CHAPTER 10

Taking or Avoiding the Path to China-US Rivalry: European Perspectives and Responses

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Introduction

This essay is organized in two parts. It first considers the problem of an emerging rivalry between China and America in the Asia-Pacific region. It rejects the assumptions of some analysts that China and America are already rivals by pointing to some significant restrictions impeding the path to rivalry between the two powers. However, it argues that historically rivalries have often developed between great powers unintentionally and inadvertently because strategic change is a structural relationship that great powers have not always been able to control, even when they may have wished to. In these instances rivalries emerged despite intentions and because of inadvertent consequences such as impacts on third parties. Despite Chinese claims to have achieved US understanding of the need for a ‘new kind of great power relations’ between the two states the path to rivalry still exists as demonstrated in clear and persistent strategic mistrust. This problem of a structural relationship that may result in rivalry is not only a regional issue but a global issue because of the high degree of interdependence of other regions with Asia in strategic and other terms. The second part of the essay therefore considers European perceptions of the future of China-US relations and how an independent European position on the problem of China-America rivalry might be fashioned.

China-America Relations and the Problem of Rivalry

The complexities of the Asia-Pacific region (APR) defy easy categorization: interactions between state power and social power, between political change and social, economic, and technological change, and between national security and human security, are complex and dynamic. The paradox of the APR is that despite this dynamism the strategic structures of the region show significant degrees of continuity between the past and the present. Strategic Asia exited the bipolar Cold War system with four characteristics: the region was
organized as a hierarchy with great powers, middle powers and smaller powers exerting variable influence on regional structures, some promoting change, some defending the status quo; the predominant relationship between the great powers was a balance of power system, with balance of threat confined to two relationships—India-Pakistan and DPRK-ROK; US hegemony was significant in strategic and economic terms but was most influential for those within the US alliance system—US ability to shape regional relations was politically and geopolitically limited outside the alliance system; finally, regional multilateralism was a middle and small power project constrained by the interaction of the preceding characteristics—hierarchy, great power balancing, and hegemonic management. This hybrid strategic structure has evolved without changing its fundamental character, so the core questions about strategic change are about how these primary structures are changing in relation to one another: What is happening to regional hierarchy—is the region returning to a new form of Sinocentrism? Great power balancing is intensifying—what will happen to Japan-China-India relations in the next 20 years and how will outlying powers like Russia or Australia intervene to shape this balance? Is American hegemonic management durable—or in decline? Can nominal regionalism be developed so that it offers some prospect of governance around international or human security? It is wrong to reduce this complex regional architecture to any one bilateral relationship but China-America relations are important because they contain some of the answers to each of the preceding questions—the possibilities and limits of a new Sinocentrism, the future of great power balancing, the durability of the American alliance, and the prospects of regional multilateralism will be significantly shaped by the future of China-America relations. Moreover the outcome to these questions will have significance far beyond Asia given high degrees of interdependence between Asia and other countries and regions of the world. There is then a great deal of discussion in America and China about the future of their relationship and its wider impact, but this debate is becoming a global discussion also given the significance of the bilateral relationship to the future of Asia and its relations with the rest of the world.

Stephen Walt of Harvard University has said that one of the five big questions we should be asking about the coming decades is whether China will continue to tolerate American military predominance in Asia or whether it will take sustained efforts to match American power with the ultimate aim of forcing the US out of the region. Walt argues:

The current situation is clearly anomalous. Historically, it is somewhat unusual for one great power to have a tight set of alliances in the