

## **Changing Power Dynamics in Asia**

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A fast-rising Asia has become the fulcrum of global geopolitical change. Asian policies and challenges now help shape the international economy and security environment. But 2010 — the year of the tiger in Chinese astrology — will be remembered as the year in which China roared by ratcheting up tensions with neighbors from Japan to India by escalating territorial feuds. In fact, 2010 was the year that Chinese leaders undercut their country's own interests by kindling fears of an expansionist China, thereby facilitating America's return to center stage in Asia.

China's lengthening shadow has prompted a number of Asian countries to start building security cooperation on a bilateral basis, thereby laying the groundwork for a potential web of interlocking strategic partnerships. Such cooperation reflects a quiet desire to influence China's behavior positively, so that it does not cross well-defined red lines or go against the self-touted gospel of its "peaceful rise."

But building genuine partnerships is a slow process, because it demands major accommodation and adjustment on both sides. The US, for example, has worked hard in recent years to co-opt India in a "soft alliance" shorn of treaty obligations. Yet, despite a rapidly warming bilateral rapport and Obama's recent statement calling India the "cornerstone of America's engagement in Asia," conflicting expectations and interests often surface.

The United States is now courting Vietnam as well. Like with India, the United States is using a nuclear deal with Vietnam as a strategic instrument to build close cooperation. The Cold War legacy, however, continues to weigh down thinking in Hanoi and Washington to some extent. Within Vietnam's ruling Communist Party, there are deep divisions over the country's relations with the United States. Even as Vietnam moves closer to the United States as a hedge against China's muscular strategy, some Vietnamese leaders fear that the Americans remain committed to regime change.

After all, despite Burma's strategic importance vis-à-vis China and Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house detention, the United States continues to enforce stringent sanctions against that country, with the aim of toppling its government. In the process, Burma has become more dependent than ever on China.

China, for its part, is wary of fighting battles on too many fronts. In the Asian strategic triangle comprising China, India and Japan, Beijing seeks to achieve better balance in its relations with New Delhi when its ties with Tokyo deteriorate. Similarly, as the first decade of the twenty-first century showed, Beijing seeks to smooth its ties with New Delhi when Sino-Japanese relations worsen.

The shifting patterns in China-India and China-Japan relations appear to be driven by Beijing's strategy not to take on its two main Asian peer rivals simultaneously. After all,

while the United States is likely to remain a key factor in influencing Asia's strategic landscape, the role of Japan and India will be important. If China, India, and Japan constitute a scalene strategic triangle in Asia, with China representing the longest side, side A, the sum of side B (India) and side C (Japan) will always be greater than A. Not surprisingly, the fastest-growing relationship in Asia today is probably between Japan and India.

In the U.S.-China-India-Japan strategic quadrilateral in Asia, with the United States, Japan and India working closely together, Beijing will find its options constrained. But if this quadrangle is turned into a pentagon with the addition of Russia, China would be boxed in from virtually all sides. Japan plus Russia plus India, with the United States lending a helpful hand, would not only extinguish any prospect of a Sino-centric Asia, but would create the ultimate strategic nightmare for China.

As recent developments show, however, a Russian-Japanese rapprochement remains far off. The U.S.-China relationship itself is likely to remain uneasy, but overt competition or confrontation suits neither side. For the United States, China's rising power actually helps validate American forward military deployments in the Asian theater. The China factor also helps the United States to retain existing allies and attract new ones, thereby enlarging its strategic footprint in Asia.

Against this geopolitical background, Asia's power dynamics are likely to remain fluid, with new or shifting alliances and strengthened military capabilities continuing to challenge the prevailing order.

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