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Other Publication**Author(s):**

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Publication date:

2017-11

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000222699>

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Originally published in:

CSS Policy Perspectives 5(6)

The China Challenge Calls for US Leadership

Chinese President Xi Jinping has strengthened his domestic authority and offered an expansive vision for his country's global role. To address the rise of China, the United States must think beyond "America first".

By Brian G. Carlson

During his recently concluded trip to Asia, US President Donald Trump encountered a newly strengthened Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, who is determined to claim a greater role for his country. This reality came into sharper focus following last month's 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The congress's most notable results were that Xi strengthened his domestic authority and signaled his likely intention to remain China's paramount leader beyond 2022, when recent custom would dictate that he step aside after ten years in power. The congress also had important foreign policy implications. Xi's report to the gathering suggested that China is likely to maintain, and when possible amplify, its recent foreign policy assertiveness. The main themes of Trump's twelve-day, five-country visit to Asia were North Korea and economics, but the rise of China was a crucial subtext.

China's recent assertiveness in foreign policy predates Xi's accession to power in late 2012, but it has gained momentum under his leadership. It is apparent in recent events, including China's construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea, this past summer's border standoff with India,

and criticism of South Korea for its decision to host a missile defense system supplied by the United States. China's increasing pressure on Hong Kong and Taiwan is also consistent with this pattern.

During his report to the Congress on October 18, Xi heralded a "new era" in Chinese socialism. One message

KEY POINTS

- During last month's 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Chinese President Xi Jinping strengthened his domestic authority and laid the groundwork to remain in power beyond 2022.
- Xi appears to be discarding Deng Xiaoping's advice that China maintain foreign policy restraint, instead staking a claim for China to enjoy greater influence in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.
- US President Donald Trump's campaign statements questioning the value of alliances in Asia and his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a regional free-trade agreement, have called US leadership in Asia into question and offered an opportunity to China.
- The United States still holds a strong hand in Asia, but effective leadership requires a sustained commitment to upholding the regional security and economic order.

appeared to be that China would officially set aside the foreign policy restraint that Deng Xiaoping had counseled during China's rise to power. In Xi's view, Deng's famous foreign policy axiom, often translated as "bide your time and hide your capabilities", may have outlived its usefulness. China appears ready to assert not only an enhanced regional role, but also a greater role in the world. Trump's policies toward Asia have weakened the US ability to respond to this challenge. To reverse this trend, the United States should adopt a clear strategy based on sustained commitment to the Asia-Pacific region.

Xi Jinping Strengthens His Domestic Position

The 19th Party Congress's implications for domestic Chinese politics made this gathering the most significant of its kind so far in this century. As expected, the congress approved a second five-year term for Xi as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Delegates also approved a new Central Committee, a new Politburo, and a new Standing Committee of the Politburo. Five of the Standing Committee's seven members, all except Xi and Prime Minister Li Keqiang, are new. Of the five new members, four are Xi's allies.¹ Moreover, in a departure from recent practice, the new Standing Committee includes no obvious successor to Xi, who is 64. This suggests that Xi, though required to step down as president in March 2023 after two terms, may intend to remain the country's paramount leader for much longer.

Another major outcome was the congress's decision to enshrine Xi's political philosophy in the party constitution by name. Xi Jinping Thought therefore took its place in the constitution alongside Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory. This step enshrines Xi's thought as Chinese Communist Party doctrine, thereby making any challenges to his authority virtually inconceivable. Xi had already spent the past five years consolidating his power, primarily through a wide-ranging anti-corruption drive that has ensnared many of his potential rivals.

As Xi strengthens his own power, the prospects for reform in China appear remote. During the Third Plenum in November 2013, the CPC promised that market forces would play a "decisive role" in the economy. The market reforms that many expected during Xi's first five-year term mostly failed to materialize, however, and Xi's comments during his speech to the Congress last month emphasized the state's role in the economy. The prospects for political reform seem nonexistent. On the contrary, Xi has tightened restrictions on political freedom. Among other steps, he has cracked down on political comments that Chi-

nese citizens make to friends and family members in text messages and online.

Xi's consolidation of personal authority represents a rejection of Deng's principle of collective leadership. Deng believed that excessive concentration of power in one man, as had occurred during the Mao era, was dangerous. As Xi casts aside Deng's principles for domestic politics, he also seems prepared to discard some of Deng's core foreign policy advice.

No More Biding Time and Hiding Capabilities

In 1990, as turbulence spread throughout the communist world, Deng argued that China should exercise restraint in foreign policy. He believed that China should focus on domestic modernization and economic growth. This, in turn, depended on maintaining a peaceful external environment, especially during a period in which China's relative power still lagged far behind that of the United States.

Xi's foreign policy decisions in recent years and his speech to the Congress suggest that he believes China now enjoys increased freedom to assert its interests. He said that China's military modernization would continue, with the goal of building armed forces that would be capable of operating on land, at sea, in the air, in outer space, and in cyberspace. These forces would be capable not just of fighting wars, but of winning them. He boasted that China's construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea was one of the most important accomplishments of his first five years. He insisted that China would build naval forces capable of defending its territorial claims and outposts in the South China Sea. China will also seek to strengthen its global role by building infrastructure across Eurasia through the Belt and Road program. All of this is

FURTHER READING

Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping

David M. Lampton (2014)

This book analyzes the leadership styles of China's leaders in the post-Mao Zedong era. It includes an assessment of Xi Jinping's leadership early in his tenure.

The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power

Thomas J. Christensen (2015)

This book gives an overview of US-China relations in the post-Cold War era and analyzes the challenges that China's rise will pose in the future.

"China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure?" *Michael Beckley, International Security 36:3 (Winter 2011/12), pp. 41–78*

This article questions the common assumption that the United States is in relative decline compared to China and argues for sustained US global leadership.



U.S. President Donald Trump takes part in a welcoming ceremony with China's President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, November 9, 2017. REU / Damir Sagolj

consistent with Xi's previously stated commitment to the "Chinese dream" of "national rejuvenation".²

An article published this fall in the nationalistic *Global Times* may shed light on the Chinese leadership's thinking. In this article, He Yafei, a former vice foreign minister, argued that the world had entered the "post-American era".³ Although the United States would remain the world's most powerful country for many years to come, the world was no longer unipolar. This process of adjustment in the global balance of power began in 2008 with the financial crisis, and 2017 appeared to be another important turning point. In what the former vice foreign minister called a "great role reversal", Western countries have turned against globalization. This populist backlash is apparent not only in the United States, with the election of Trump and domestic political turmoil, but also in Europe, where Brexit and the rise of populist forces on the Continent have cast doubt on the EU's future.

Under these circumstances, He Yafei asserted, China has stepped forward to play an increasingly important global role. Two examples that he offered were China's defense of the Paris climate change accords and Xi's speech in support of the liberal international economic order at this year's Davos gathering. If He's argument reflects official thinking, as is likely, then China perceives the current moment as one in which to press its claims for a greater international role.⁴

The Challenge Facing the United States

The United States faces daunting challenges in responding to China's rise. Many of its problems, especially domestic political divisions, are self-inflicted. In order to preserve its global leadership, the United States must put its own house in order.

Trump's own actions have also weakened the US position in Asia. Some of his comments during the presidential campaign, when he threatened to withdraw US forces from Japan and South Korea unless those countries paid more for their own defense, raised doubts about the US commitment to regional security. By pulling the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, he undermined US economic leadership in the region. His current efforts to renegotiate a free trade agreement with South Korea, a key US ally, are similarly unhelpful. Trump called for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" during his trip, but his "America first" policies and promises not to sign another free-trade agreement in Asia undermine this objective. The US withdrawal from economic leadership in the region offers China an opportunity to fill the vacuum.

It also complicates efforts to exercise leadership on security issues, as in efforts to rally support for confronting North Korea.⁵

Trump's policies toward China have also been erratic. His primary objective has been to persuade China to increase pressure on North Korea. To this end, Trump has flattered Xi and at times has softened US policy toward China on other issues, including economics and the South China Sea. When he has been disappointed with the results, he has criticized China sharply. Trump's effort to gain China's help on North Korea will be an uphill climb, as China's primary concern is to prevent a war and the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang. Failure to resist China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is likely to unnerve regional allies and unlikely to win Chinese support for efforts to pressure North Korea. The effort to secure an improved business climate for foreign companies operating in China would be more likely to succeed if the United States and European countries would increase coordination.

The United States Still Has Cards to Play

Trump's visit to Asia was a missed opportunity to reestablish US leadership in the region. Despite China's increasing self-confidence, however, the United States still enjoys a strong position. As Joseph Nye argues, the United States still holds several cards that give it the upper hand over China, including geography, energy, trade, and the dollar. The United States is surrounded by oceans and friendly countries, whereas China shares land borders with fourteen other countries and is embroiled in territorial disputes with several neighbors. In the energy sphere, the United States has exploited the revolution in unconventional energy sources to reduce its energy dependence significantly, whereas China is increasingly reliant on imported energy

sources. International trade patterns leave China more vulnerable than the United States. Finally, China's renminbi is far from challenging the dollar as the world's reserve currency. These advantages, Nye argues, are likely to endure long after Trump leaves the presidency.⁶

One reason that Deng Xiaoping counseled foreign policy restraint was that an assertive China could provoke a reaction by other states in Asia. This risk remains. If China becomes sufficiently assertive in its maritime and territorial disputes, it could provoke the other claimants to increase coordination or even form alliances to counter China. In some ways, these trends are already apparent, as the United States, India, Vietnam, and Japan have discussed ways to increase policy coordination. In order for these efforts to be effective, however, the United States must remain engaged. If Asian allies begin to doubt the US commitment, then eventually they may have no choice but to reach accommodations with China, thereby greatly strengthening Chinese influence in the region. Many of Trump's statements and actions to date have not inspired confidence on this score.

Withdrawal from TPP is an already established fact, and now one can only hope that the United States will take other steps to re-engage in regional economic issues. On the security front, the United States needs greater clarity about its strategic objectives. Any policy premised on gaining China's support for actions designed to destabilize the North Korean regime or coerce it to relinquish its nuclear weapons is likely to fail. Instead, the United States should focus on deterrence and avoid sliding into what would certainly be a devastating war on the Korean peninsula. Above all, the United States needs a clear strategy

toward China, which poses the main challenge to US leadership in Asia and the world. A successful strategy would signal both reassurance and resolve toward China. The United States should make clear that it has no intention to stifle China's development, but also fully intends to support its allies and resist illegitimate encroachments by China in the South China Sea and elsewhere. The United States still commands a strong position in Asia, but translating its advantages into successful strategy requires leadership and commitment

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ISSN: 2296-6471