

INSTITUTE OF ASIAN STUDIES



Prof. Rober Sutter



*Prof. Robert Sutter is Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the Elliott School of George Washington University. He also serves as the school's Director, Program of Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs and has more than three decades of experience in government services. He taught full time for ten years at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and part-time for thirty years at Georgetown, George Washington, Johns Hopkins Universities, or the University of Virginia. He has published 20 books, over 200 articles and several hundred government reports in contemporary East Asian and Pacific countries and their relations with the United States. His most recent book is Foreign Relations of the PRC: The Legacies and Constraints of China's International Politics since 1949.*

*We had the opportunity to talk with Prof. Sutter before his lecture on January 6 – China's Rise and its Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy, in Brno. Prof. Sutter came to the Czech Republic on the invitation from the Association for International Affairs.*

**In line with the theme of your today's lecture let me start with a question, how would you assess China's present power position and where do you see it in twenty years' time?**

That is a very big question. China today is the second power of the world. It is the second biggest economy and will probably overtake the United States in overall size in ten years. It is also the biggest trader, manufacturer, creditor and holder of foreign exchange in the world. Its average annual growth rate over last the 30 years is on a level of 10%. China is undeniably economically very important and its influence is heavy. You could find its footprints all around the world. It is important in dealing with virtually everyone from Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Middle East but at the same time the scope of Chinese interests is often focused narrowly on commerce.

Where does China matter more, not talking only economy wise? It is around its neighborhood in Asia. In a sense, China is still a regional power. Its military is very much confined to that part of the world. There is no Chinese military presence of significance anywhere else. Asia is where Chinese security and sovereignty issues meet the economy. Also, Asia is where China meets the US. That's where the competition between the US and China is intense. China is enjoying a worldwide political prominence and is important globally, but nowhere else is it as important as it is in Asia.

We are currently at a stage where China is rising and the US may be at the same level or might be declining. There is a lot of speculation now that China should be perceived as the leading power of Asia. It certainly is a rising power, very powerful. It has a strong military and economy but there is one major contradiction that clouds the forecast. The Chinese are trying to do something that really has not been done - to take a socialist state, allow for rapid economic development, freer economy and for a big social change. At the same time they are trying to preserve one party state. That is very hard to do and it leads to lots of tensions. It is, for example, very hard and expensive to keep control and order inside China. China spends more on internal security than on national defense.

Chinese leaders have a legitimacy problem. They are unsettled. Will they succeed or not? They have been successful up to this point and probably will continue to be successful. That would be my judgment but twenty years is a long time and I am reluctant to make a big forecast beyond that. I think China will continue to grow and be a big power. Whether it is actually going to be the leading power of Asia, I personally do not think so but many people do. China's rise remains encumbered.

**You have mentioned the competition between the United States and China, do you think the old dictum of Deng Xiaoping “hide your power, bide your time” still holds true for the Chinese foreign policy?**

Not at this stage. It is changing. China is much more assertive than Deng Xiaoping would have ever been under that rubric. They are showing their power, figuratively flexing their muscles and getting into trouble as a result. I am not sure how long they are going to do it this way but they are certainly doing it at the moment. I would have to say that, for now at least, they have put aside the Deng Xiaoping dictum and said no, we are powerful enough that we can do this. But it leads to a lot of problems with Japan, with Vietnam, the Philippines, with United States, and with Taiwan. This is not a good position for them to be in but right now that is what they are doing.

**If China is not poised to become the leading power in the region, who will take the stage?**

I think the US. The US is going to be there for some time. I have studied this a lot and I certainly do not want to be biased but I have come across this message in the last ten years I have been interviewing officials of the Asia-Pacific governments. I have interviewed 210 officials since 2004. The last time in 2010, before that in 2008, 2006 and 2004. These officials suggest the power of the US is in Asia, why it is the leading power and why it will continue to be the leading power.

There are two basic reasons for this, the first one is security. In Asia, governments matter. They make the decisions. It is not the media or interest groups, it is the government officials and they are most of the time very calculating. What they want, the vast majority, is development. Development is their legitimacy, they need it. And what do they need for development? Well they need a lot of things but they need stability. Then when you ask them, is Asia stable? They

look at you funny and they say ‘no, not really’. I say ‘what do you mean?’ They reply, ‘well we don’t like each other and we do not trust each other’. This is their little secret. This is not true only for China and Japan, this is true for the whole Southeast Asia, this is everywhere in the region. Where do they get stability you ask? The short answer is from the US. The United States does it at a great cost, of 50 to a 100 billion dollars a year and at great risk. Americans are willing to get killed to keep stability in Asia. Now, that is not because America loves Asia, but because of a certain sense of interest that drives us to do this. I don’t know when China is going to replace that and if it ever will. To me stability is a very profound interest that Asian countries have and China just will not meet.

The other thing the America does is that it buys all the stuff of Asia-Pacific. It buys commodities. Asian economies are export oriented economies and they all need to export to be prosperous and successful. And the Americans buy, they have an enormous trade deficit of 400 billion dollars. Most of it is with China because China is the main place of exports of the processing trades out of Asia. That is a very costly thing.

The bottom line for American leadership is risk, cost and commitment. And China does not do any of that. China does “win-win”. That means when China does something, they have to win and their win sense is very narrow. It is not broad, open minded, not regional minded, it is not global minded. It is focused on Chinese development, Chinese prosperity, and Chinese interests. That is where the win has to take place and if they do not win they don’t do things. They are not going to do anything like the US does for the region. The Americans could stop doing it, could leave and could go home but it is improbable at this point. Asia is important. I don’t think America is going home, Mr. Obama says it is not going, the proof is in actions. The base of the United States in this region is quite strong, even not taking into account the Asian Pivot - the Obama’s Asia-Pacific “rebalance policy”. These two pillars, stability and the commodity demand are unique for the US and China doesn’t do any of that.

China, more than anything, is a problem for Asia, it is not a stabilizer it is the destabilizer. And Asian governments know it. So what do they do? They talk to the United States, they get a closer relationship with the United States. They are hedging. They don’t want the US to have problems with China, they don’t want to confront China themselves. They want to get along with China, they want to prosper with China. But they cannot depend on China whereas they depend on the United States.

**How do you think the Asian Pivot of the US that you have mentioned and the win-win mindset of China will reconcile?**

This is tough. We are not in the period of reconciliation with China it seems to me. We are in the period of managing tensions. The idea is that we don’t let our tensions get to the point where we have to shoot at each other. We try to find areas where to cooperate but they tend to be by design not in Asia. In Asia we are competing and the stakes are high for both China and the United States. It is a difficult situation to be in but we are managing it carefully. I think the US president does not want any big trouble with China. And I think Mr. Xi Jinping doesn’t

want it with the United States either but he doesn't act that way. And this is where the Deng Xiaoping dictum comes in or would come in. If the Chinese were acting like Deng Xiaoping, then there would not be a problem but today there is a problem. Because Xi Jinping's China is expanding and expanding at the expense of China's neighbors, who are allied with the United States. This makes the United States look weak in Asia, it makes it look like it cannot keep up with its commitments, and it makes it look unreliable. This is not something the US wants to see happen and so to prevent it from happening, they have been firmer in dealing with China.

### **What is the general perception of China among Asian countries?**

This is one of the main reasons why I do not think China is going to confront the US. They do not have a very strong position in Asia and this is the most important area of the world for them. 70 percent of their foreign policy activity centers in Asia. That is a lion's share of their foreign policy attention. Getting the rim of Asia right would be a number one job for China because when you look at the rim you see they have very mixed relationships all around. Relationship with Japan is terrible. They have a big problem in East China Sea with the Japanese. North Korea, supposedly their only ally, is a big problem and they have no answer to it. No solution. It is an on-going festering problem. Countries around South China Sea are somewhat softer in their resistance to the Chinese late assertiveness and salami-slicing but Vietnam is not soft at all and is also a problem. Taiwan had been going well for a certain time but now there is a possibility of the opposition forces winning in the upcoming election that takes place a year from today. When that happens, Beijing has to recalibrate its policy towards Taiwan. It is a very difficult issue. Also, then they have an uncertainty over Hong Kong they need to face.

Add it all up, China seems to be in a vulnerable position. What you see overall, looking at the relationships China has with India, with Australia, with New Zealand, with South Korea, these are often trade relationships albeit strong but the governments remain very wary of China, strategically and politically. And for good reasons. China was very disruptive over the years, the PRC has a negative legacy in this part of the world. They surely do not want to talk about it but other governments all know about this and they have not overcome it yet.

China has been working for 25 years trying to improve their influence and image in Asia. This has been a focal point of their activity since the end of the Cold War. How have they been doing? It can be measured merely by looking at the relationships China has with regional powers around the rim of China. It is a very mixed picture that gets reversed from time to time. For example Indonesia, the most important country in Southeast Asia. China has alienated Indonesia through its actions in the South China Sea. They had been doing a good job for 20 years improving their relations with Indonesia and then they fouled it up overnight.

They do similar things often because they are conflicted. They want to spread their influence and they want to do it through peace and development. With the low profile of Deng Xiaoping or even with the high profile of Xi Jinping, if it is peace and development the Asian countries will welcome this. This is what they have been pursuing publicly but at the same time, and

sometimes giving it priority, are territorial sovereignty issues where there is no compromise for the Chinese. It is their territory so they are working persistently to get all other countries out. Their neighbors see this and they call it aggression, coercion, intimidation, which it is. Where is the peace and development in that? It is at total odds. This makes Asian governments wary of China and looking for sources of leverage to deal with China. The US is a major source of leverage. This is the dynamic that is in play right now in East Asia and the Chinese have not done a very good job in managing it. Without a secure foundation in nearby Asia, China will be unable to take major leadership role in other world areas.

**From what you have said, is China preventing itself in a way to actually become the leading regional power?**

China talks about the world and the US containing them, but they are very good at self-containment. This is something that does not get a lot of attention and I do not want to put too much weight on it but it has a symbolic face value. China has never acknowledged making a mistake in foreign affairs. The People's Republic of China has never acknowledged this and they work very hard to make sure their people feel that way and believe that. Chinese people say yes, this is right we have always done the right thing. We do our policies on the basis of principles and these principles lead to moral behavior. Unfortunately what they do not say is that they have principles for all occasions. When one set of principles does not work then they get another set that does fit and does work. China's neighbors intuitively know none of these principles matter and the Chinese are very much moved by circumstance to pursue their power and influence. But the Chinese people, even the leaders think that they act on the basis of principles.

Also, when you do that you become very self-righteous, you become exceptional. And this is coming from an American. We are known for being exceptional but Americans acknowledge their mistakes in elections. A candidate will come up and say your policy is wrong and I am going to change the policy. Here is why and we are going to have a new policy. Then he or she actually wins. This is how we do it. China does not have elections. China is like the Pope. I am a devoted catholic, I understand the Papacy but they cannot admit making a mistake. China is in a sense just like the Pope. Run by a lot of cardinals, when you look at the people that run the Chinese Communist Party. The fact they never make a mistake makes them very difficult to deal with. Having a dispute, it is never China's fault, it is always the other side. Someone else. And if they do not want to blame the other party they blame the United States. That is the fault-blame target and a very common pattern.

**What role do you see here for Europe? Coming from Czech Republic and Slovakia, does Europe have any significance for the China-US relationship and their interaction?**

Friends of the United States in Europe are important in talking with China about American intentions. Americans do not want to dominate China, they want to make sure that Asia does not come under the dominance of a coercive power and China is acting as a coercive power towards its neighbors right now. Something needs to be done and Europe can explain

American perspective on this issue and American actions to the Chinese and they can also explain Chinese perspective to the Americans. Our European partners can act as mediators, emphasize that nobody, particularly in Europe, wants to see any sort of serious difficulties between the US and China. But it is up for the leaders of the United States and China to manage these issues. I think they will. I think they can do it. We have been through worse times, in recent years with China. The situation over Taiwan in 1995 until 2008 was much tenser than what we have today. I am convinced we can manage these issues but they are here to stay.

The impact on the rest of the world could be damaging economically but so long as we remain competitive and not confrontational I think we are OK. I do not think it is going to have a particularly big impact on Bratislava or Prague or anybody in this part of the world. The US may call upon countries to be supportive of the United States, for example in international financial institutions, the World Bank and IMF, which are now under challenge because of China's movement toward setting up their own international banks in Asia. This could happen and may come up but I don't see any other effect for Europe at this point.

**Moving to a very topical issue these days, what are your thoughts on relations between China and Russia, particularly after the recent Ukrainian crisis?**

The Russia-China relationship remains a marriage of convenience. When they have strong parallel interest in dealing with the United States, which is usually a target, then they stand together. Mr. Putin certainly has strong reasons to stand against the United States and the Chinese have somewhat strong interest to stand with Mr. Putin. In this respect Ukraine was and is a difficult issue for them. China has tried to finesse it and still remain to look supportive of Mr. Putin but the bottom line here is that it is circumstantial, it depends on circumstances. If those were to change if one or the other were to see their interest as better served with an accommodation or moderation to the West they would do it. This has happened at least twice in the last decade. It happened in 2001 when President Putin moved away from his anti-US position to one of moderation and the Chinese did not know about it. They were allied together on all sorts of issues and then they split. Actually, they did not really split, Putin just left and Chinese were left befuddled by this for a while. The second time this has happened was with the war on Georgia. This time the Russians were looking for support from China for their acts against Georgia but the Chinese would not give it.

China and Russia don't agree with each other unconditionally. You could find that in fact they disagree on key issues. Then it gets back to the "win-win" scenario, obviously for both. Will the Chinese win in return for their support? If it looks like they will not win so much they are not going to be supportive.

**As a New Year's resolution, what would you recommend to Chinese leaders in 2015?**

Get a consistent approach that is appealing to Asia. I think peaceful development would do it. It is a very good approach but you have got to get control over those territorial issues that are driving them to do obnoxious things to their neighbors.

*interviewer: Šimon Drugda*

*Opinions expressed in this interview are those of the respondent and do not reflect the position of Institute of Asian Studies.*



Inštitút ázijských štúdií (IAS) je nezávislou partnerskou organizáciou Centra pre európske a severoatlantické vzťahy (CENAA) v Bratislave. Hlavným cieľom inštitútu je podpora a realizácia výskumu v oblasti ázijských štúdií a šírenie vedomostí o Ázii medzi slovenskou odbornou verejnosťou, spolupráca s organizáciami s podobným zameraním v strednej Európe a budovanie partnerstiev s ázijskými partnermi.

©IAS/CENAA

Tolstého 9, Bratislava, 811 06

E-mail: [office@cenaa.org](mailto:office@cenaa.org)

[www.cenaa.org/ias/](http://www.cenaa.org/ias/)

Nájdete  
naš aj na  
facebooku

