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The Collective Influence of Smaller States in the US-China Security Dilemma

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Ja Ian Chong, Asia Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Any ratcheting down of Sino-US security dilemmas in the Asia-Pacific is a task that ultimately falls to Washington and Beijing, but regional states should avoid fueling tensions.”

Sino-US disquiet over East Asia in recent years highlight the collective role that non-leading regional states have in exacerbating security dilemmas between major powers at moments of power transition. Security dilemmas occur when actors view their own attempts to enhance security as benign, but are seen as threatening by others—particularly competitors. Defending against perceived threats may consequently agitate potential rivals and ironically make other actors feel less secure. How regional states from Japan and Korea, through various ASEAN members along with Australia, individually respond to Chinese and US initiatives can unfortunately further aggravate Sino-US suspicions, even if inadvertently. After all, support from regional actors has influence on the success of bilateral, as well as multilateral, initiatives, arrangements, and institutions that ground US and Chinese efforts to maintain or modify the prevailing order in East Asia.

Cooperation, Transition, and Friction Regardless of whether power transition is real or perceived, expectations about substantial shifts in international politics can be disconcerting. The preeminent power—the United States in this case—worries about how to best maintain its interests and leading position, whereas the emergent power—China—frets about ways to sustain and entrench its growing prominence, while simultaneously addressing potential challenges impeding its rise. Beijing views its efforts to establish preeminence in East Asia as a natural expression of China’s rights, while Washington sees retaining regional leadership as a preservation of longstanding American interests. Neither the United States nor China appear completely comfortable with fuller expressions of each other’s goals in this regard, especially given uncertainties over the pace of power transition and the long-term viability of each other’s competitive positions.

Individual choices that regional states make under such conditions of flux collectively influence the severity of the Sino-US security dilemma by affecting the context and environment in which Washington and Beijing operate. Governments from Tokyo to Jakarta are figuring out whether and how much political capital to commit to existing arrangements, as well as when and how to seek alternatives that may involve a reduced US role. A tepid and slow readjustment from existing US-backed frameworks may result in a regional state missing new opportunities, while a too rapid and drastic response could potentially result in foregoing—or even undermining—key public goods and benefits the current system provides. If smaller states appear to be quickly seeking alternative arrangements given these calculations, Washington may see potential decline as more threatening and seek to arrest the situation in ways that alarm Beijing. Slower and more reserved regional acceptance of Chinese-backed initiatives for more exclusive intra-East Asian frameworks may lead Beijing to anticipate efforts to stymie its rise, prompting more assertive behavior that in turn will cause concern in Washington.

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Attempts by regional states in East Asia to “hedge” their relations with both China and the



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United States over the past decade have helped widen Sino-US differences. The mid- to late-2000s saw regional governments, including longstanding US allies Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Australia, welcome an accelerated broadening and deepening of cooperation with China across a range of issues. They sought to enhance the ASEAN plus frameworks, develop the Northeast Asian trilateral, expand the Chiang Mai currency swap initiative, and conclude bilateral and multilateral trade arrangements with Beijing resulting in furthering economic integration with China. From 2009, those same regional governments were similarly receptive to US efforts to highlight and consolidate Washington's regional presence through public demonstrations of US diplomatic and military commitment to the region. Despite this increase in regional cooperation involving both leading powers, longtime observers of the US-China relationship Wang Jisi and Kenneth Lieberthal have noted growing apprehension between Beijing and Washington in their 2012 report titled *Addressing US-China Strategic Mistrust*.

Policy, academic, and journalistic circles in the United States and China at times appear to take regional engagement efforts by the other as some sort of an affront to their own national positions. Given an upswing in both bilateral and multilateral cooperation with China by other countries throughout the Asia-Pacific from the mid-2000s through roughly 2008, many US analysts pointed to an end to Washington's Asian preeminence. Former George W. Bush administration National Security Council Asian Affairs Director, Victor Cha, called this understanding the “conventional wisdom” he had to counter in a 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article titled “Winning Asia.” This was in spite of regional alliance adjustments and efforts to increase interoperability with the United States at the time. Today, Chinese observers see receptiveness to the US “rebalance” to Asia and participation in US-led initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership as either US “manipulation” or regional actors trying to “play” Beijing and Washington against each other. Many in China also view the recent intensification of disputes over the South China Sea with Vietnam and the Philippines, along with the ongoing dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands as indicative of US “meddling.”

Ways Forward? Any ratcheting down of Sino-US security dilemmas in the Asia-Pacific is a task that ultimately falls to Washington and Beijing, but regional states should avoid fueling tensions. It would be helpful if regional states were more cognizant about how their efforts fit into broader configurations of regional interactions, and how such patterns affect perceptions in Washington and Beijing. Regionally-led initiatives to develop serious dialogue mechanisms and common practices for managing behavior over contentious issues can help provide some cushion between the United States and China, especially if sufficiently transparent. Explicit attempts to demonstrate equivalency in working with both the United States and China can also aid in tempering the competitive element in Sino-US ties in Asia. These possibilities may not be surprising, but remain difficult to realize given the diversity of economic and strategic interests—not to mention intra-regional competition—among regional states in East Asia.

Regional states need to first get their collective house in order. In Southeast Asia, this means giving substance to the integrative goals laid out in the ASEAN Charter and the goal of a 2015 ASEAN Community by addressing the difficult substantive questions associated with state sovereignty, integration, divergent concerns, and differing levels of development. Likewise, Northeast Asian states should work on finding mechanisms to manage regional issues like territorial disputes. Governments in both Northeast and Southeast Asia can also consider ways to further enhance indigenous political and economic integration across the two sub-regions. An initial first step is to candidly assess the strengths and limitations of the multiple, overlapping regional arrangements in Asia. This can point regional governments toward building on complementarities, reducing contradictions, and greater overall effectiveness in intra-regional coordination, if not cooperation. Undoubtedly, even such preliminary efforts will face challenges from the realities of domestic politics in all the countries involved as well as likely interference from Washington and Beijing, and will require sustained local political support to succeed.

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