

## U.S.-China Relations: Setting Priorities, Making Choices

Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

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The Obama administration has been doing a little better, but not good enough, with China. There is no open conflict between the two, but tensions are high. Territorial disputes throughout the South China Sea and Sea of Japan could flare into violence. North Korea is more disruptive than ever. Other important issues lurk in the background.

While there should be no surprise when important powers like the U.S. and People's Republic of China disagree, the two must work through such issues. Unfortunately, the U.S. is far better at making demands than negotiating solutions. In particular, Washington seems to ignore the interdependence of issues, the fact that positions taken in one area may affect responses in others.

For instance, the U.S. famously initiated a “pivot” to Asia, or “rebalancing” of U.S. resources and attention to the region. In practice, the plan hasn't amounted to much. Washington moved a few thousand Marines to Australia—enough to irritate the PRC but not to achieve anything if hostilities occurred.

Washington implausibly claimed that the shift had nothing to do with China. But the residents of Zhongnanhai are not stupid. For what other reason would the U.S. reaffirm *military* alliances and augment *military* forces in Beijing's backyard?

Yet at the same time the Obama administration was pressing the PRC to apply greater pressure on North Korea to end the latter's nuclear program and constant provocations. The North has no other close relationships and relies on the PRC for most of its energy and food, as well as the vast majority of outside economic investment. If only China would step on Pyongyang's windpipe North Korea would have to yield, runs the argument.

The U.S. acts as if it was asking for a small favor. In fact, no one knows how the Democratic People's Republic of Korea would react. Attempting to coerce Pyongyang would risk China's relationship with its only ally in the region.

The DPRK might grudgingly give ground, while shifting its economic and political ties to Russia or the West, leaving China with another hostile power on its border. Or Pyongyang might successfully resist Beijing's pressure, while making a similar geopolitical shift to others.

Or the North might resist and collapse. China then would face the prospect of chaos next door, losing its economic position, facing a flood of refugees, and risking a violent spillover. Worse geopolitically would be eventual Korean reunification, which would leave an expanded U.S. ally hosting American troops on the Yalu.

The latter would be unpleasant for Beijing even without the "pivot." A unified Korea could play a significant role in any campaign to contain the PRC. What matters most are not Washington's professed or even actual intentions, but America's perceived intentions.

The Obama administration's attempt to moderate territorial disputes in the region runs into the same problem. America is committed to one side, maintaining defense relationships, deployments, and treaties with several interested parties including Japan. While Washington's call for a peaceful resolution of disagreements is well founded, in practice it acts as an endorsement of the status quo—which favors America's friends and allies.

The PRC likely would be skeptical even if it saw the U.S.-led bloc as benign. However, America's senior ally is Japan, still remembered for its World War II depredations in China. Other nations, such as the Philippines, also contribute to what Beijing perceives to be an attempt at containment. Why should China comply with U.S. demands?

The U.S. has sought Beijing's aid in overthrowing the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and forcing Iran to abandon any nuclear weapons ambitions. Washington sees these issues as matters of moral and practical necessity. However, the PRC's acquiescence would expand American influence and even perhaps create a new U.S. client state. That is not obviously in the PRC's interest, especially when America is seen as attempting to maintain its dominance in East Asia.

Other issues also cannot be considered in isolation. While human rights are not a security question, American pressure on Beijing to respect political activities hostile to the Communist Party's monopoly of power may be seen to be no less threatening than Washington's military moves. Talk of values and rights are coming from a country attempting to preserve its privileged geopolitical position in China's neighborhood.

Moreover, U.S. attempts to convince Beijing to combat climate change by limiting energy use—which would inevitably slow China's economic growth—look more sinister when Washington is working to constrain the PRC's influence. Talk of necessary sacrifice is less convincing in the context of the larger geopolitical struggle. Suggesting that this policy is part of a sinister plot gives Washington too much credit, but perception matters more than reality.

In foreign policy the urgent often pushes out the important. The Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts, for instance, are dominating headlines today. But over the long-term the status of Ukraine and Syria are not important, let alone vital, to America. Relations with China, the world's second largest economy and potential military superpower, matter far more.

There inevitably will be disagreements and misunderstandings. The two nations must manage such controversies. And doing so will require recognizing that issues are interrelated. In particular, the U.S. must accept the necessity of trade-offs, most notably that it cannot be seen as leading a coalition against Beijing if it hopes to convince the PRC to adopt policies seemingly against its own geopolitical interests, such as sacrificing its ally North Korea.

Much can be achieved if the world's superpower and incipient superpower develop a sustained cooperative relationship, as did imperial Great Britain and rising America. That requires Washington to manage the important even as it confronts the urgent.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*