenge the US-anchored liberal world order, but it believes it is entitled to claim disputed territories, push back against America’s strategy of primacy (particularly when it involves bullying behavior by the US), and guard against Japan’s militaristic turn under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The Xi Jinping administration has few plans to directly challenge the US. Any new Cold War, such as a geopolitical split in East Asia, would have fatal consequences for Chinese interests. That is obvious to most Chinese. However, this does not necessarily mean that the liberal world order can always impose decisive structural constraints on China’s behavior. As long as the liberal world order stands, with America’s central role in world affairs, geographical temptations for China will be — as they have been — quite limited, a point that Ikenberry powerfully demonstrates.
of the maritime disputes, and Beijing’s ensuing harsh gestures followed by efforts to soften its policy, has caused Washington’s policy community to turn more unfriendly toward Beijing. For its part, China seems to be psychologically more intolerant toward the strategic squeeze it feels that it is experiencing from the US. Xi Jinping’s use of the phrase “Asia is for Asians” at the summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in April 2014 reveals China’s angst, although his appeal was in reality an “empty bell.”

THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER
The warming in Beijing-Moscow relations across a number of areas is, of course, a formidable response to geopolitics on China’s part, but it seems questionable how far it could go. China and Russia will continue to see their closeness, politically, economically and strategically, as benefiting each other, but that hardly means that they will become military allies. Thus, Beijing-Moscow relations are a formidable countermeasure to the China-US rivalry, but not yet a counterbalancing act.

Despite many cranky outbursts, China has few options to shake up the liberal world order. Geopolitics will not dominate China’s response to the US in particular and the world community in general. Beijing will continue to adhere to its pledge to integrate fully and peacefully into the global community. Thus, China will continue to bend toward its role as a “co-operator.” A telling example is the Xi administration’s changed attitude towards North Korea. Pyongyang had long been seen by Beijing as a geopolitical asset. But China’s endeavors within its periphery, where geopolitics is dangerously brewing.

The CCP’s legitimacy simultaneously relies on its capacity to ensure sustainable economic growth and domestic prosperity. Basically, these two domains — using geopolitics to protect China from unwelcome external change and integrating into the liberal world order to gain internal economic benefits — have been ingrained in China’s development pattern.

BALANCING ACT
Actually, China has been struggling between geopolitics and the liberal world order for years. It remains to be seen where China eventually ends up, but there is no doubt that Beijing will try to strike a delicate balance between them. The question is how China will allocate its resources between them — in other words, to what extent can China resist eventually taking sides? The return of geopolitics is not a nightmare for China, but it is an ominous trend, given its growing dependency on the world market for its oil, gas, raw materials and, more significantly, overseas markets for its products. What is quite tricky for China is the reality of the liberal world order. It is not a matter of norms and rules, but an incar- nation of massive power and strength. No matter how powerful China’s military and economy become, the power disparity will stay in favor of the US. When the liberal world order presents its unchallengeable geopolitics, China must learn to be a competitor for the sake of its own interests, which are not sensitive only to its government, but also to the Chinese people.

China is nowhere near being a mature great power; that is a long way off. But China has already experienced the moderating effects of the liberal world order, because it has been a “co-operator” with the US and its allies. Beijing’s participation in international sanctions against Iran is an example of this. The US also has become an indispensable power for China. The Crimea crisis and its implications for Beijing are evident. Some Chinese see the advantages of the crisis outweighing the disadvantages, but in the eyes of Beijing, Vladimir Putin’s reckless return to a sort of Cold War European order is alarming. If Putin attempts to replicate this game in Central Asia, China will be the victim. The return of geopolitics is a potentially dangerous illusion for China in that sense.

Can China decisively tilt toward the liberal world order while insulating itself from the negative effects of geopolitics? That is unlikely unless Beijing and Washington can change their domestic agendas and consent to some sort of power-sharing in a new regional order. But both powers at least have a strong desire not to let geopolitical effects become unmanageable. The key factor here is not which dimension of geopolitics or the liberal world order will be more dominant in China’s future, but to what degree the liberal world order can accommodate China’s reasonable geopolitical considerations. James Steinberg and Michael O’Hanlon point out that both countries need to create a virtuous circle to penetrate their leadership and societies, rather than a vicious circle to set free their anxieties, misperceptions and self-serving allegations toward each other.3

To prevent contentious domestic and political factors from reinforcing animosity, both China and the US require skillful and durable diplomacy. Of course, Beijing and Washington need strategic assurances, as well. Beijing should know not to over-reach. At the same time, Washington should be aware of not overreacting to China’s endeavors within its periphery, where geopolitics is dangerously brewing.

---


Zhu Feng is Executive Director of the China Center for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea and Professor of International Relations at Nanjing University. He can be reached at zhufeng@nju.edu.cn