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Applying offensive realism to the rise of China: structural incentives and Chinese diplomacy toward the neighboring states

Xiaoting Li*

School of Advanced International and Area Studies, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

*E-mail: lxtusa@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This study employs offensive realism to provide a baseline for assessing Beijing's strategic choices in dealing with regional neighbors. In theory, when an ascending power is not yet capable of dominating its home region, it would strive foremost to prevent external powers from extending their influence in its vicinity. To attain that goal, it will likely adopt a carrots-and-sticks strategy, by rewarding some neighbors and punishing others according to their readiness to accommodate its ascendance and keep a cautious distance from external powers. Empirically, China's management of territorial disputes from the 1950s onward is quite consistent with these theoretical expectations. Viewed in this light, restraint and assertiveness are not inversely related in Chinese foreign policy behavior. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin and serve the same overriding purpose of countering adversarial (especially US) influences in China's neighborhood.

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1 Introduction

In contemporary international relations theory, John Mearsheimer's offensive realism stands out for its pessimism that the rise of China will lead to an intense security competition in Asia. For years, [Mearsheimer \(2005, 2010, 2014, 2014\[2001\]\)](#) predicts consistently that as the People's Republic of China (PRC) becomes more powerful, it will declare a Chinese version of the 'Monroe Doctrine,' try to reduce the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific, and settle territorial disputes with neighboring countries in its own favor. Furthermore, he predicts that Beijing's ambitions will frighten most of its neighbors and compel them to join a US-led balancing coalition, leaving Asia ripe for conflict and even war.

In recent years, there are indeed signs of growing tensions between the PRC and some of its neighbors. Concerned with Beijing's increasing assertiveness, some Asian states already begin to upgrade their cooperation with the United States, which declared in January 2012 its intention of 'rebalancing' toward the Asia-Pacific ([US Department of Defense, 2012](#), p. 2). Against this backdrop, Mearsheimer's predication seems to have come true.

Or does it? On careful review, the evidence looks more complicated. Some US experts at the prestigious Center for Strategic and International Studies, for example, report that most countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia support both the US rebalance and a constructive Sino-American relationship. Given their growing economic and political ties with China, those countries wish to avoid choosing between Washington and Beijing, but to maintain positive relations with both sides ([Berteau et al., 2014](#)). For its part, the PRC leadership seems to realize that China's diplomatic assertiveness since 2009 has damaged its reputation and interests considerably. Thus, since late 2013, Beijing has placed a renewed premium on a good-neighborly diplomacy, to preserve a benign external environment for China's development ([Shi, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014; Ruan, 2014](#)).

From one perspective, the absence of overt conflict between China and its neighbors indicates a defeat for offensive realism. [David Shambaugh \(2005, p. 94\)](#), for instance, contends that Mearsheimer overstates Beijing's hegemonic ambitions and, relatedly, its neighbors' readiness to isolate or contain China (see also [Kang, 2007; Kirshner, 2012](#)). Noting the PRC's frequent compromises in territorial disputes, [Taylor Fravel \(2008, p. 308\)](#)

questions Mearsheimer's claim that great powers are primed for expansion and aggression. More recently, [Amitav Acharya \(2014, p. 171\)](#) argues that Mearsheimer overlooks how a rising China is constrained by a unique set of regional conditions, especially the local equilibrium of power, economic interdependence, and regional institutions, which would prevent the PRC from playing power politics in Asia.

To these criticisms, [Mearsheimer \(2014\[2001\], p. 362\)](#) responds by emphasizing that his theory focuses not on the present or even the immediate future but on the distant future when China becomes much more powerful than it is today. In fairness, this response falls short of meeting his own criteria that '[a] theory's ability to predict the future is based on its ability to explain the past' ([Mearsheimer, 2014\[2001\], p. 6](#)). Apparently, if the past is misunderstood, the future cannot be correctly foreseen. Thus, if offensive realism is to withstand the aforementioned criticisms, it is critically important to provide an explanation, in its own theoretical terms, of why China's relations with its neighbors have not become unrelentingly grim, or why both sides seem capable of demonstrating a degree of resilient practicality in dealing with each other.

This study, therefore, seeks to reexamine the nuance of offensive realism as a guide for understanding China's strategic interactions with its neighbors, an issue with momentous implications for international peace and security. In theory, offensive realism does not expect states to act like mindless aggressors or relentless balancers. Rather, it expects them to pay close attention to geography and the local power balance, and to act strategically after weighing the costs, benefits, and feasibility of their actions. Logically, these arguments could also bolster the contention that some form of mutual accommodation may be possible between a rising if prudent China and its wary but pragmatic neighbors. In particular, it is not unthinkable that, fearing containment by an adversarial great power, a materially weaker PRC might show restraint and even offer concessions in certain territorial disputes, in exchange for some neighbors' cooperation in limiting the extension of that adversary's influence in China's vicinity.

Nevertheless, in the offensive realist view, such accommodation is only part of the picture. Conceivably, while China could reward some neighbors for their cooperation, it could also punish others for their noncooperation, to signal that defying its ascendance has a price. Moreover, as its relative capabilities grow, the PRC will inevitably compete harder against US influence in Asia and possess greater coercive means against those

noncooperative neighbors. As will be detailed, Beijing's carrots-and-sticks strategy is manifested foremost in its management of territorial disputes from the 1950s onward and has acquired fresh content in recent years despite China's enmeshment in the regional economic and institutional order. Ultimately, however, the underlying logic of realist theory implies that Beijing's long-term goal of excluding Washington from Asian affairs is unachievable and that rivalry and conflict would ensue if the PRC goes too far in forcing the issue.

In short, offensive realism is not an analytical straightjacket. If construed properly, it provides a plausible, parsimonious explanation of China's penchant for both restraint and assertiveness toward regional neighbors. This study makes this argument in four steps. The first section uses the framework of offensive realism to outline theoretically the broad possibilities of Chinese diplomacy toward neighboring states. Utilizing primary and secondary PRC sources, the second section then demonstrates that the preceding theoretical expectations find much support in available evidence on the making of Chinese foreign policy. Afterward, the third section contemplates why hopes of Chinese primacy may be chimerical in Asia's geopolitical structures, on the grounds that unbalanced power breeds fear and compels its potential targets to take necessary precautions. The last section concludes with a discussion of how the findings matter to theory and policy.

2 Interpreting China's ascendance: Why and how offensive realism matters

From the standpoint of offensive realism, international politics is anarchical, highly competitive, and inherently dangerous. To enhance their own security, states must maximize their relative power against potential rivals. In this structurally induced competition, great powers regard each other with the deepest suspicion and look constantly for opportunities to augment their own positions vis-à-vis peer competitors. Historically, the commonest way of power maximization was expansion and territorial conquest, since land is a critical source of a state's latent power (i.e. its wealth and population, which undergird its military prowess). Indeed, before the end of World War II, all great powers including the United States had followed more or less an expansionist course in their bids for regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2014 [2001], especially Chapters 2 and 6).

This is not to say, however, that great powers will adopt expansionist policies under any circumstances. Assuming states to be rational actors, offensive realism expects them to behave strategically toward their external environment. In effect, a great power should consider carefully not only the preferences and possible countermoves of other states but also the immediate and long-term consequences of its own actions. Accordingly, great powers should avoid taking offensive actions that will likely entail more costs than benefits and hence weaken their strategic positions in the long run (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], pp. 31, 36–37).

Thus, great powers are not ‘mindless aggressors so bent on gaining power that they charge headlong into losing wars or pursue Pyrrhic victories.’ Instead, they should be prudent power-maximizers who understand the game of ‘when to raise and when to fold’ (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], pp. 37, 40). Central to this game are two factors – the balance of power and geography, the first being a key structural variable and the second a ‘structural modifier’ in realist terminology (Taliaferro, 2000, p. 137).

When the local balance works against it, for example, a great power is well-advised not to take the offensive, but to defend the existing balance from threats by its more powerful rivals. With a marked increase in its relative advantages, it may then seize opportunities to shift the balance in its favor, if and when the benefits outweigh the costs and risks. Furthermore, a great power without a strong navy should take into account the ‘stopping power of water,’ or the difficulty of projecting power overseas (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], pp. 2–3, 37, 140–145).

In short, great powers should act within the limits of what is possible or feasible. They could, of course, sometimes ignore those limits and act unwisely, but only at their own peril. The United States has been the sole regional hegemon in the last two centuries, largely because it encountered no serious local or external balancers during its ascendance (Elman, 2004). In contrast, all other contenders for regional dominance, from Napoleonic France to Imperial Japan to Nazi Germany, had brought about their destruction by overextension in the face of multiple adversaries. In today’s world, seeking hegemony through foreign conquests is a plainly foolhardy enterprise, not only because of the prohibitive costs, but because the United States, having acquired preponderant power in international politics, would not tolerate a rival’s control of either Europe or Asia (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], pp. 364–365, 367–368).

From the preceding discussion, it follows logically that, until it achieves parity with the United States, a materially weaker PRC should have more incentives to ‘fold’ than to ‘raise,’ – i.e. to eschew overt hegemonic pursuits, rather than initiate a premature contest for regional supremacy. After all, despite its impressive growth, China still lags considerably behind America in economic, military, and technological strength and lacks the material wherewithal to establish a Sinocentric order (Beckley, 2011; Nye, 2012). Meanwhile, China faces probably the ‘most challenging geopolitical environment in the world,’ because it has too many neighbors to contend with (Nathan and Scobell, 2012, p. 5). When push comes to shove, most of those neighbors are capable of turning a conflict with China into a costly war of attrition for Beijing, thereby sapping its strength and diminishing its security.

Under the circumstances, to invade and subdue China’s periphery would be both beyond current Chinese means and politically suicidal, for such attempts are bound to provoke the formation of a counterbalancing coalition, to the detriment of the PRC’s long-term interests (Fravel, 2010).¹ Besides, territorial expansion is nowadays hardly essential to a great power’s economic growth or wealth creation, which depends increasingly on the globalized market, production, and finance, and China’s rise largely confirms this pattern (Brooks, 2005; Rosecrance, 2006; Kirshner, 2007).

In the meantime, the logic of offensive realism indicates that when a rising power is not yet capable of dominating its home region, its principal objective would be to hinder the extension of other great powers’ influence in its neighborhood. Given the enduring Sino–American strategic distrust since the founding of the PRC, this means, unsurprisingly, that Beijing was – and still is – preoccupied most of the time with the task of preventing Washington from gaining influence in Asia at China’s expense (Friedberg, 2011; Lieberthal and Wang, 2012).

To attain that goal, the PRC obviously needs more friends than foes among its neighbors. Strategically, a friendly neighborhood could shield China from direct threats posed by the American colossus, by impeding or restricting US presence in Asia (e.g. by declining to provide Washington with military bases, overflight rights, or onshore support). It would also

¹ However, China might still engage in localized, incremental expansion, as it has done in the South China Sea (Glaser, 2014a). Offensive realism suggests that when both systemic and military opportunities are present for such expansion, a rising state may do so without eliciting a counterbalancing response (Labs, 1997).

enable Beijing to concentrate on economic and military buildup, in preparation for an ultimate power transition vis-à-vis Washington. Conversely, a hostile neighborhood would not only strengthen the US position and influence against China but draw Beijing into constant conflicts and deflect its attention and resources from the priority of economic development.

Meanwhile, China's neighbors may wish to avoid an inimical relationship with Beijing too, in the absence of demonstrable Chinese hostility toward their sovereign independence. In theory, offensive realism recognizes that balancing is not a clearly preferred strategy even in an unbalanced regional system (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], p. 160; for a neoclassical theory of underbalancing in international politics, see Schweller, 2008). Admittedly, balancing a rising state involves significant opportunity costs as well as the forfeit of possible gains from cooperation with that state (Chan, 2012, ch. 2–4). Geopolitically, China's neighbors are acutely aware that America is an ocean away, whereas China has long dominated Asia's mainland – a fact that often compels its neighbors to adjust their national policies with some appreciation of Chinese interests and preferences (Ross, 1999, 2006; Womack, 2006).

Moreover, in regional politics, some Asian countries perhaps pay more attention to each other, than to China (e.g. India vs. Pakistan, North Korea vs. South Korea, or Vietnam vs. its weaker neighbors). By maintaining constructive relations with the PRC, they could preserve a potential point of leverage against their local adversaries. In the early nineteenth century, European great powers had adopted a similar opportunistic attitude toward the ascendance of the United States, because they were busily competing against each other and wished to have America serve as a future ally (Elman, 2004).

In addition, Southeast Asian nations have been traditionally reluctant to conclude formal alliances with the United States, for fear of compromising their own autonomy and freedom of maneuver (Acharya, 2011, 2014). Instead, they prefer an informal balance-of-influence strategy, by granting all major powers a stake in the regional order and allowing them to balance each other (Goh, 2008; Ciorciari, 2010). Implicitly, this approach finds support in a key tenet of offensive realism, which cautions that alliances are but 'marriages of convenience' and inherently unreliable (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], p. 33). Since states can change their allies but not their neighbors, it is thus understandable that many Asian countries, despite their support of the US rebalance policy, remain reluctant to choose between Washington and Beijing (for details, see Berteau *et al.*, 2014).

Logically, therefore, offensive realism does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a pragmatic bargain between China and its neighbors, presupposing that both sides are strategic players. That is, anxious to forestall US-led containment or encirclement, Beijing might seek to promote amicable and cooperative relations with neighboring states, in exchange for their agreement *not* to join forces with Washington against China. Indeed, it is often observed that a long-standing goal of Chinese diplomacy is to solidify friendly ties with neighboring countries, so as to buffer China against real or perceived US pressures (Goldstein, 2005; Shambaugh, 2005; Nathan and Scobell, 2012; Sutter, 2012).

In particular, since good-neighborly relations consist foremost in secure and settled borders, it is not unthinkable that Beijing would sometimes show restraint and even offer concessions in territorial disputes with its neighbors, for the double purposes of signaling its cooperative intent and undercutting the rationale for US involvement. Theoretically, offensive realism does not disapprove of one great power making concessions to others, so long as those concessions help it concentrate resources against the more menacing foes (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], pp. 164–165). On closer examination, much of China's peripheral territory is of limited economic and military value, which might have made it easier for Beijing to make certain territorial compromises (Fravel, 2010, pp. 512–518, 523–524).

Nevertheless, offensive realism would anticipate that accommodation and goodwill is only part of the picture in the PRC's relationship to its neighbors. Conceivably, while Beijing could reward some neighbors for their cooperation in preventing an antagonistic great power from encircling China, it could also punish others for their noncooperation. Offering concessions to any and all would make no practical sense, for it only signals weakness, invites contempt, and emboldens an adversary to demand more. Instead, through calculated strikes at unbending foes, a rising state could demonstrate to its neighbors that it is not a paper tiger and defying its ascendance has a price, thereby deterring further challenges to its interests.

Furthermore, as China's relative capabilities continue to grow apace, the local balance of power and geography will cease to pose insurmountable obstacles to the flexing of Chinese muscles. The PRC's rapid military modernization, for example, has enabled the progressive expansion of China's maritime defense perimeter, enhancing Beijing's ability to frustrate or complicate American intervention in a major conflict on China's periphery (Montgomery, 2014). In contrast, many Asian states are worried that US

budgetary constraints would erode Washington's strategic preponderance in the Asia-Pacific, leaving them unable to withstand China's burgeoning power (Johnson *et al.*, 2014, pp. 39–43).

This is not to imply, however, that a materially stronger China will attempt to conquer the rest of Asia, which offensive realism considers unlikely as well as infeasible (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], p. 370). Rather, the point is that Beijing will possess great coercive means – economic, military, and diplomatic – to influence the foreign policy choices of its neighbors and to push harder for a distinct sphere of influence. In this process, the PRC might offer sweeter carrots to those cooperative neighbors, as even a superpower needs friends and partners to cope with potential rivals more effectively. Yet meanwhile, it could also wield heavier sticks against those uncooperative neighbors, to discourage noncompliance with its wishes.

In sum, offensive realism suggests that China has strong and structurally driven incentives to diminish the influence of other great powers (especially an adversarial one) in its home region and that these incentives may lead Beijing to act both cooperatively and coercively toward its neighbors, depending on the latter's readiness to accommodate China's rise and/or keep a cautious distance from external powers. Admittedly, that a state's power-seeking strategy is often complex and contingent upon varying circumstances is not a novel tenet in realist theory. Like Mearsheimer, classical realists such as E. H. Carr (1964, pp. 112, 145) and Hans Morgenthau (1978, pp. 10–11) also perceived international politics as an endless struggle for power, which is nevertheless moderated by the necessity to exercise power prudently to attain one's ends. Theoretically, this line of thinking is consistent with the above propositions about how a rising state should approach its neighbors, both to secure their support and to compel their awe.

Unlike Mearsheimer, however, Carr, Morgenthau, and their adherents believed that a dominating great power could placate a rising competitor and moderate the latter's foreign policy by making sufficient concessions to accommodate its interests (Kirshner, 2012, pp. 65–69). On this point, offensive realism would probably retort: if a reigning power like America has an abiding interest in preserving its primacy over any regional competitors, and if a latecomer like China has an equally dogged determination to vitiate and ultimately eliminate the US sway over its periphery, there seems to be little room for resolving this fundamental clash of interest. Consequently, offensive realism predicts a greater likelihood of conflict between Beijing on the one hand and Washington and its Asian allies on the other.

In this regard, the differences between defensive and offensive realism are striking too. Implicitly, defensive realism considers international politics a more peaceful arena wherein the top priority of states is not to maximize power, but to preserve security. Accordingly, states are well-advised to maintain a posture of self-restraint and avoid unnecessarily aggressive or provocative actions that could impact their security negatively (Waltz, 1979, pp. 126–127; see also Taliaferro, 2000). From this perspective, it is in the best interest of a rising state like China to come to terms with American hegemony, as well as to pursue moderate policies toward all its neighbors. Likewise, Washington and its partners should keep signaling their restraint and reassurance to Beijing, to avert a ‘security dilemma’ in which uncertainties about each other’s intentions prevent purely security-seeking nations from cooperating to sustain a mutually acceptable status quo order (for this view, see Johnston, 2003, 2013).

In the offensive realist view, however, the Achilles’ heel of this defensive realist prediction lies in its failure to see that for an ascending power, security does not always consist in the maintenance of the status quo. Rather, given the lasting strategic distrust between Beijing and Washington, the PRC might find it more advisable to improve its long-term security position by seeking a gradual reduction of American influence in Asia and forging a new ‘status quo’ in its own favor. If that is the case, then Sino–American relations may face stormy times ahead, as the United States obviously has no intention of abandoning its Asian allies and partners to their fate and letting China hold the reins in this vitally important region.

Viewed in this light, offensive realism becomes readily falsifiable in regard to the behavior of a rising China. The theory would be invalid if the PRC customarily welcomes, not just in words but in deeds, a sustained US presence and leadership role in Asia’s security architecture, or if process-tracing reveals that Beijing frequently offers territorial compromises to the neighboring countries without considering the question of having the concerned countries keep the United States at arm’s length.

Perusing the empirical record of Chinese foreign policy from the 1950s onward, however, the next section will show that offensive realism appears to find much sustenance in the PRC’s regional diplomacy, as manifested particularly by Beijing’s strategy of treating friends and foes differently in territorial disputes.

3 Linking theory and reality: Structural incentives and Chinese diplomacy

Regarding the PRC's management of territorial disputes, scholars have long noted a curious duality in Chinese behavior. In some disputes, Beijing acts equably and makes substantial concessions to its smaller neighbors. Yet, in others, Beijing acts assertively and even with alarming belligerence, against a powerful adversary or its allies (Christensen, 2006; Fravel, 2008; Johnston, 2013). In a comprehensive study, Fravel (2008) argues that Beijing often traded territorial concessions for a neighbor's assistance in countering threats to China's domestic stability, while reacting bellicose to a neighbor's attempts to press forward against Chinese interests. Meanwhile, Fravel (2008, p. 60) admits in passing that the strategic necessity to balance US power could also explain Chinese compromises in certain disputes, though he does not develop this argument in detail.

Seeking to fill this gap in the literature, this section shows that structural incentives do critically impact PRC leadership decision-making on territorial disputes. That is, Beijing tends to reward those neighbors whom it perceives as friendly or cooperative in keeping a rival great power from gaining influence at China's expense, and to punish those unfriendly ones whom it suspects of lining up with that rival against China. Given space constraints, this section focuses on the three most noteworthy periods, namely, the 1950s and 1960s, the 1990s and early 2000s, and the post-2009 wave of Chinese assertiveness.

3.1 *The 1950s and 1960s: China responds to the US threat*

From the outset, the PRC leadership had viewed US involvement in Asia with utmost concern, for fear that Washington might enlarge its alliance system to strangle China militarily and diplomatically. As early as April 1952, PRC premier Zhou Enlai (1990, pp. 53–54) had stressed the need to befriend China's neighbors and dissuade them from aligning with American 'imperialism.' In June 1954, Chinese diplomacy began to bear fruits in this respect, owing to Zhou's deft maneuvers during the Geneva conference on the settlement of the Indochina crisis. First, Zhou reached an understanding with the leaders of Burma, Laos and Cambodia: i.e. Beijing would respect the sovereign independence of Southeast Asian nations, as long as they remained strictly neutral and forbade the presence of US military bases on their territory that could menace China's security (Li *et al.*, 1997, Vol. 1, pp. 388–389,

393; Jin *et al.*, 2008, Vol. 3, pp. 1494–1496)). Second, together with Indian premier Jawaharlal Nehru and Burmese premier U Nu, Zhou expounded the famous Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which greatly improved the PRC's international image (Jin *et al.*, 2008, Vol. 3, pp. 1524–1532).

On 8 July 1954, Mao Zedong, chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), outlined eleven guiding principles for Chinese diplomacy, specifying the establishment of a 'peace zone' in Southeast Asia as a foremost means of countering the US threat (Pan *et al.*, 2013, Vol. 2, pp. 257–258). Three months later, Nehru, who advocated a pan-Asian peace zone too, visited China and held several in-depth conversations with Mao. Describing the United States as a 'powerful rival' bent on subverting and weakening the PRC, Mao (1998, p. 175) emphasized that Beijing needed in earnest the friendship and cooperation of its neighbors. In December 1954, U Nu also visited Beijing and professed candidly Burma's fear of Chinese aggression. In reply, Mao (1998, pp. 187–189) pledged that China would not invade Burma or interfere with its domestic politics and that the CCP had already disbanded its overseas branches in Burma, Indonesia, and Singapore. Gratified, U Nu (1955, p. 97) declared publicly in Beijing that Burma would never become a 'pawn' of any state hostile to China.

In April 1955, Zhou Enlai attended the Asian-African conference in Bandung, Indonesia. To assuage the misgivings of neighboring states, Zhou (1990, p. 130) announced for the first time that China would seek a peaceful resolution of all its boundary problems. In return, Zhou (1990, pp. 127–128) obtained an oral assurance from the premier of Pakistan, a US ally, that Pakistan bore no malice toward China and would not participate in any US-led aggressive wars against the latter. In late 1955, the government of Thailand, another US ally, began to pursue a secret rapport with Beijing too, on the grounds that Thailand must face the reality of China's ascendance and not count on American protection forever (Huang, 2008).

Despite Zhou's announcement at Bandung, however, Beijing did not immediately set out to investigate China's boundary problems, which were numerous because China's land border with most neighboring countries was never officially demarcated. Indeed, preoccupied with the daunting tasks of domestic reconstruction, the PRC government conducted a comprehensive survey of the entire Chinese border only in 1957–1959, which produced China's first-ever boundary atlas in June 1959 (Liao, 2013a, p. 76). Nonetheless, in November 1955, the PRC and Burmese forces clashed accidentally in a disputed sector, which prompted Beijing to consider solving

the boundary dispute with Rangoon first. According to Zhou Enlai, Burma's friendliness toward China was the 'political foundation of our discussions [about the settlement]' (Liao, 2013b, p. 88). In August 1956, after intensive research, Zhou drew up a tentative proposal, which entailed substantial PRC concessions to Burma (Jin *et al.*, 2008, Vol. 3, pp. 1725–1729).

Unsurprisingly, Zhou's proposal met with vociferous objections from many quarters, including the CCP's local leadership in Yunnan Province (bordering Burma), the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the ethnic minorities living in disputed areas, the noncommunist 'democratic parties,' and even the PRC embassy in Burma (Zhuo, 2003; Liao, 2013b). Official CCP scholarship shows that Zhou spent nearly a year explaining and defending his proposal in internal discussions. In a nutshell, Zhou argued that China must reduce tensions and consolidate peaceful coexistence with its neighbors, to thwart the US 'imperialistic scheme' of encircling and containing the PRC. With this paramount goal in mind, China must adopt a realistic attitude and not press for undue gains in resolving boundary problems (Jin *et al.* 2008, Vol. 3, pp. 1734–1745; Liao, 2013a, pp. 82 to 83). Besides, the proposed concessions to Burma involved little military or economic loss to China; some concessions were purely nominal, because China had long lost administrative control of certain disputed areas (Liao, 2013b, pp. 92 to 93).

Ultimately, Zhou's arguments prevailed, and the PRC's National People's Congress (NPC) approved the premier's proposal in July 1957. Reciprocally, Burmese premier U Nu reassured Zhou that after settling the border issue, Rangoon would sign a treaty of nonaggression and cooperation with Beijing, to formalize Burma's pledge not to join any military alliances targeted at China (Li *et al.*, 1997, Vol. 2, pp. 29 to 30). Due to domestic government changes, however, Burma signed a boundary treaty with China only in January 1960, but the terms of the treaty, under scrutiny, were quite similar to Zhou's 1956 proposal (Feng, 2014). Moreover, the two countries did simultaneously sign a nonaggression treaty that assured Burma's political neutrality, as Zhou reported emphatically to the NPC (Li *et al.*, 1997, Vol. 2, p. 285). In 1957, Beijing also agreed to transfer the White Dragon Tail Island (lying in the middle of the Tonkin Gulf) to North Vietnam, to support Hanoi's anti-US struggle (Fravel, 2008, pp. 268–269).

Regarding the Sino–Pakistani border, Beijing exhibited an identical, level-headed attitude. In mid-1956, Mao instructed Geng Biao, PRC ambassador

to Pakistan, to enhance friendship with Islamabad and so breach US military encirclement of China. Toward that end, [Geng \(1998, pp. 79–83, 108 to 109\)](#) soon advised Beijing to relinquish a long-standing if outdated claim of sovereignty over an enclave in the Karakoram Mountains, as a conciliatory step toward the resolution of the Sino–Pakistani boundary question. Geng’s advice was accepted; a few months later, during Pakistani premier H. S. Suhrawardi’s visit to Beijing, Mao stressed again China’s need to befriend its neighbors in order to cope with the ‘tremendous pressure’ from the US military presence in Asia ([Pan *et al.*, 2013, Vol. 3, pp. 12–16](#)).

In July 1958, the PRC State Council established a Boundary Commission, to coordinate interdepartmental research on China’s boundary problems ([Shen and Li, 2006, p. 362](#)). In December 1958, the CCP Politburo issued a directive to all provincial leaders, exhorting them to pay closer attention to boundary issues and prepare for a gradual, step-by-step settlement ([Li *et al.*, 1997, Vol. 2, p. 194](#)). However, that Beijing did not possess a complete boundary atlas until June 1959 impeded any attempts at quick settlement. Still, in January 1960, the CCP leadership concluded that given the persisting US threat, China needed to unite with all anti-imperialistic forces and, above all, to stabilize relations with its neighbors. Accordingly, the Politburo decided to speed up the boundary negotiations, primarily with India ([Wu, 1999, pp. 236–248](#)).

Indeed, despite the first armed clashes on the Sino–Indian border in 1959, Beijing retained a continuous interest in avoiding antagonizing New Delhi. In May 1959, [Mao \(1998, p. 376\)](#) personally edited a diplomatic note to India, adding the following words: ‘[China’s] main enemy is US imperialism. ... India is not our enemy, but our friend. China will not be so stupid as to make an enemy of the United States in the east and an enemy of India in the west.’ In April 1960, Zhou Enlai visited India and attempted to persuade Nehru to maintain the status quo on the border pending a final settlement ([Li *et al.*, 1997, Vol. 2, pp. 307–313](#)). Zhou’s attempts failed; afterward, India adopted a bold ‘forward policy’ and, taking advantage of China’s domestic vulnerability in 1961–1962, made substantial inroads into the territory claimed by Beijing ([Fravel, 2008, pp. 176–183](#)).

By February 1962, [Mao \(1996, p. 6\)](#) had formed the conviction that ‘the US-led imperialist bloc, the reactionary elements like Nehru, and [Soviet] modern revisionists are coordinating a new anti-China chorus.’ On 5 October 1962, Zhou Enlai instructed the PLA’s General Staff to draft a plan of operations against India immediately, on the grounds that only a ‘major

strike' could force an adversary to moderate its attitude toward China (Jin *et al.*, 2008, Vol. 4, p. 2199). Nevertheless, after routing the Indian army in a short border war (which lasted from 20 October to 21 November 1962), China declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrawal. As Zhou explained to the Indonesian ambassador later, Beijing did so because it wished to de-escalate the conflict and avoid driving New Delhi deeper into the Western camp. Meanwhile, Zhou foresaw protracted difficulties in Sino–Indian relations, which he said derived from Washington's 'strategic plan' to turn India against China (Li *et al.*, 1997, Vol. 2, pp. 517, 547).

Due to such deep-seated perceptions of US malevolence, Beijing continued to compromise with those neighbors whom it perceived as friendly and cooperative, but stood firm against those who had allegedly thrown their weight on the side of China's enemies. North Korea, for example, received considerable territorial concessions from the PRC, partly because Pyongyang was then a staunch ally in Beijing's relentless struggle against both US 'imperialism' and Soviet 'revisionism' (Wu, 1999, pp. 569–574, 670–681; Fravel, 2008, pp. 113–115).

Likewise, the archival research conducted by PRC scholars reveals that in 1961–62, Pakistan made clear to Beijing that it did not support US containment of China and that the improvement of Sino–Pakistani relations might encourage other US allies, including Thailand and the Philippines, to change their attitudes toward China too. After it felt entirely satisfied with Islamabad's diplomatic support, Beijing finally agreed to start boundary talks in late 1962 (Han and Qi, 2010; Han, 2011). Within five months, the talks were concluded in March 1963, much to Pakistan's advantage (Fravel, 2008, p. 116).

In marked contrast, Beijing was less flexible in handling the Sino–Soviet boundary dispute. Indeed, since late 1959, the CCP leadership had regarded Soviet foreign policy with growing scorn and consternation, accusing Moscow of conniving with American 'imperialism' against China (for details, see Wu, 1999). Thus, in boundary talks, Beijing kept trying to seize the moral high ground as a way of needling Moscow for concessions (Shen *et al.*, 2007, pp. 357–364; Fravel, 2008, pp. 120–123). As this strategy proved ineffectual, Mao ordered the PLA to strengthen its border defenses against the Soviets in 1963–64 (Shen *et al.*, 2007, pp. 342–347). But, with opposing troops stationed at close quarters and tensed for possible combat, clashes became inevitable, which eventually led the two communist giants to the brink of war in 1969.

3.2 The 1990s and early 2000s: China responds to US preponderance

After US president Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing in 1972, the United States and China entered into a *de facto* alliance against Soviet expansionism. In the following two decades, Beijing set its sights upon collaborating with Washington to prevent the extension of Soviet influence on China's periphery. Correspondingly, the PRC put its territorial disputes with US regional allies (e.g. Japan and the Philippines) in abeyance but fought a protracted border war with Vietnam, a former ally which turned its fealty toward Moscow in the late 1970s.

After the Tiananmen crisis in June 1989, however, Beijing's distrust of American intentions rose again. The attitudes of China's patriarchal leader Deng Xiaoping were a case in point. As a pragmatist, [Deng \(1993, pp. 330–333, 350–351, 363\)](#) was keenly aware of China's vast inferiority in relative power vis-à-vis America; thus, he strongly favored maintaining a stable Sino–American relationship, to benefit China's long-term development. Yet, as a lifelong communist, [Deng \(1993, pp. 325 to 326, 359 to 360, 363\)](#) repeatedly charged Washington with attempting to destabilize and subvert the PRC and advocated a new international order that rejects US/Western supremacy. To achieve that end, [Deng \(1993, pp. 353, 363\)](#) advised the CCP's post-1989 leadership to foster closer ties with other developing nations, especially the post-Soviet republics.

In 1989–1992, Beijing thus sought actively to improve relations with many neighboring states (for details, see [Qian, 2006](#)). According to CCP general secretary [Jiang Zemin \(2006, Vol. 1, pp. 278 to 279, 288 to 289\)](#), a friendly neighborhood provided China not only with a benign security environment but also with expanded strategic maneuvering room against US preponderance in world politics. At that time, senior PRC diplomats recalled that Russia and India voiced similar objections to US/Western predominance and wished to deepen cooperation with China. Moreover, Moscow and New Delhi made clear that their lingering boundary problems with Beijing should not impede bilateral cooperation and that peace and stability should be maintained on the border pending a settlement ([Cheng, 2006, pp. 248–250; Qian, 2006, pp. 178–187](#)).

Unlike Maoist China in the 1950s, however, the PRC in the 1990s perceived no clear and present US military threat, and its distrust of American intentions stemmed mostly from political and ideological considerations ([Lieberthal and](#)

Wang, 2012, pp. 7 to 8). Meanwhile, China's deepening integration into the international system also compelled Beijing to maintain a constructive relationship with the United States, which was not only the architect of the system but also a vital source of capital, technology, and managerial know-how for China's development (Jiang, 2006, Vol. 1, p. 312). Under the circumstances, Jiang Zemin and his colleagues did not feel that conflict with America was imminent or that China needed to forge an anti-US alliance anytime soon (Jiang, 2006, Vol. 1, pp. 278–281, 312).

Accordingly, Beijing was not in a hurry to compromise territorially with its neighbors this time. Rather, as Jiang (2006, Vol. 1, pp. 289; Vol. 2, pp. 198, 204 to 205, 407) repeatedly stressed in the 1990s, China's top priority in managing the remaining territorial disputes was not to pursue a hasty settlement but to stabilize the status quo and create a propitious context for a gradual, step-by-step solution, primarily by expanding political dialogues and economic cooperation with the neighboring states.

Nonetheless, offensive realism expects great powers to fear each other because their formidable offensive capabilities are considered an ineradicable threat in the long run, and because they can never be certain of their opponents' long-term intentions (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], pp. 42 to 43). Thus, the preponderant power of the American hegemon, in the emphatic words of Jiang Zemin (2006, Vol. 1, p. 280; Vol. 2, pp. 422 to 423; Vol. 3, p. 8), remains a latent but never-ending threat to China's national interests as well as the survival of the ruling communist regime. As a result, available evidence indicates that whether a neighboring country was helpful in buffering China against US preponderance continued to matter a great deal to Beijing's policy toward that country.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, for instance, the Russian government exhibited a keen interest in developing relations with the PRC as a possible counterweight to the West. In April 1996, President Boris Yeltsin took the initiative to propose that Beijing and Moscow establish a 'strategic partnership of cooperation,' which was accepted by Beijing with alacrity (Qian, 2006, p. 188). In Jiang Zemin's (2006, Vol. 2, pp. 195 to 196, 402 to 403, 547) view, collaboration with Russia facilitated China's efforts to preserve stability in its restive Muslim borderland, to counter US predominance in international affairs, and to promote a multipolar world order.

Thus, Jiang played a key role in pushing for a complete settlement of Sino–Russian border disputes, the sooner the better (Tang, 2011, pp. 180 to 181). According to former PRC foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan (2011,

pp. 187–199), Jiang’s political will and decisiveness cleared the way for the resolution of sovereignty over the Heixiazi Island in the Ussuri River, which was the last and thorniest of Sino–Russian territorial disputes. Since the 1920s, successive Chinese governments had insisted that the island belonged to China. Jiang, however, made the pivotal decision to abandon that historical Chinese claim, and to settle for a compromise that eventually conceded approximately half of the island to Russia.

Similarly, regarding the Sino–Vietnamese boundary dispute, old antagonisms proved less strong than new pressures for Beijing and Hanoi to seek reconciliation. Qi Jianguo (2010, 2012), former PRC ambassador to Vietnam, testifies that even before the normalization of state-to-state relations in 1991, the Vietnamese communist leadership had begun consultations with the CCP on how to promote economic growth while preserving the socialist one-party system. Furthermore, the communist old guard in Hanoi were then profoundly antipathetic to Washington and assured Ambassador Qi that Vietnam would never again permit any third country to use the Cam Rahn Bay as a naval base against China.

Against this background, in 1997–99, Jiang Zemin twice reached an agreement with Vietnamese communist leaders to resolve the land border disputes as soon as possible, so as to advance the ‘all-round cooperation’ between Beijing and Hanoi (Tang, 2011, pp. 298–299). Bound by this political injunction from their topmost leadership, the two countries worked out a final settlement in late 1999, which gave half of the disputed land territory to Vietnam (Fravel, 2008, pp. 147–148). A year later, China and Vietnam resolved their protracted maritime disputes in the Gulf of Tonkin equitably, which again reflected the determination of their communist leadership to establish a long-term cooperative relationship (Qi, 2010; Tang, 2011, pp. 311–321).

In comparison, Beijing showed little interest in expediting boundary negotiations with New Delhi, after India conducted a series of nuclear testing in May 1998 and attempted to secure US support by referring to a possible threat from China.² As Tang Jiaxuan (2011, ch. 10) reminisces, the incident shook the political foundation of Sino–Indian relations and revived Beijing’s

2 In 1993 and 1996, China and India had already signed two agreements to maintain peace and stability on the disputed border. According to Cheng Ruisheng (2006, pp. 248–250), former PRC ambassador to India, both countries were then anxious for each other’s support in resisting US/Western predominance.

distrust of Indian intentions. The two sides managed to patch up their quarrels, however, after New Delhi reaffirmed in diplomatic exchanges that India and China were not enemies or rivals. Still, it was not until 2005, when the two countries agreed to build a formal ‘strategic and cooperative’ partnership, that they resumed serious boundary talks (Tang, 2011, pp. 518–524).

Likewise, in the 1990s, the PRC maintained a relatively low-key position on the maritime-territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, not only because of Beijing’s limited power-projection capabilities but also because the diplomatic support from Japan and Southeast Asian nations was vitally important to China’s efforts to expand its international stature and forestall US containment (Goldstein, 2005; Shambaugh, 2005; Qian, 2006; Shirk, 2007). Still, it is suggestive that throughout this period, China did not compromise with Japan or the Philippines, both of which were US allies and looked politically suspect in Beijing’s eyes (e.g. see Jiang, 2006, Vol. 2, pp. 204, 246; see also Shirk, 2007).

3.3 China’s post-2009 assertiveness: Two steps forward, one step backward

From Beijing’s perspective, the Sino–American power balance began shifting to China’s advantage after 2008. Notably, the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, while debilitating the US economy and casting doubts upon Western capitalism, did not slow China’s rise. Instead, the PRC has ascended to the status of the world’s number-two great power, with a distinctive model of development that appeals to many developing countries, and capable of rallying much international support for reforming the Western-dominated world order (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012, pp. 8–10).

As a result, there was an upsurge in Chinese confidence that Sino–American relations had entered a new phase, to be characterized by greater US accommodation of China’s concerns and interests. Shi Yinhong (2010, 2013), a renowned scholar and advisor to the PRC State Council, observes that this confidence led some Chinese elites in 2009–12 to misconceive the basic aims of Chinese diplomacy toward neighboring states. Instead of preserving good-neighboring relations as a useful buffer against the still unrivalled US power, those PRC elites advocated pursuing total victory in any and all disputes with China’s neighbors. This approach, which Shi referred to sardonically as ‘triumphalism,’ had the opposite effect of alienating many neighboring states and fortifying American strategic involvement in Asia to China’s disadvantage.

By late 2013, however, the new PRC administration under President Xi Jinping seemed to realize that China's 'triumphalism' had gone too far. Consequently, starting with a major work conference on China's 'periphery diplomacy' (*zhoubian waijiao*, or diplomacy toward neighboring states) in October 2013, Xi began to reaffirm the strategic necessity for developing closer political, economic, and security cooperation with the neighboring countries. As in old days, this 'new' PRC strategy rests upon the deft employment of both carrots and sticks: i.e. while offering rewards to some neighbors for their accommodation of a rising China, Beijing also intends to impose costs on others' pursuit of policies that challenge Chinese interests (Glaser, 2014b; Johnson *et al.*, 2014; Ruan, 2014).

Undeniably, in Chinese eyes, the foremost of Chinese interests consist in countering the US rebalance to Asia and weakening the US alliances in China's neighborhood (Shi, 2010, p. 12; Glaser, 2014b, p. 2). Officially, Beijing denies any intention of pushing America out of Asia. In August 2015, for example, PRC foreign minister Wang Yi pledged to US secretary of state John Kerry that 'China does not intend to expel the United States from Asia, and would like to see the United States play a positive role in the Asia-Pacific.'³ However, if the US alliance system in Asia is vitiated or dissolved, China will undoubtedly emerge as the regional hegemon by default. Presently, Beijing seems to be employing a variety of means to attract the voluntary alignment of regional states, as well as drive a diplomatic wedge between those countries and America.

More recently, President Xi Jinping has put forth several bold initiatives. Politically, in May 2014, the Chinese leader outlined a vision of a new, 'Asia-for-Asians' regional order, which implicitly precludes an active role for the United States or its alliances in the regional security architecture.⁴ Economically, Beijing seeks to cement the association between China's growth and regional prosperity, especially through the multi-billion-dollar New Silk Road project and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, thereby encouraging more neighboring states to accommodate and support China's ascendance (Ruan, 2014, pp. 16, 18–20).

3 See the PRC Foreign Ministry's press statement on Wang Yi's meeting with Secretary Kerry (http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjb_602314/wjbz_602318/xghds/t1286523.shtml) (7 September 2015, date last accessed).

4 See Xi's address to the 2014 summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1158070.shtml) (7 September 2015, date last accessed).

Within this context, China keeps signaling that it will treat friends and foes differently, even on the ultrasensitive maritime-territorial disputes. In 2013, for example, the PRC upgraded its cooperative partnership with Brunei and Malaysia, two South China Sea claimants that had long kept a low profile in the dispute to avoid antagonizing Beijing (Chen, 2013; Ruan, 2014, p. 16). Despite intermittent Sino–Vietnamese frictions in 2013–14, Beijing evidently values continuous collaboration with Hanoi on political and ideological grounds, which explains its restraint in recent skirmishes (Ruan, 2014, p. 25; Vuving, 2014). Nonetheless, in dealing with Japan and the Philippines, two US allies suspected by Beijing of deliberately defying China’s ascendance with American support, the PRC adopts a salient hardline position, sometimes to the point of escalating the disputes intentionally to create a new status quo in its favor (Fravel, 2013; Glaser, 2014a; Ruan, 2014, pp. 14, 22 to 23).

Critics of offensive realism may wonder why the ‘stopping power of water,’ a key concept in Mearsheimer’s theory, fails to constrain Chinese behavior in maritime disputes. On closer inspection, Mearsheimer (2014 [2001], p. 265) seems to use the concept to highlight the difficulty of attaining global or sometimes regional hegemony, not to indicate that overseas territorial conquests are absolutely unachievable or unprofitable. For Beijing, however, it is one thing to carry out amphibious landings on a few disputed islets in the East and South China Seas, but quite another to launch a massive invasion of Japan and the Philippines.

3.4 What next? The Chinese dream of regional primacy and its structural limits

According to international relations theory, economic interdependence and intergovernmental organizations serve the vital purposes of promoting cooperation and preventing conflict among nations. In a voluminous literature, scholars maintain that economic and trade linkages create a common interest in preserving peace, whereas international institutions enable states to advance collaboration and settle disputes amicably (for a classical study that expounds these views, see Russett and Oneal, 2001). Indeed, owing to the phenomenal expansion of Chinese trade and participation in international organizations in the last three decades, it is often noted that the PRC is no longer an unruly, revolutionary actor in international society, but adopts a more restrained and collaborative approach in global and

regional affairs (Johnston, 2003, 2008; Kang, 2007; Kent, 2007; Foot and Walter, 2011; Chan, 2012).

In some aspects, Beijing's periphery diplomacy seems in accord with this thesis. Overall, PRC leaders and elites recognize that the costs would far exceed the benefits if China resumes a posture of unyielding militancy in the international system. In addressing domestic audiences, senior PRC diplomats often underscore the fact that China now shares a wide range of common interests with its neighbors and that it is unwise to jeopardize those interests by militarizing China's remaining maritime-territorial disputes (Qi, 2010; Wu, 2011, 2014). Even the PLA's naval strategists endorse a generally cautious approach toward the South China Sea dispute, for fear that armed conflict would derail China's economic growth (which relies heavily on foreign trade) and foreclose the possibility of lucrative joint development (Goldstein, 2011).

Meanwhile, however, it is worth bearing in mind that great powers usually possess multiple means to achieve the same end: when economic weapons suffice to accomplish its purposes, a stronger state tends not to employ the more hazardous military weapon (Carr, 1964, p. 132). Nowadays, the gigantic Chinese economy has furnished Beijing with a formidable array of economic weapons: i.e. the PRC could punish its perceived adversaries, not by military force, but by the application of such economic pressure as denial of access to the Chinese market, imposition of trade sanctions, or interruption of economic assistance or cooperation. Indeed, the coercive elements of Beijing's economic diplomacy have caused growing anxieties among China's neighbors (Reeves and Pardo, 2013; Glaser, 2014b).

Similarly, it is not uncommon for great powers to twist the rules of international institutions to suit their national interests. Various scholars, for instance, observe that some international institutions leave Beijing with considerable room for tactical evasions (Kent, 2007; Foot and Walter, 2011; Schweller and Pu, 2011). Regarding the South China Sea disputes, Chinese maneuvers have prevented the ASEAN's regional structures from playing a stronger role (Johnson *et al.*, 2014, p. 42). Meanwhile, despite its interest in promoting military confidence-building measures, the PRC has deployed an increasing number of civil marine-surveillance vessels to defend its claims in the East and South China Seas, which looks equally intimidating to other claimants and increases the likelihood of incidents or crises (Swaine and Fravel, 2011; Fravel, 2013).

From a longer-term perspective, however, Beijing's gains from those endeavors may be self-defeating, because they demonstrate that the PRC, like other great powers, would not hesitate to use its power to get its way. For China's neighbors, this might well be a sobering reminder that they have to hedge their bets against future dangers. International politics, after all, is a self-help arena wherein states can never be certain of each other's intentions (Mearsheimer, 2014[2001], p. 31). Even if a rising power acts with exemplary self-control today, its weaker neighbors will still worry about its future behavior. If its actions are less than exemplary, the neighboring countries can hardly be blamed for taking necessary precautions.

When the weaker states cannot effectively balance a potential hegemon in their own region, they have to consider introducing external helpmates as a strategic counterweight. To be sure, while doing so, they may still wish to avoid conflict with the rising state in their midst, much less to precipitate a confrontation between that state and external powers. For, in any such conflicts, they will unavoidably find themselves in the frontline and take the brunt of battle, the costs of which they are perhaps loath to bear.

Instead, their ideal strategy is to have both the rising state and external powers participate in the construction of an open and inclusive regional order, with malice toward none and benefit for all. For states of lesser stature, this approach would put them in the desirable position of being able to garner reassurance and support from all major powers, while avoiding overreliance upon and domination by any one of them. Implicitly, these calculations are part and parcel of the aforementioned balance-of-influence strategy adopted by most Southeast Asian nations, which encourages all great powers to contribute collaboratively to regional peace, stability, and prosperity, rather than covet privileged positions or exclusive spheres of influence (Acharya, 2004, 2014; Goh, 2008; Ciorciari, 2010).

In theory, therefore, China's long-term goal of excluding US influence from Asian affairs is unachievable, since it plainly contradicts the neighboring countries' interests and preferences. Fundamentally, those interests are structurally induced too, because, as Kenneth Waltz (1997, p. 915) vividly put it, 'international politics abhors unbalanced power' just as nature abhors a vacuum. For its weaker neighbors, China's rising power warrants both solicitous attention and intent alertness, and to join hands with Beijing against Washington is not in their interests any more than the reverse. When the chips are down, they are unlikely to snap to attention at Beijing's peremptory command to push America out of Asia; nor, for that

matter, would Washington stand aside and permit Beijing to demolish its primacy in Asia.

Presently, many Chinese elites seem well aware of this. In August 2014, even the *Global Times*, a quasi-official PRC newspaper known for its fiery anti-Americanism, admitted in an editorial that ‘while America is incapable of forming a united front to contain China, China is just as incapable of mobilizing East Asian countries to clear the region of US influence.’⁵ Consequently, some PRC strategists begin to espouse a new vision of Chinese leadership in Asia, undergirded by Beijing’s provision of such public goods as peace, security, and prosperity for the region. Yan Xuetong (2011, 2013), an eminent scholar and advisor to the PRC government, avers that this emphasis on leadership rather than hegemony not only corresponds with traditional Chinese advocacy of moral and humane authority in international relations but portrays a new path to regional primacy that will attract willing followers. In part, China’s post-2013 periphery diplomacy appears to edge in this direction, as manifested by greater PRC efforts to fuel regional economic growth and build trust with regional neighbors (Glaser, 2014b; Johnson *et al.*, 2014; Ruan, 2014).

Nevertheless, China’s neighbors are unlikely to mistake glitter for gold and take China’s self-estimation at face value. Historically, despite its imposing exterior, ancient China’s ‘benevolent hegemony’ did not preclude the stratagems of coercion and domination, and claims about ‘Chinese exceptionalism’ are but a mixture of facts and myths (Zhang, 2013; Chong, 2014). Likewise, even optimistic assessments of the PRC’s regional diplomacy do not take the benignity of Chinese intentions for granted (e.g. see Acharya, 2004, 2014). Tellingly, despite their desires to benefit economically from China’s rise, many Asian states continue to gravitate toward the United States for security cooperation (Berteau *et al.*, 2014; Chong and Hall, 2014).

In sum, the Chinese dream of regional primacy faces lasting and ineluctable limits, which are embedded in Asia’s unique geopolitical structures. If Beijing is willing to live with that, it may still find ways, as before 2009, of dissuading its neighbors from aligning with other great powers to check or contain China’s rise. If, however, Beijing attempts to compel wider Asian acquiescence in Chinese supremacy, it will find the odds loaded heavily against the PRC, and Mearsheimer’s prediction of a counterbalancing coalition

5 The editorial is available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2014-08-12/101630670898.shtml> (7 September 2015, date last accessed).

might triumph with a vengeance against a China trapped in not-so-splendid isolation.

4 Conclusion

This study employs offensive realism to provide a baseline for assessing Beijing's strategic choices in dealing with regional neighbors. In theory, when an ascending power is not yet capable of dominating its home region, it would strive foremost to prevent external powers from extending their influence in its neighborhood. To attain that goal, it will likely adopt a carrots-and-sticks strategy, by rewarding some neighbors and punishing others according to their readiness to accommodate its ascendance and keep a cautious distance from external powers.

Empirically, this study records in detail that Beijing has long sought the assistance of its neighbors in turning away a rival great power from China's periphery, often by offering territorial concessions as a reward for such assistance. Nonetheless, Beijing is much less likely to compromise with those neighbors whom it suspects of collaborating with external powers against China: indeed, it tends to punish those alleged 'pawns' in order to flout their external sponsors and show who is the resident strongman in Asia. Restraint and assertiveness, in other words, are not inversely related (i.e. as one side grows, the other shrinks) in Chinese foreign policy behavior. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin and serve the same overriding purpose of countering adversarial (especially US) influences in China's neighborhood.

Since the PRC has pursued this carrots-and-sticks diplomacy with remarkable consistency to date, there is good reason to think that little will change in the future. Thus, the basic assumptions of offensive realism ring true: fundamentally, great-power politics is still a struggle for power and influence, and conflicts of interest among those titans are genuine and not just a result of unfortunate misunderstanding. And, to explain those conflicts, it is necessary to accord a certain causal significance to the structural incentives that push great powers to compete against each other in the first place.

A perceptive reader may ask why this study does not address Beijing's approach toward Taiwan, given that the Taiwan issue has long bedeviled Sino-American relations and seemed most likely to lead to conflict and even war between Beijing and Washington. The answer is two-fold.

Theoretically, offensive realism tends to emphasize territorial expansion as a means of achieving security, with scant attention to non-security goals like national honor or economic self-enrichment (Snyder, 2002, p. 157). To China, however, the Taiwan issue (and to a lesser degree, Beijing's maritime disputes with Japan and the Philippines today) perhaps matters much more to its national honor than to its security; therefore, Beijing's policy toward the breakaway island may not fit neatly into the theory. In practice, the PRC does not recognize Taiwan as an independent state but insists that the island is a part of China and so Beijing is entitled to subjugate it by force if necessary. Politically, it is unsurprising that Beijing appears less likely to compromise territorially with a 'renegade province' than with another full-fledged sovereign nation.

Still, the theoretical expectations of offensive realism should apply to the Taiwan issue in at least one crucial aspect: i.e. when the PRC suspects Taiwan of adopting adversarial policies with American support, it will more likely react with extraordinary hostility toward the perceived menace. In the 1950s, Beijing twice initiated crises in the Taiwan Strait, due to its consternation at the growing collaboration between Chiang Kai-shek (who was determined to return to the Chinese mainland by launching a military counteroffensive against the CCP) and the United States. In 1995–1996, Beijing conducted aggressive military maneuvers in the strait, on the grounds that the 'Taiwanese separatists' led by President Lee Teng-hui were receiving more visible support from Washington and could only be deterred by a massive show of Chinese arms (see Fravel, 2008, pp. 228 to 229, 252–255, 258 to 259). In this sense, the PRC's approach toward Taiwan is not dissimilar to its strategy of handling other territorial disputes, as much of Chinese behavior depends on Beijing's perceptions of the threat posed by an adversary's relations with a rival great power.

The ultimate question for this study is, will an ascending China succeed in pushing America out of Asia? Both theory and reality suggest that the answer is no. To begin with, China's rise is not necessarily accompanied by America's decline, and it would take Beijing at least several decades to shift the strategic balance in its own favor (Beckley, 2011; Nye, 2012). Short of a decisive power transition, the PRC cannot establish its centrality in the regional order. Even if the power transition occurs, it is doubtful that China's neighbors will sever their security links to America and stake their hopes on Chinese benevolence, given the structural imperatives that require states to beware and hedge against unbalanced power. For Beijing,

there is still a long way to go to overcome these forbidding structural hurdles. To force its neighbors into subservience is not a rational choice, but a mindless act of hubris that could only worsen China's regional position.

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