China’s Path: Growing and Learning
By Wang Yizhou

Those who worry that China's spectacular economic growth will lead to a more aggressive role for the country on the world stage, and make it a troublesome partner in the search for a new security architecture in Asia, fail to understand how dominant domestic issues are in China's security calculations, argues Peking University international relations scholar Wang Yizhou.

My analysis and forecast of China's security objectives, as well as the possible security architecture of East Asia, are based on several assumptions about the foreseeable future: there will be no major incidents in the international strategic environment, no dramatic political or social instability in China, and Deng Xiaoping's policy of reform and opening up will remain the guiding principles for all aspects of China's development. I also assume that the formation of China's security objectives and strategies will follow a typical “learning and error correction” process — thus it will be characterized by a kind of progressive transformation rather than a violent revolution either from the perspective of historical sociology or the sociology of knowledge.

From practical observation and logical reasoning, China will remain an inward-looking power for rather a long time, with its security objectives largely determined by domestic priorities.

Objective 1: Controlling friction among big powers

In its current stage of peaceful development, China’s main priority for military security and defense modernization is to try to avoid full-scale confrontations with major world powers, not just the US, Japan and Western powers in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but also transitional countries and emerging powers such as Russia and India. These countries have a decisive influence on global security and regional affairs, and determine the key arrangements and the direction of the contemporary international system. Political, military and diplomatic relations with these countries play a “trigger” role in China’s overall foreign policy.

Given the gap in strength between China and
the US, Russia and other big military powers, as well as the negative impact that international terrorism, the “Taiwan independence” movement and other forms of separatism may have on China, it’s not difficult to arrive at one clear conclusion: no development would bring such devastating consequences to China as a military confrontation with another major power. This would halt China’s economic modernization process. As a result, the primary task for China’s leadership, including its military leaders, is to ensure that big power frictions involving China are kept at a low level of intensity, and ideally resolved. For the Chinese army, the main goal is prevention (and dialogue), and armament configuration and training methods are all oriented in this direction. The assumption is that as long as the security and political relationship between China and other major powers does not escalate into a confrontation, China’s development and peaceful coexistence will remain on course.

Objective 2: To curb domestic ethnic separatism

Whether China can properly handle the Taiwan issue and other issues related to national unity will be the biggest test and the key for China to play a bigger role in the regional security of East Asia. The Taiwan issue is a Pandora’s Box. As we all know, the big family of the Chinese nation is composed of members from different regions, cultures and ethnic groups. In Chinese history, there have been times when peace was made with rulers of minority nationalities in border areas through marriage into feudal dynasties. But there have also been tortuous experiences with forced separation. Since the founding of the new China in 1949, especially since the reform and opening-up policy, the cause of national unity has been moved forward.

Nevertheless, there are still potential major risks: the continuously widening gaps — in social development, the economy, education and technology — between multi-ethnic frontier areas and the rest of the mainland; a small number of separatist forces inside and outside China and their supporters, especially calls for independ-
Objective 3: To achieve a soft landing on sovereignty disputes

China is the most populous country in the world, and also one of the largest geographically. China has 9.6 million square meters of land area, and 3 million square meters of maritime territory (according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which entered into force in 1994). As a big country, China not only has a long land border with 14 immediate neighbors but a vast coastline and more than 10 neighbors across the sea (such as Japan, South Korea and some countries in Central Asia and Southeast Asia). It’s very rare to have so many neighbors. These geographical characteristics have facilitated a wide range of contacts and brought about many opportunities. However, they have also created difficult defense challenges.

From the perspective of upholding state sovereignty, China has faced controversies and troubles that most other countries have not had to face. As China has become more powerful, the domestic media and the public have exposed the government and army to increasing scrutiny and pressure on issues of national sovereignty. Therefore, a main objective of China’s national security policy is to maintain territorial integrity and safeguard its own interests in disputed areas. It must be pointed out, however, that the main focus in safeguarding national sovereignty is to seek “stability” and a “settlement” in disputed areas, rather than to “cede” or “seize” territory. Since Deng initiated reform, most elites have recognized that force is the last and worst option, and that diplomatic and other peaceful means should be used first. In the foreseeable future, say within the next 10 to 15 years (which the Chinese view as the period of strategic opportunities for development), this approach to disputed territories is likely to prevail. This also applies to hot spots and potential hot spots around China — the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, for example, or the “Talibanization” of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The ancient Chinese classic, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, stresses the importance of defeating the enemy without fighting a war, a view that has profoundly influenced contemporary Chinese military strategists.
Objective 4: To protect China’s overseas interests and shoulder more global responsibilities

As Chinese people and capital increasingly move into almost every corner of the world, a new element has been added to national security—the need to protect the expanding overseas interests of China. As a result, Chinese military personnel have had to extend their vision. In keeping with the norms of international relations and their own capabilities, they must guarantee the safety of Chinese personnel and property overseas. For example, they need to keep sea lanes open and navigation safe, ensure energy pipelines and production platforms run normally, fight piracy and all kinds of crimes at sea, provide military support for maintaining the stability and security of countries or regions of concern to China and effectively deter various threats. Given the current stage of China’s military and defense modernization, however, it is not capable of fulfilling all of these tasks, but they are long- and medium-term objectives.

To protect overseas security interests, the Chinese military must be able to project itself outside the country. This poses technological, logistical and equipment challenges quite different from those required domestically, and demands higher standards of Chinese soldiers and the military’s command system: they should understand international laws and practices as well as the language, history, politics and economic situations of the countries where they are assigned. They must also have some appreciation for what China’s security interests abroad really mean. To prepare for this new role, it would be ideal if the military could deepen its contacts and dialogue with counterparts among the big powers and build mutual military trust with relevant organizations within the United Nations or other major international military and security institutions.

As China continues to strengthen its ability to protect its overseas interests, it also needs to build more international goodwill and recognition by shouldering more international security responsibilities. This could include calling for more regional or sub-regional security dialogues and establishing regional security mechanisms that meet all members’ interests and aspirations. Strengthening ties with the UN and other global security organizations as well as sending more peacekeeping troops and military observers is vital, as is helping to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and strengthening the registration and supervision of mines and small arms in the process of international trade, transfer and use. To achieve these goals is certainly a long process, and can only be pursued extensively when domestic and peripheral security priorities have been met.

AFTER ANALYZING the sequence of China’s security objectives, let me now focus on their impact on East Asian security.

First, as an emerging power, China is far from being a big power with strong international experience and awareness, especially compared with Britain, Russia and the US. China allocates its security resources first to domestic security, then to peripheral security and finally to global security responsibilities. This reflects the basic scale by which the Chinese judge what is vital, important, and secondary in the country’s security interests. It also implies the various bottom lines for using force. It is essential for other countries to comprehend that scale if China wishes to strengthen cooperation with other countries. Among China’s East Asian neighbors, as well other members of the international community, there is little understanding, in my view, of the sequencing of China’s security concerns. As a result, they mistakenly regard China as an expansionist country.

Second, since the reform and opening-up policy, the setting of China’s security objectives and military modernization have always been subject to the country’s guiding principle of “the economy first.” As US strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski once noted, China is a business-communist country, quite different from traditional communist countries. Its political and social climate is dominated by the desire for development and income growth, market expansion, popular consumption, and the demand for energy. These to a large extent decide China’s diplomatic and military agenda. Without acknowledging this, it’s impossible to understand the Chinese distinction between traditional security (sovereignty and bor-
Third, for East Asia, the deepening economic interdependence among China, Japan, South Korea and the US has gradually solidified the economic and social foundations for building a regional security community. Compared with the European integration process, to establish a security community in East Asia involves more complications, risks and uncertainties, as well as unique opportunities. In that process, China is now moving towards the core from the periphery, possibly with more initiatives in the future. The Chinese are fully aware that East Asian peace and development, and their role in it, will be crucial for China to become a real global power. Understanding this will also help East Asian countries to strengthen their economic, trade and financial ties with China.

Fourth, given China’s size and growth rate, the noise of those who worry about the “China threat” will not disappear no matter how China explains itself and what actions it takes. To gain mutual trust and cooperation not only requires China to remain restrained in dealing with disputed issues; it also requires other countries to abandon their Cold War thinking. The most difficult challenge is reducing the doubts held by some countries, such as the US and Japan, and calls by some to “contain” China, while at the same time persuading Chinese military strategists that the Taiwan issue will not become an excuse for Western powers to contain China. The frictions between China and the US on arms sales to Taiwan in early 2010 show how difficult it is to solve this problem.

With regard to the kind of new security architecture that might emerge in East Asia, I believe China would like to see a situation where such platforms as the Six-Party talks over denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula gradually become a more regular and systematic mechanism to achieve the long-term security architecture needed in this region.

At the same time, the building of a security architecture for this region must be incremental, with many designs and initiatives undertaken step by step starting from concrete crises and problems, and including much bargaining and consultation over time. China is much more comfortable with peaceful, diplomatic and non-military measures to address issues in the region. One crucial aspect is to keep minor confrontations and crises from escalating into military clashes. Thus, an early warning and crisis management system should be an important part of the architecture. On this, China would like to learn more from others.

To sum up, the history of the past three decades proves that China is not only a rapidly emerging power but also a country wishing to learn. As a researcher who has experienced the years of reform and opening up in China from its beginnings, I feel prudently optimistic about China’s growing role in East Asian security cooperation.

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