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GREAT CONTINENT, GREAT RESPONSIBILITY: FINDING CHINA'S ROLE

— Tsuneo Watanabe

China does not look at all happy with regional security developments in relation to the US and its allies. It opposed the US Freedom of Navigation Operation (Fonop) in the South China Sea, where China appears to be building military facilities on artificial islands, thus ignoring international law. (China refuses to recognize the ruling by an arbitration court in The Hague that invalidated its territorial claims to these islands.)

It has also strongly opposed South Korea's participation in the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system with the United States. Xi Jinping warned that if South Korea's president, Park Geun-hye, did not handle THAAD "properly," it could worsen the strategic relationship between the two countries.

Chinese leaders should recognize that such moves undermine China's soft power capabilities, and serve none of China's interests.

Japan, for its part, would welcome creative Chinese leadership to secure regional order via peaceful means instead of by force. In other words, Japan's regional strategic goal is to encourage China's peaceful participation in a regional security order with Asian, American and European partners.

If international relations were governed purely by a zero-sum game, China's recent actions may make some sense. They may appeal to the domestic audience by showing off the resurgence of a strong China. However, in both the short and long term, military confrontation with the United States or its allies over the East and South China Seas or allowing North Korean intimidation of regional neighbors would be disastrous to China's interests.

What needs to be recognized is the incontrovertible fact that China has accumulated great and expanding wealth precisely because of regional stability and a multilateral approach from all sides. This is something that US leadership and regional players' cooperation has guaranteed.

Even if China has aspirations to become a regional leader as it seeks to forge a new great power relationship with the United States moving forward, recent expressions of hostility to the current regional order contradict a successful strategy, begun many years ago, that has served China well.

Recently, I had a typical conversation with Chinese scholars on regional security issues. They complained that Japan and the United States seem to be trying to hold back China's prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region by containing it.

I and my colleagues countered that what Japan is interested in is regional stability and prosperity through a liberal international order buttressed by commonly agreed rules. We do not want any challenge to the current security order by coercion of the type we saw with the annexation of Crimea by Russia. At the same time, we would respect China's attempts to change the nature of international rules so long as it was conducted through peaceful negotiation.

Chinese leaders may have already understood the logic of that position, but cannot put it into practice due to tough domestic political struggles. Or, they may not follow such logic due to the long history of imperial China or authoritarian communist rule.

Rivalry within the communist party is indeed harsh. Chinese leaders hesitate at showing weakness to the outside world since potential

political opponents would take advantage of it in the context of rising nationalism. In the past, however, wise Chinese leaders were able to marry strong domestic leadership with efficient, non-confrontational, international cooperation.

This was Deng Xiaoping's prototype of the peaceful-rise strategy. Without it, China could not have become the world's second largest economy.

Deng's policy suggests two critical points about China's future. First, sustainable economic development helps ensure stable domestic political leadership. The Chinese people will not be satisfied by robust ideological pronouncements or national assertiveness without economic prosperity. Second, regional stability and respect for a multilateral regional framework continues to form the foundation for China's economic growth. Challenging the current international order is, therefore, not in China's interests.

Even traditional Chinese thinking should suggest that a cooperative approach would be more sustainable than a coercive approach. The ancient Chinese philosopher, Mencius (B.C.372-289) argued that ruling by virtue rather than by force is superior. If a kingdom's virtue is respected by other kingdoms, they would not try to invade and this would bring peace. It may be the earliest soft power argument in human history.

Wise Chinese leaders from Deng Xioping to Hu Jintao may have internalized such traditional wisdom.

In the end, China's current awkwardness in relation to international norms only helps unite its rivals in the region and beyond, and potentially undermines Chinese national interests in both strategic and economic terms.

The key to China finding a workable and sustainable role is for it to understand that everyone in Asia is perfectly happy to see an increasingly prosperous China, precisely because everyone in Asia benefits from this. China's best way to continue to be prosperous is to work with, not against, the other players in the region.

Foregoing belligerence and staying on track with the magnificently successful peaceful rise strategy combines the best of China's past with the wisest of approaches to China's future. It is a win win for China, and for the region as a whole.

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