

Paper for Asia-Pacific Roundtable 2012: Asia in the Eyes of China

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I want to limit my discussion of China's worldview to the Asia-Pacific. I also do this in a way slightly different from those conventional discussions of a country's perceptions of other countries or regions in terms of cultural traditions and popular sentiments. I discuss how China perceives "Asia" that has bearing (influence or justification) on China's international policy and approach to Asian countries. I make four observations and then discuss their implications for China's relations and policy towards Asian countries.

First, China generally sees Asian Pacific countries in terms of geographical distance: the closer, the more important. Historically, as John Fairbank has explained for us a long while ago,¹ China sees itself at the center of several concentric circles that include countries of different geographical distances and in different categories, and therefore having different types of relationship with the Chinese empire, from tribute states to inner Asian states and to outer Asian states, and of course, to barbarians. Japan, for example, was for a long time, seen at least from China then, as bordering on the edge of being barbarian.

The world has changed. And it is said globalization has brought in a "flat world." Indeed, geographic distances mean little today for the spread of Chinese products, capital and people. Moreover, China has been told that beyond its Middle Kingdom, there is an international society and the nation-

¹ John K. Fairbank, 1968. *The Chinese World Order*. Harvard University Press.

state system, with its members all meant to be equal. After all, there has been talking that China is becoming a *global* power itself. But somehow in China's view of its neighbors close in the region, there is always an element of geographical distances that shapes how China thinks and approaches countries in the region.

China's official lines about the different strategic value to China of different country groups is an illustration of such a persistent element in China's international view of the region: "(relations with) major powers are critical, (with) surrounding countries are primary, (with) developing countries are foundational, and (with) international institutions are instrumental" ("大国是关键，周边是首要，发展中国家是基础，多边是重要舞台") .

Second, China sees the Asia-Pacific as geopolitically structured into mainland Asia and oceanic Asia. Not only seeing Asian countries differently, China also tends to see Asian countries through the lens of a dominant historical structure persistently presenting itself in modern Asian international relations. To be sure, this is always an important element, for example, in the strategic thinking of the United States of the Western Pacific. But it is much natural and convenient for China to conceptualize "Asia" in such a bifurcated structure. This mainland-oceanic structure corresponds historically to the two large groups of political entities in the Asia-Pacific: China and its immediate neighbors largely on and from the mainland, and the European colonial settlements that spread around lands in today's Southeast Asia. While European settlers and scholars tend to see South Asia and Southeast Asia linked into a large mass of region, the Chinese do not usually see that way. They see South Asia is on its west and has little to do with *nanyang*. Between these two blocks, there have been a series of countries in between, torn in constant tension in the past century: Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam.

This bifurcated structure received significant reinforcement during the Cold War: the Communist China and its allies on the mainland, and the anti-Communist, US-led allies in the oceanic Asia. Dean Acheson's "defense

perimeter” in 1950 from Japan to the Philippines, and from Singapore to Indonesia, served nicely as the demarcation line in this bifurcated structure. It is this bifurcated framework that makes sense to the Chinese as why the members of the US-led hub-and-spoke alliance system during the Cold War were mostly oceanic Asian countries and why the Chinese fought hard to hold its lines in Korea, Taiwan, and Indochina.

The end of the Cold War generated some hopes for the collapse of the Cold War bifurcated structure, replaced perhaps with a new security community underpinned by multilateral institutions. Indeed, there was a sunshine policy on the Korean Peninsula as well as the Six Party Talks. There have been “three-through connections” and the fanfare about the greater China across the Taiwan Strait in the early years. Countries on Indochinese Peninsula joined ASEAN. And there have been APEC, ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asian Summit. It is claimed by some that China seems to have given up its suspicion of multilateralism; and that, through socialization, it has been accepting and integrating itself into the new security community.

What puzzles many is that, as these broad, community-based, region-wide multilateral initiatives have found increasingly problematic and unsatisfactory, other new developments seem to bring us back to the profound structure. TPP at least so far is an oceanic Asian framework. The resurrected, updated or expended alliances of US with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore and Australia bring back the hub-and-spoke alliance system in a more subtle form, and the boundaries of that strikingly match with the original “defense perimeter” of 1950. The Chinese would be first to say “I told you so.” The reshaping of the strategic environment seems to be largely explainable in this framework of bifurcated structure.

Third, China sees patron-client relationship central in the international relations of Asian Pacific countries. Patron-client relations are a mechanism of security and insurance in politics and business prevalent in Asia-Pacific countries. There is no reason to doubt that this applies also to their international relations. The attribute system in the Chinese empire not too long ago was in

fact a form of patron-client relations. China had long been operating, spreading and experiencing patron-client relations as a "patron" in its international relations, and is therefore sensitive to signs and substance of patron-client relations in Asia-Pacific countries. In the eyes of China, contemporary patron-client relations of Asian countries have their patrons mostly being external to the region, many of them former Western colonial powers.

That most Asia-Pacific countries are largely at the client end of the patron-client relations in its international relations has its historical roots. Historian Donald G. McCloud has explained to us that European colonial settlers forged an interstate system in Southeast Asia as such that each individual country had more important relations vertically with its colonial power in Europe than its relations horizontally with other countries in the region.² Independences and revolutions after World War II have not completely destroyed this traditional interstate structure of vertical attachment, connection, access and indeed patronage. Political change in many of these countries in the past 20 years seems to only reinforce this link. Chinese analysts can quickly point out that pluralist politics in these countries weakened the state's capacity to form viable national interests and to inform and enforce their international policy and activities accordingly. International policy of these countries can easily be dominated by ruling elites which are best connected with international patrons.

This patron-client relationship finds itself manifesting better, for example, with the hub-and-spoke alliance system than multilateral institutions. As the Chinese look around and further down south, there is plenty of reason for them to be cautious about the changing dynamics in regional politics and the value of alternative mechanisms and frameworks shaping and enforcing regional order and relationships.

Fourth, China sees Asian countries having mixed feelings about China. One from outside Asia might conveniently see that Asian countries are all the

² Donald G. McCloud, 1995. *Southeast Asia: Tradition and Modernity in the Contemporary World* Boulder: Westview Press.

same, and are similar in behavior or thinking, or perhaps share the same identity. Such historically and culturally shared identity, many have argued, may not diminish the importance of material interests of the countries in the region, but certainly has a significant driving and shaping effect on the dynamics and patterns of their relations.³ Given the dominance of the Chinese empire and civilization in the past, one might also easily assume that the Chinese might take a position of superiority universally in relation to Asian countries. By the same token, Asian countries are easy to either identify with China or to be fear of China.

The way China sees Asian countries however are perhaps more updated than this. Many Asian countries have seen China as a backward country, could not put its act together for a long time and is one of the last among countries in Asia to catch up in modern economic development, and in building a modern country and society. Change in the past 30 years in China has helped dispel some of this feeling of China among Asian countries. But China is more likely to be seen as "nouveau riche," with all the problems of manner and attitude associated with it. This is a characteristic of China that China may not that easily relates itself to. It more likely sees its development in the past 30 years as another manifestation of its long lasting, built-in ability to be a great country.

Speaking of China's thousands of years of civilization and tradition - Confucianism and other things essentially Chinese, we heard a few decades ago the theory of "Centre at the Periphery,"⁴ suggesting that the glorious, all capable Confucianism was dead at its origins in the center, but flourished in countries around China, from Japan to Korea, and from Taiwan, Hong Kong to Singapore. As scholars took pains to point out that the Confucianism that made modern economic development possible in these Asian countries is no longer the Confucianism that Confucius lectured about thousands years ago, but rather a new and different kind of Confucianism.

³ David Kang, 2009. *The Rise of China: Peace, Power and Order in East Asia*. Columbia University Press.

⁴ Tu Wei-ming 2005. "Cultural China: the periphery as the center" *Daedalus* 134(4): 145-167.

This connected-but-not-the-same feeling of many Asian countries about China, particularly those used to be influenced by Chinese culture and civilization, is widely evident. When someone talks about Asian values in Singapore, for example, they will probably prefer not to mention Confucianism, perhaps not China or Chinese. When Singaporeans visit China, they would quickly claim they are Chinese but not that Chinese Chinese. The Japanese have settled that ambivalence long time ago by declaring, to “get out of Asia and become European,” many times since the Meiji Restoration. And there are Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, those with such a mixed feeling about China that varies only in degree. When China looks around the region, it must feel that it has not being shown proper respect by its fellow neighbors, used to be admirers of Chinese civilization, cultural tradition and social life. In a probable Chinese view, these fellow neighbors are actually the “nouveau riche”, or 暴发户, in a longer historical sense, with all the issues of manner and attitude associated with it.

There is a view that negative and positive feelings of a country about other countries may have to do with the ups and downs of the country itself. When you are rich and strong, as this view goes, countries bandwagon with you. When you are poor and weak, people step on you. There seems to be this element in what’s going around with China, so much so that looking at China in the region today, many see bandwagoning of Asian countries with China as a likely scenario as China is going richer and stronger. China itself tends to buy into this all along. Do we remember Deng Xiaoping’s famous line: “you would be beat up by others if you lag behind” (落后就要挨打) ?

But, as China has well recognized, the both elements of Asian countries’ feeling about China exist at the same time. They are subtle, but persistent, underlying partly the thinking and approaches of Asian countries towards China. China’s development performance, expanding global influence (as an Asian country), and efforts to nurture relations with other Asian countries, have not necessarily led to respect by other Asian countries, to their treating of

China as a "normal" country. China's frustrations with Asian countries are inevitable.

What do all of these mean for China in the Asia-Pacific or for the Asia-Pacific with China? These aspects of how China sees Asia have significant bearing on China's thinking and approach towards issues in the region and its relations with Asian countries, and are certainly useful for us to have a better understanding of China and its policy and issues in the region, as well as patterns of its relations with Asian countries.

Asia is not a whole for China in its thinking and approach to issues and countries in the region. Not only is it more effective for China, and, for that matter, for any countries in China's position, to deal with individual countries on their own. But more importantly, there are significant differences among Asian countries in terms of their relevance and importance to China's international interests and concerns, and intensity of their activities with China.

While globalization, regionalization, the waves of post-War rapid economic growth and development among countries in the region, and their efforts in building multilateral institutions in the region may have all led people to perceive Asia as an integrating whole, China is more used to seeing the region as mainland Asia and oceanic Asia, or perhaps Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. China perhaps will not be that worried about TPP as many might have thought. A Japan-Korea-China free trade area plus China-Taiwan-Hong Kong free trade area in Northeast Asia is not something incompatible with TPP for the region.

Bilateral approach is still a more effective way for China in managing issues and relations in the region. Coalitions to face China seem to be possible. This however can take the form of coordinated formal coalition, but can also be that individual Asian countries simultaneously take a similar position on similar issues towards China.

As such, there are no incentives for China to produce or insist on regional leadership – it is not clear as what the mechanisms of the imagined regional leadership for China are and what that leadership might achieve.

Fundamentally, this large issue of how China sees Asian countries and how this in turn affects policy and behaviors of the countries involved concerns the problem of trust among countries in the region, particularly between China and other Asian countries. This problem of trust leads to different options or strategies in shaping regional order: alliance of collective security with your trusted friends and allies, hedging against countries that pose potential security threat to you, or regional institutions and security community with confidence building measures to deal with common security issues. When the Chinese look around the region, there seems to lack of trust on both sides (how China sees Asian countries and how Asian countries see China). For the option of multilateral institutions, there is a built-in problem between institutions and trust – which one comes first: whether we rely on regional institutions to build trust or we need sufficient trust first to make institutions work. China's experience of engagement with multilateral institutions in the past 20 years has provided no clear answer to this. For the option of strategic alliance, it consolidates trust among the members of the alliance, but intensifies the problem of lack of trust within the security environment. Perhaps one needs both multilateral institutions and bilateral alliances in the time of ambiguity, ambivalence and dynamic change.