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The Sino-American comedy of errors

By Spengler

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BEIJING - Everything in tragedy happens for a reason, and the result always is sad; most things in comedy happen by accident and the outcome typically is happy. Sino-American relations are not destined for conflict, although that is possible. The misunderstandings that bedevil relations between the world's two most powerful countries remain comedic rather than tragic. That probably is as good as it gets, for no amount of explanation will enable Chinese and Americans to make sense of each other.

Where the Chinese are defensive and cautious, the Americans tend to perceive them as aggressive; where the Chinese are expansive ambitious, the Americans ignore them altogether. The United States is a Pacific power accustomed to maritime dominance. To the extent that Americans focus on China's foreign policy, it is to express alarm at China's territorial claims on small uninhabited islands also claimed by Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. Apart from some overheated and self-serving rhetoric from a few Chinese military leaders, though, the contested islands are of negligible importance in China's scale of priorities.

The issue may be moot by this writing: last week, China and Japan released a "Principled Agreement on Handling and Improving Bilateral Relations", following meetings between Japan's national security adviser, Shotaro Yachi, and Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi. The document promises to "establish crisis management mechanisms to avoid contingencies" and to employ "dialogue and consultation".

Neither Japan nor China had any interest in a military confrontation in the Pacific, although both sides employed the island disputes to play to their own nationalist constituencies. The Principled Agreement sends a signal that the Kabuki show had gone far enough.

A common American meme in response to supposed Chinese expansionism in the Pacific projected an Indian-Japanese military alliance to contain Chinese ambitions under US sponsorship. Although a few Indian nationalists enthused over the idea, it was an empty gesture from the outside. If India got into a scrap with China over disputed borders, for example, just what would Japan do to help?

The newly-elected Indian government under Narendra Modi never took the idea seriously. On the contrary, after President Xi Jinping's recent state visit to India, Modi envisions Chinese investment in urgently needed infrastructure. Economics trumps petty concerns over borders in the mountainous wasteland that separates the world's two most populous nations.

There also is a strategic dimension to the growing sense of agreement between China and India. From India's vantage point, China's support for Pakistan's army is a concern, but it cuts both ways. Pakistan remains at perpetual risk of tipping over towards militant Islam, and the main guarantor of its stability is the army. China wants to strengthen the army as a bulwark against the Islamic radicals, who threaten China's Xinjiang province as much as they do India, and that probably serves India's interests as well as any Chinese policy might.

Chinese analysts are dumbfounded about the US response to what they view as a sideshow in the South China Sea and only tangentially concerned about India. They struggle to understand why a vastly improved relationship with Russia has emerged in response to US blundering in Ukraine.

As a matter of diplomatic principle, China does not like separatists because it has its own separatists to contend with, starting with the Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. Washington thought that the Maidan Revolution in Kiev last year would take Crimea out of Russian control, and Russia responded by annexing the peninsula containing its main warm-water naval base.

When the West imposed sanctions on Russia in retaliation, Moscow moved eastwards - an obvious response, and one that strongly impacts Western power. Not only has Russia opened its gas reserve to China, but it has agreed to supply China with its most sophisticated military technology, including the formidable S-400 air defense system. Russia was reluctant to do so in the past given Chinese efforts to reverse-engineer Russian systems, but the Ukraine crisis changed that.

Western analysts, to be sure, now observe that the new Russian-Chinese rapprochement might be a challenge for the West. The New York Times devoted a front-page feature to the opinions of the usual suspects among Soviet watchers in its November 9 edition.

This was obvious months ago, and should have been obvious before the fact: the West merely threw B'rer Putin into the briar patch to his east. Of all the miscalculations in Western policy since World War II, this was perhaps the stupidest. The Chinese are left to scratch their heads about their unanticipated good luck.

It is wrong to speak of a Russian-Chinese alliance, to be sure, but there is a developing Sino-Russian condominium in Asia. The energy and defense deals between Moscow and Beijing are important in their own right, but they take on all the more importance in the context of what might be the most ambitious economic project in history: the New Silk Road. The Pacific holds little promise for China. Japan and South Korea are mature economies, customers as well as competitors of China.

Expansion in the Pacific simply has nothing to offer China's economy. What China wants is to be impregnable within its own borders: it will spend generously to develop surface-to-ship missiles that can take out US aircraft carriers, hunter-killer submarines, and air defense systems.

China's prospects are to the west and south: energy and minerals in Central Asia, food in Southeast Asia, warm-water ports on the Indian Ocean, a vast market, and access to world markets beyond. The network of rail, pipelines and telecommunications that China is building through the former Soviet republics and through Russia itself will terminate at the Mediterranean and provide a springboard for Chinese trade with Europe.

The whole Eurasian landmass is likely to become a Chinese economic zone, especially now that Russia is more amenable to Chinese terms. That the Americans would have helped bring this to fruition by tilting at windmills in Ukraine baffles the Chinese, but they are enjoying the result.

The economic impact of this is hard to fathom, but it is likely to extend Chinese influence westwards on a scale that the West simply hasn't begun to imagine. It is not at all clear whether China has a clear idea of what the implications of the New Silk Road might be. The implosion of America's geopolitical position has placed risks and opportunities at Beijing's doorstep, to Beijing's great surprise.

A year ago, Chinese officials privately reassured visitors that their country would "follow the lead of the dominant superpower" in matters relating to Middle East security, including Iran's attempts to acquire nuclear weapons. For the past several decades, China has allowed the US to look out for the Persian Gulf while it increased its dependency on Persian Gulf oil. By 2020, China expects to import 70% of its oil, and most of that will come from the Gulf.

The Chinese view has changed radically during the past few months, in part due to the collapse of the Syrian and Iraqi states and the rise of Islamic State. It is hard to find a Chinese specialist who still thinks that the US can stand surely for Persian Gulf security. Opinion is divided between those who think that America is merely incompetent and those who think that America deliberately wants to destabilize the Persian Gulf.

Now that the US is approaching self-sufficiency in energy resources, some senior Chinese analysts believe it wants to push the region into chaos in order to hurt China. One prominent Chinese analyst pointed out that Islamic State is led by Sunni officers trained by the United States during the 2007-2008 "surge" as well as elements of Saddam Hussein's old army, and that this explains why IS has displayed such military and organizational competence.

The complaint is justified, to be sure: General David Petraeus helped train the 100,000-strong "Sunni Awakening" to create a balance of power against the Shi'ite majority regime that the US helped bring to power in 2006. How, the Chinese ask, could the Bush administration and Petraeus have been so stupid? To persuade the Chinese that they were indeed that stupid is a daunting task.

China's attitude towards Washington has turned towards open contempt. Writing of the mid-term elections, the official daily newspaper Global Times intoned: "The lame-duck president will be further crippled ? he has done an insipid job, offering nearly nothing to his supporters. US society has grown tired of his banality."

But the decline of American influence in the region from which China obtains most of its oil is not a happy event for Beijing.

China did not anticipate the end of the free ride from the Americans, and it isn't sure what to do next. It has tried to maintain a balance among countries with whom it trades and who are hostile to each other. It has sold a great deal of conventional weapons to Iran, for example, and some older, less-sophisticated ballistic missiles.

But China has sold Saudi Arabia its top-of-the-line intermediate range missiles, giving the Saudis a "formidable deterrent capability" against Iran and other prospective adversaries. China obtains more oil from Saudi Arabia than any other country, although its imports from Iraq and Oman are growing faster. Because the latter two countries are closer to Iran, China wants to strike a balance.

Chinese opinion is divided about the implications of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons: some strategists believe that the balance of nuclear power in the region will suffice to prevent the use of such weapons, while others fear that a nuclear exchange in the Gulf might stop the flow of oil and bring down China's economy. China has joined the P-5 plus 1 negotiations (involving the UN Security Council permanent five members plus Germany) on Iran's nuclear status, but has not offered a policy independent of President Barack Obama's.

Meanwhile the rise of Islamist extremism worries Beijing, as well it should. At least a hundred Uyghurs reportedly are fighting with Islamic State, presumably in order to acquire terrorist skills to bring back home to China. Chinese analysts have a very low opinion of the Obama administration's approach to dealing with IS, but do not have an alternative policy. This is an issue of growing importance. Instability threatens the Silk Road project at several key notes.

China has no sympathy whatever for what analysts there like to call "political Islam". America's flirtation with the Muslim Brotherhood - both from the Obama administration and from mainstream Republicans such as Senator John McCain - strikes the Chinese as incompetence, or worse. But China has no capability to go after the Islamists, except for a very limited deployment of marines off the coast of Somalia.

China's policy-making is careful, conservative and consensus-driven. Its overriding concern is its own economy. The pace of transformation of the Middle East has surprised it, and it is trying to decide what to do next.

Its pro forma policy is to join the Iran talks, and offer to join the Quartet (the UN, the US, the European Union, and Russia) talks on the Israel-Palestine issue, but neither of these initiatives has much to do with its actual concerns.

What China will do in the future cannot be predicted. But it seems inevitable that China's basic interests will lead it to far greater involvement in the region, all the more so as the US withdraws.