

China Leadership Monitor

CLM Insights Interview:

Robert Sutter, Author of *Chinese Foreign Relations*

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- 1. Your central argument is that China’s foreign policy behavior is contingent on circumstances and without a powerful strategy. This appears to contradict many who argue that China has a consistent long-term strategy. Can you elaborate on your argument?**

This judgment is based on 50+ years of experience as a U.S. government and academic analyst trying to explain People’s Republic of China foreign policy behavior. The record does not demonstrate a clear and lasting grand strategy. Maoist China showed repeated dramatic changes in strategies of world revolution and Chinese national interests. In the 1960s, foreign experts were convinced that China’s foreign policy determinants came from China’s internal dynamics. They were surprised when increased Soviet military pressures on China compelled Beijing to reach out to the United States. A powerful reality was that China did not control its security environment throughout the Cold War. Whatever long-term strategy it might have had mattered much less than the imperative of regime survival against superpower pressures.

Preoccupation with foreign pressures continued in the 1990s. Though freed from the Soviet threat, China faced unexpected and prolonged U.S.-led isolation following the Tiananmen crackdown. China’s rapid economic growth and truculence in the Taiwan Strait crisis saw the U.S. reverse policy and favor engagement. Chinese strategists saw developments leading to a multipolar world beneficial to China. But the tough policy of the incoming Bush administration prompted another big shift emphasizing China’s peaceful rise. Chinese and foreign observers highlighted a long-term Chinese strategy of broad accommodation to the U.S.-led international order. But other foreign observers argued that China had a hidden strategy seeking regional dominance and global leadership. The latter seemed vindicated when Xi Jinping articulated the broad “China Dream” of regional and global leadership, but how long this strategy will last in the face of recent unanticipated opposition from the United States remains to be seen.

- 2. What are the main factors influencing Chinese national security policy? How have these changed under Xi Jinping?**

The power and policy of great powers and allies and partners along China's periphery in Asia have remained the main external factor influencing Chinese national security. All Chinese sovereignty ambitions are located here. The region remains the focus of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and it remains the top priority area of Chinese diplomacy. A favorable environment along the periphery also is essential for China's economic growth, the linchpin of regime legitimacy.

As discussed below, China's mediocre record in improving its position along its periphery appeared to reinforce initiatives by Xi Jinping to advance China's international influence more broadly through the Belt and Road Initiative and other measures. Xi built upon China's ever-growing international economic influence as leverage to exert greater power in directing developments in other world areas in ways that favored China's competition with the United States.

Internal security also is a top priority, with a bigger budget than national defense. The Xi Jinping government has used extreme repression to counter perceived dangers of Islamic extremism in Xinjiang. It remains on guard against threats to regime security posed by U.S. promotion of democracy in the so-called color revolutions and in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, disclosures by Edward Snowden alerted the Xi government to dangers of U.S. high-technology penetration, reinforcing Beijing's drive to lead the high-tech industries.

3. How do U.S.-China relations influence China's overall foreign policy? As the U.S. and China are entering a decades-long geopolitical conflict reminiscent of the Cold War, what are the most likely foreign policy adjustments Beijing is going to make?

Relations with the United States and the USSR dominated Chinese foreign policy calculations during the Cold War, and since then relations with the United States have remained the most important external variable determining Chinese foreign policy. As U.S. power declined and China's power rose, Xi Jinping's government has executed an array of challenges to obstacles involving the United States that impede China's head-long pursuit of wealth and power. The challenges include big advances in Chinese military capacity targeting U.S. forces, coercive expansion in disputed border areas, state-directed economic practices plundering the open economic system and advancing control of high-technology industries, and close collaboration with Putin's Russia and other authoritarian leaders.

Beijing's challenges have come incrementally, avoiding confrontation or armed conflict with the United States. Xi Jinping was remarkably deferential when dealing with the affronts coming from President Trump and his lieutenants. The harsh U.S. countermeasures have been disruptive and costly to Beijing, but they have not stopped Chinese incremental challenges undermining U.S. influence. At the same time, Beijing is loath to confront America because it is still economically dependent, it has substantial internal preoccupations, and it remains insecure in key areas along its strategic rim where the U.S. exerts great influence.

China's overall approach to the United States appears contingent on the perceived strength or weakness of the Biden government in dealing with the many challenges posed by China. For the time being, a continuation of the recent practice seems most likely.

- 4. You observe that China's behavior toward its immediate neighbors is highly erratic, alternating between charm offensives and bullying. Can you explain the causes of such volatility? And regarding Asia, the top priority area for China, why do you conclude that China's foreign policy record there is mediocre? Can you explain why? In which geographic or functional area do you believe China's foreign policy has a better record?**

China's mediocre record among the countries along its rim has been caused in part by erratic behavior in the post-Cold War period. That erratic behavior has been caused by clashing Chinese interests and growing Chinese power to have its way at the expense of its neighbors.

As noted, favorable regional relations provide a stable environment enabling Chinese domestic economic growth—essential for regime legitimacy. Yet the region contains sovereignty issues that Beijing is determined to resolve on its terms. And the strong U.S. role as regional security leader threatens China's sovereignty and security.

The erratic record shows Beijing in the 1990s working to end post-Tiananmen isolation by establishing better ties with its neighbors while also showing greater resolve on sovereignty disputes. Beijing played down the latter and endeavored to reassure its neighbors (other than Taiwan) after the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1995–96. And it went on to give top priority to reassure the United States that China was not a threat during the Bush administration.

This “peaceful rise” emphasis did not last. With expanding Chinese power and U.S. decline, Beijing became increasingly assertive against its neighbors, contesting Chinese claims and American security involvement in the region. The Obama government responded with greater U.S. activism, but it failed to stop Chinese expansion in the South China Sea and other adverse advances. Beijing combined its growing military and paramilitary power with economic leverage and influence operations to have its way on sensitive sovereignty and security matters. It deepened involvement in regional economies through the Belt and Road Initiative and other programs.

Overall, there was some advance in Chinese relations with the region when compared with the situation in the previous decade. Thus, China today is in a much stronger position in the South China Sea and has considerably more influence in Southeast Asia. It has established a vigorous entente with Putin's Russia, and it has steadily increased its leading economic and important political role in Central Asia. However,, its relations with the United States in the region have turned sharply negative. China's relations with the other two large powers in Asia, Japan and India, have deteriorated markedly as has its relationship with Australia. All four are now aligning to counter China. South Korea has experienced wide swings in its relations with China and is very wary of China's ambitions. China's ability to influence and control North Korea has much more clearly

defined limits than were evident during the previous decade. Taiwan today is much closer to the United States.

Possible U.S. and regional weakness would enable China to establish hegemony in nearby Asia through coercion and persuasion. More likely, in particular, is continued contesting and friction over sensitive sovereignty and security issues.

Chinese rigidity on these disputes seems to preclude agreements other than deference to Beijing's demands. Chinese leaders and the Chinese people are conditioned by the official narrative that China unjustly lost territory to predatory foreigners in the so-called century of humiliation. The narrative also successfully conditions Chinese people to view Chinese foreign behavior as based on moral principles leading to uniformly morally correct foreign policy. This narrative is reinforced by China's unique practice of never having acknowledged making a mistake in foreign affairs. Thus, a dispute with a foreign country is never China's fault. Xi Jinping has added new emphasis to show that historically the Chinese empire was correct in foreign affairs, arguing it was never expansionist. Of course, China's neighbors and the United States have had a long experience with Chinese expansion coming at their expense. Such Chinese mendacity adds to the duplicity of Beijing's pledges to never interfere in other countries' internal affairs and never to seek hegemony at others' expense, reinforcing U.S. and regional cynicism about China's motives and adding to the current impasse over sovereignty and security issues today.

Other world areas, such as Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, do not pose contentious sovereignty and security issues for China, and the U.S. is less focused on countering China in these regions. China has made steady progress in growing influence, though it is far from dominant. And progress in these areas, although helpful to Chinese ambitions for economic advancement and changing global governance, appears less significant for China's interests than progress in the all-important Chinese periphery.

About the Author

Robert Sutter is Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the Elliott School of George Washington University (2011-). He also served as Director of the School's main undergraduate program involving over 2,000 students from 2013-2019. His earlier fulltime position was Visiting Professor of Asian Studies at Georgetown University (2001-2011).

A Ph.D. graduate in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University, Sutter has published 22 books (four with multiple editions), over 300 articles and several hundred government reports dealing with contemporary East Asian and Pacific countries and their relations with the United States. His most recent book is *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy of an Emerging Global Force* Fifth Edition (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

Sutter's government career (1968-2001) saw service as senior specialist and director of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the Congressional Research Service, the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and the Pacific at the US

Government's National Intelligence Council, the China division director at the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.