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Where is Assertive China Headed?
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Over the last couple of years, the New York Times has portrayed an assertive China as its mainstream narrative about China. Is this a comprehensive and objective picture? Is China a looming threat for Washington as well as for the American public to worry about? How has the U.S. government responded to this "assertive China"? Has China scored ahead of the U.S. in this duel for global power and influence? Douglas Paal, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, from Washington, D.C., places China's recent behavior in a larger and more nuanced context, analyzes the dynamic interactions between China and the U.S. and their respective perspectives, and reaches a relatively optimistic conclusion, calming the anxiety in many American minds.

Since Xi Jinping took over China's top leadership position at the end of 2012, he has put a strong personal stamp on a wide range of issues, not least on China's foreign policy. His leadership is often compared with that of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, two most powerful political figures in the history of contemporary China. His positions and policies have far reaching ramifications beyond China's borders. But Paal warns against over personalizing Xi's impact, because there is a deeper and structural set of factors underlying China's rise.

China has been the second largest economy in the world for the last five years or so, has done scientific explorations on the moon and in the deep sea, and has taken on an increasing share of global governance responsibility such as sending troops to join the UN peace keeping forces worldwide and plenty of aid personnel and materials for the management of Ebola in Africa. Such improved economic and physical capacities would empower Chinese leaders regardless of who is at the helm of the leadership.

Inside the U.S., the leading Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, has already chosen a hard line on China. It is conceivable that no Republican presidential candidates, regardless who they are, would choose to be less aggressive than Clinton's position. But the good news, Paal points out, is that in this presidential election of 2016, China won't be the first order of issues of American concern. The main foreign policy issues will be taken up by the ISIS and the Middle East, on top of which add Russia and Ukraine. Paal recognizes that even so, it would be difficult for China to strike a positive tone with the U.S. when China's actions are conditioned by the American tough election rhetoric. In addition, President Xi's positions are constrained by many domestic challenges, including a passive resistance to his initiatives from at least four members of the 7-member Standing Committee of the Polit-bureau.
The American public, having been influenced by the New York Times’s mainline narrative of an assertive China, especially about China’s territorial disputes over the South and East China Sea with its neighbors, expects their officials to respond to this narrative. Paal points out some facts that the American public is not generally aware of. In fact, China is a latecomer in the energy explorations in the South China Sea. Vietnam and a few other countries had already established their facilities before China came onto the stage. The reason that China is under closer scrutiny in this area is because China is much larger in size and capability than other claimants of the same area. In the East China Sea, China only reacted strongly after the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands) changed hands from private Japanese ownership to the Japanese government, which to China signaled a change of the status quo. Although China has encouraged Chinese fishing boats to fish in these disputed areas and has increased dispatches of its coast guard vessels to assert its rights, it has restrained from using real military forces - navy or air force - limiting confrontations to local scrimmages and avoiding any full-fledged conflict.

What are the lessons for the U.S. to draw from China's behavior? U.S. officials, concerned about the American public perception of their effectiveness, are compelled to react to the mainstream portrait of China. They have reached out to Chinese officials and reached a memorandum of understanding regarding close encounters with the Chinese at sea, and are still working on an equivalent memorandum for air-to-air encounters. Paal acknowledges that China's behavior has been relatively mild since last fall. In the run up to the APEC conference last November in Beijing, where President Xi was to meet with President Obama, China softened its stance and tried to improve relations with its neighbors. President Xi and President Obama signed several agreements during their meeting.

Near the end of the talk, Paal comments on two of China's important initiatives: to build an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and a Silk Road Project. Paal thinks that the U.S. should not be against the AIDB when many Asian countries welcome it, especially after China dispatched its vice finance minister to reassure the U.S. and other international institutions - the World Bank and the Asia Development Bank - that this AIDB will guard against corruption and ensure transparency through open bidding processes.

Paal sees China's initiative to build a modern Silk Road on land and at sea as a way to occupy its excess industrial capacity - exporting services and building infrastructure in foreign countries while pursuing neighborly relations with them - rather than seeing China attempting to expand its geopolitical influence at the expense of other big powers such as Russia. Paal foresees that the Silk Road Fund will be easier to set up and operate than the AIDB because China is the sole financier of this Fund, no need to coordinate or attract money from other countries.
Whereas the official U.S. attitude about these initiatives is skeptical, Paal thinks that Chinese money and projects will bring stability to Central Asia and other parts of the world, and that is fundamentally in line with the U.S. national interests. Furthermore, since Central Asia is an area where the U.S. is unable or unwilling to do much anyway, the U.S. might as well let the Chinese carry out some economic development there. China will do what it intends to do in those areas regardless of what positions the U.S. takes, and China will encounter all the foreseeable problems along the way. Looking forward, Paal anticipates that China will try to defuse bilateral tensions with the U.S. in the next two years during the American presidential election season; after that, the U.S. will see a stronger and healthier China in the medium term.