

# Openness in the Far East

## A Liberal and Openness Approach to China's Rise

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The United States needs a practical strategy in East Asia. In the anarchical international system, states devise strategies that align “with how they see themselves in relation to others.”<sup>1</sup> The absolute power of the United States still provides for a preeminent international role, but the reduction in its relative power necessitates narrowly defining interests to fundamental, achievable priorities.<sup>2</sup> The United States should pursue a strategy of openness to address the challenge to US security that is a rising China. This strategy should be pursued because it provides a reasonable path to achieve the United States’ primary interests without sacrificing US security, and it provides opportunities for mutually acceptable outcomes to both powers. A strategy of openness to address China means preventing the emergence of a closed regional sphere of influence in East Asia and maintaining free access to the global commons. Additionally, such a strategy emphasizes supporting, rather than promoting, democracies. The approach leverages the instruments of state power to secure US interests by taking advantage of diplomatic and economic opportunities, supporting the diplomatic and economic efforts with strategic narratives, and maintaining a ready and capable military if peaceful means to secure US interests fail. First, this article discusses openness and selective US interests in an openness strategy. Second, recognizing that power comes from many sources, this article discusses leveraging the diplomatic, information, economic, then military (DIME) instruments of power to address China’s rise and achieve the narrowly defined US interests.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the article highlights mutually acceptable outcomes achievable through openness.

A strategy of openness shifts from seeking liberal universalism—the idea that all states will eventually accept fundamental premises of the liberal order—to pursuing selectively defined and achievable interests, including a free and open international system.<sup>4</sup> The United States’ primary interests should be selectively defined as preventing a closed sphere of influence, ensuring access to the global commons, and pursuing principles of openness through institutions and regulatory regimes.<sup>5</sup> These interests underpin US prosperity, which is the backbone for continued US global leadership and the ability to deter or defeat threats against America’s political weight and territorial sovereignty. Rather than expecting China’s embrace of liberalism, which is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future,

openness indicates a willingness by the United States to coexist with an illiberal state and even accept that China will take leading roles in international institutions.<sup>6</sup> Openness preserves the existing structures of the liberal order, many of which China benefits from actively participating in, and encourages great power cooperation. When cooperation is not possible, the strategy encourages the United States and its partners with similar views to create norms that will define acceptable behavior.<sup>7</sup> Openness does not preclude the United States from maintaining its military might and allies to protect its interests should peaceful means fail to achieve vital US objectives.

Diplomatic efforts to secure selective US interests in an openness strategy should seize opportunities for great-power cooperation. The United States should pursue opportunities for strategic agreement. Such opportunities may include, but are not limited to, addressing disease, open space access, space debris mitigation, and trade. Because these opportunities are not the primary US political objectives, other opportunities may arise or be more appropriate to pursue for cooperation. Such rapprochement efforts will serve to resolve conflict and as “a necessary first step to . . . constructive engagement.”<sup>8</sup> China’s semi-open economy and participation in the current liberal order presents a ripe opportunity for constructive engagement. Through the pursuit of common interests, the United States and China can create or strengthen existing connections among bureaucracies, institutions, and individuals.<sup>9</sup> The connections have the potential to yield strategic advantages. Increased entanglement will reduce vulnerability of short-term reversals with US political leadership changes.<sup>10</sup> Increased entanglement also provides an opportunity to introduce US ideas and values into China, despite the Chinese Communist Party’s tight control and restriction of information that flows into the country. Entanglement takes advantage of opportunities to introduce ideas and alternatives gradually and broadly into China through interactions with people and organizations. Such ideas could “sow the seeds of political change” advantageous to the United States.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to great-power cooperation, the United States should seek to adjust relations with China by means other than war through a defensive diplomatic strategy.<sup>12</sup> Diplomatic pursuits should take advantage of a tactical opening by recognizing China as a regional leader, signaling the United States is willing to live with an illiberal China and accept that China may have leading roles in international institutions. However, in response to any Chinese efforts to create a closed sphere of influence, restrict passage through international waters, or otherwise restrict access to the global commons, US diplomatic pursuits should use purposeful interactions to redirect Chinese power towards more mutually acceptable outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Accepting an illiberal China taking leading roles in international

institutions in East Asia would provide the means for the United States to redirect Chinese efforts to pursue its interests in a peaceful, multilateral forum where mutually acceptable outcomes are possible. Increased entanglement and cooperation in areas of mutual interest provide a foundation to understand Chinese interests and redirect unacceptable efforts towards mutually acceptable outcomes.

The information element of national power provides a soft power tool to influence China. Power is manifested not only from resources and military strength, but also the ability to change states' behavior.<sup>14</sup> A compelling strategic narrative is one such power resource.<sup>15</sup> The United States must pay attention to how its strategic narratives are received and interpreted. The narratives should relate to US interests that focus on the advantages of open systems, societies, and institutions and that restricting access to the global commons is unacceptable. Strategic narratives should seek to influence China to abide by economic norms and rules it currently fails to follow. Narratives should also aim to influence China's explanation for its modern rise in power. After the Mao era, "China's opening to the world" led to it achieving the world's second largest economy.<sup>16</sup> China's economic growth led to its military rise. Further, China's economy underpins its current military power and world influence, which cannot be separated from increased Chinese participation in open systems and institutions in the existing liberal order. Narratives should capture these facts as they support the value and importance of not disrupting the economic benefits directly related to open systems and unrestricted access for all states to the global commons. Finally, the United States should ensure that its narratives are based in fact to avoid losing credibility.<sup>17</sup>

Economic measures, including entanglement (also associated with a deep engagement strategy), provide considerable influence and an opportunity for cooperation in an openness approach to achieving US interests. China has placed significant emphasis on growing its economy and middle class for decades. Because aspects of military power require economic strength, China's national security and ability to be a sustained regional power necessitates "a peaceful international environment," and "a stable international order."<sup>18</sup> China's economy also depends upon maritime trade. Increased trade with Russia and central Asian states would not alleviate China's dependence on maritime trade.<sup>19</sup> China's economic growth and opening to the world resulted in "deep interactions with global markets," including reliance upon raw material imports and export markets for finished products.<sup>20</sup> China's reliance upon maritime trade, stability, and the related institutions and rules that facilitate effective trade provides an opportunity. The United States should pursue multilateral and global institutional pressure to prevent China from creating a closed sphere of influence in East Asia or restricting access to the global commons. Open trade and access in East Asia, thereby facilitating unrestricted

trade, is a mutually beneficial outcome for both China and the United States, and such trade also benefits numerous other states in the region.

The United States should also seek new or updated economic agreements that incentivize upholding rules by ensuring states that act responsibly continue to enjoy the economic benefits of stable trade. Agreements should seek to disincentivize irresponsible behavior by penalizing (to varying extents) states who fail to follow acceptable behaviors, thereby incentivizing China to follow institutionalized norms.<sup>21</sup> The United States can leverage China's dependence on maritime trade by seeking broad cooperation and agreements with China's maritime trade partners. The United States should also use the information instrument of power to support its economic approach. Narratives should convey that the systems and institutions China has benefitted from depend upon institutionalized norms for responsible behavior and fair economic practices.<sup>22</sup> Norms and fair practices must be emphasized as the key to sustainable success of open systems, existing institutions, and the states that benefit from their participation, such as China. With such a view of key factors essential to China sustaining the economic underpinning of its rise in power, including the importance of open systems and norms and fair practices shared by the United States, China could be influenced to follow rules of responsible behavior that would mutually benefit both states.

An openness approach to a rising China allows the United States to maintain its military readiness that can bolster its diplomatic and economic efforts, keep East Asia open, and be ready to secure US interests if needed. If peaceful means to resolve conflicts over selective interests prove impossible, the United States must be prepared for the discriminate use of force to defend its selective interests and assure its allies of continued US commitment. The United States should modernize agreements and seek new multilateral arrangements for military cooperation to share burdens and risks.<sup>23</sup> Cooperation should leverage allies' strategic contributions. Such contributions will include "technological expertise, intelligence sharing," and other resources.<sup>24</sup> History provides a useful lesson in predicting another multilateral opportunity. As previously occurred in Southeast Asia, regional states are more likely to balance against the rising Chinese threat than bandwagon with China.<sup>25</sup> The United States will capitalize on diplomatic embeddedness (the bilateral and multilateral ties that link states together) by leveraging its institutional ties to China's neighbors for strengthening and building multilateral coalitions.<sup>26</sup> Diplomatic embeddedness will make negotiating side-payments (benefits for all parties) and issue-linkages easier and provide better information on partner preferences.<sup>27</sup>

The United States should maintain its forces in the region and continue exercises to ensure its partners do not perceive abandonment or a lack of reliability of

US security guarantees. Continued force presence and combined exercises will also bolster essential alliances to the security of the United States, including preserving access to the global commons and preventing a closed sphere of Chinese influence. By maintaining force posture in the Indo-Pacific, the United States can deter aggressive Chinese (and Democratic People's Republic of Korea) behavior and assure the region that the United States is ready and willing to defend its partners and allies, prevent a Chinese closed sphere of influence, and maintain access to the global commons.

Openness allows for mutually acceptable outcomes. Because the Chinese government's rhetoric does not seem to match the reality of its behavior, the United States cannot be sure of China's true intentions. China's approach to Taiwan appears revisionist. Additionally, its expansionist tendencies in the South China Sea are aggressive. Yet these actions are met with statements that China "will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion."<sup>28</sup> If China seeks recognition as a great power, openness supports such recognition while influencing China to conform to international norms within the existing order in which they participate. If China's true goal is regional hegemony, openness supports a reasonable compromise. China can exercise regional leadership and take leading roles in institutions without risking conflict with the United States, so long as it does not pursue a closed regional sphere of influence whereby access to the global commons is compromised. Meanwhile, the United States would be able to maintain its regional presence and pursue its interests through peaceful cooperation and competition. In such a compromise, both powers continue to enjoy the benefits of access to the global commons, including vital trade.

An openness strategy that leverages the entire DIME should be used to address a rising China's challenge to US national security. US interests need to be selectively defined in the region to prevent a closed sphere of influence, ensure open access to the global commons, and pursue openness principles through norms and regulatory regimes. To secure these interests, the United States should leverage measures across the entire DIME, seek cooperation where possible, and be prepared to compete and defend interests when cooperation fails. Although mutually acceptable outcomes are achievable, the United States should maintain its military presence to deter aggression and assure its allies and partners that the United States remains committed to its security agreements and interests. ★

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## Notes

1. J. Wesley Hutto “Constructivism: The Role of Ideas, Identities, and Norms,” lecture delivered at Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL, 23 Nov. 2020.

2. Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “The Open World: What America Can Achieve After Trump,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2019): 25.

3. For purposes of the flow of this article, I will discuss the intended use of the economic instrument of power before the military instrument of power, despite their order in the acronym.

4. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 18.

5. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 21–4.

6. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 19.

7. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 19.

8. Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., *Arts of Power: Statecraft and Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1997), 81–2.

9. Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 81–2.

10. Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 81–2.

11. Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 81–2.

12. Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 72–3.

13. 9 Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 73–4; and Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 21–2. The United States should apply the historical lessons from its space relations with the Soviets and Russia—space should be a diplomatic tool, not a stumbling block.

14. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* 80 (Autumn 1990): 155.

15. Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power,” *Media, War, & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 74.

16. Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 9–10.

17. Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative,” 74–5, 79.

18. Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2012): 57; and Xi, “Speech Delivered to the 19th Communist Party Congress [Selections].”

19. Haddick, *Fire on the Water*, 131.

20. Haddick, *Fire on the Water*, 19, 131.

21. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 24.

22. Hutto, “Constructivism.” Ensuring the narratives are based in fact will be challenging. However, the United States can distinguish between China’s rise resulting from participation in the current liberal order and its potential to have achieved more success already if China’s participation would have included greater adherence to institutionalized norms. As China seeks to continue its economic growth, avoiding trade disputes and disrupting the flow of the system that China has enjoyed substantial success through pose strong incentives that may prove to be the best way to shape responsible behavior.

23. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 24; and Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 84–5.

24. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner, “The Open World,” 25.

25. Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 15–6.
26. Marina E. Henke, "The Politics of Diplomacy: How the United States Builds Multilateral Military Coalitions," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2017): 412.
27. Henke, "The Politics of Diplomacy," 412.
28. Glaser, "A US-China Grand Bargain?," 61–2; and Xi, "Speech Delivered to the 19th Communist Party Congress [Selections]."

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