

The expectation that China eventually would pursue an assertive grand strategic policy—in the aftermath of successfully attaining comprehensive national strength—will not be surprising to most students of international politics, since such behavior would be fairly consistent with the conduct of previous great powers historically.

Assertive policies in the case of China may be more likely for two other reasons. First, the unique and long-standing Chinese experience of geopolitical primacy and the association of that primacy with good order, civilization, virtue, and justice, may make the pursuit of geopolitical centrality through assertive behavior once again attractive, even in the absence of a hierarchical Confucian world view.¹ Moreover, the record presented in Chapter Three suggests that the use and exploitation of force was by no means exceptional in Chinese history, many official protestations today notwithstanding,² even though the application of intense levels of force for prolonged periods was often resisted by some Chinese political elites and even though strong Chinese regimes would at times eschew the use of force when it was shown to be ineffective and inferior to appeasement. In general, it is unlikely that imperial China behaved significantly differently from Republican Rome where defense of the periphery was concerned and at least one authority has argued that

¹As suggested in Chapters Two and Three, the Chinese emphasis on geopolitical primacy derives as much from China's general historical experience as the predominant political, economic, cultural, and military power of East Asia as it does on the specific belief system of the Chinese state at any particular time.

²For one such example, see Li (1997).

Neither Chinese nor Romans, retreating in the face of aggressive barbarians, dug in on a fortified line to save civilization. On the contrary, Chinese and Romans, each exploiting a geographical environment that had recognizable characteristics, built up the highest civilizations of their times. They expanded to take in all the terrain that could be profitably exploited by the techniques they already had, until they reached a zone—the depths of Mongolia, the depths of Germany—which because of costs of transportation and distances from metropolitan markets could not be further integrated with the urban-rural *oikumene*. Further expansion would mean diminishing returns—too much military expenditure, too little additional revenue. That was where they dug in and why they dug in. Their “defense lines” were in fact the limits which they themselves set on their own expansion.³

As also shown in Chapter Three, within this general dynamic, the Chinese, like the Romans, pursued a variety of stratagems—punitive expeditions in some cases, coopting adversaries in others, and multiple forms of bribery in still some other instances—but the overarching objective still remained at the very least the neutralization of, or at best control over, the strategic periphery and, more important, the defense of a hegemony that was initially created by force, when possible, and ultimately legitimized and maintained by the claim of virtue and superior order and a related demand for deference from neighboring powers. *If* China fulfills its expected potential, there is no reason to believe that it will *not* eventually seek to “establish some sort of hegemony to protect and promote its interests.”⁴ Thanks to the changing circumstances of the age and at least some of the lessons provided by Chinese history, this hegemony may not “necessarily involve the physical conquest and occupation of neighboring countries⁵ . . . but [it] would mean the use of various types of coercion to maintain an environment favorable to China’s interests, and not necessarily to anyone else’s.”⁶

At the very least, therefore, growing Chinese power would at some point in the future likely result in a search for “hegemony” under-

³Lattimore (1979), p. 274.

⁴Roy (1996), p. 762.

⁵Nor, we should add, prolonged or major conflicts with other powers.

⁶Roy (1996).

stood as a quest for universal acceptance of its increased power, status, and influence as a legitimate right. Toward that end, if history is a reasonably accurate guide, an assertive China could reasonably be expected to augment its military capabilities in a manner commensurate with its increased power; develop a sphere of influence by acquiring new allies and underwriting the protection of others; acquire new or reclaim old territory for their resources or for symbolic reasons by penalizing, if necessary, any opponents or bystanders who resist such claims; prepare to redress past wrongs it believes it may have suffered; attempt to rewrite the prevailing international “rules of the game” to reflect its own interests; and, in the most extreme policy choice imaginable, even ready itself to thwart preventive war or to launch predatory attacks on its foes. Although it is unlikely that the last choice would be attractive in the nuclear age and might be made less likely if China were to become a democracy, the fact remains that any combination of these policies, though natural from the perspective of a powerful state, would stir the suspicion of its rivals and precipitate an action-reaction spiral that reinforces the temptation to embark on assertive stratagems even more strongly.

Second, an assertive China is likely to appear over the long haul, under the assumptions discussed above (including continued high growth, domestic political and social stability, etc.) precisely because the United States, the established hegemon, will—if the historical record pertaining to previous declining hegemonies holds—prepare to arrest its own gradual loss of relative power and influence. This behavior may, of course, not be oriented explicitly and solely to coping with an emerging Chinese threat, but it will nonetheless take place “under the shadow” of steadily increasing Chinese power. As a result, the attempts at regeneration will most likely provide numerous opportunities for various domestic constituencies within the United States to cast the process in explicitly anti-Chinese terms. Some of this rhetoric may be intended to shape the national consensus in pursuit of a robust containment strategy directed against the new rival, whereas other constituencies may be content simply to use the rhetoric to obscure their own private pursuit of some narrow rent-seeking opportunities that may arise as a result of growing Chinese power.

Even apart from such efforts at exploiting the China threat (which might materialize at the societal level), the U.S. state itself, for purely prudent reasons, would most likely be inclined at some point to accelerate its efforts at national renewal merely to immunize itself against the worst consequences imaginable as a result of greatly increased Chinese power. Consistent with this objective, the United States, for fully understandable reasons, would eventually seek to further improve its military capabilities in the face of significant increases in Chinese military power to ensure an effective defense of itself and its allies; restructure its economy and society to reverse unfavorable growth trends, increase technological innovation, or absorb or counter innovations that may be emerging elsewhere; preserve the extant international “rules of the game” with minimal changes in an effort to accommodate the rising challenger at the lowest minimal cost; maintain the existing political order by renewing its existing alliances, perhaps by altering the existing division of labor, reapportioning prevailing burdens, or recruiting new allies; develop new alliances by offering protection to states potentially threatened by the new rising power; and, in the most extreme response imaginable, contemplate preventive war or at least anticipate and prepare for military challenges mounted at itself and its allies.

Although it is unlikely that extreme variants of the last ingredient would form part of responsible U.S. policymaking, the fact remains that even the other policy responses would be interpreted by Beijing as little other than a covert attempt to contain China. Suspicions of this sort are already strong in Beijing, but they are likely to become even more corrosive—probably more justifiably—*if and when China approaches the status of a true global peer of the United States*. If China, in fact, continues to be governed by a nonliberal regime at that point, the traditional U.S. crusading impulse may only reinforce those imperatives flowing from the desire to maintain a balance of power into an even more aggressive attempt at containment. In any event, and irrespective of the precise dynamics involved, the intersection of diffidence on the part of the declining power—and all the efforts at arresting decline that those give rise to—and confidence on the part of the rising power—with all the assertiveness occasioned by that assurance—is likely to result in a rivalry that can only be managed but not avoided or wished away.

If such a rivalry can be anticipated, even if only over the long term, the question of how the United States should respond becomes a critical issue.⁷ Many political realists argue that so long as the rise of China is assessed to be inevitable, there is no strategic alternative, in essence, to containing China—assuming that weakening, or undermining, or destroying it in some risk-free way is impossible. Machiavelli, writing at a different point in history, in fact provided the first systematic baseline for such a policy when he described the contours of Roman imperial strategy toward the Greeks. As Machiavelli approvingly described, Rome was compelled to conquer Greece to preempt Antiochus of Syria from securing Greece for himself. Clearly, neither Greece nor Syria threatened Roman security in any immediate sense but,

the Romans, seeing inconveniences from afar, always found remedies for them and never allowed them to continue so as to escape a war, because they knew that war may not be avoided but [only] deferred to the advantage of others.⁸

The realism of Machiavelli, therefore, concludes that security can be preserved only by prudential action and that prudence in the face of potential changes in the international power structure can only take the form of continual preemptive conquest.⁹ Since it is unlikely that the U.S. polity would find the Machiavellian solution very appetizing, preemptive conquest, which may be costly, unsuccessful, and perhaps even unethical in the modern age, may have to be replaced, in the view of some observers, by more conservative strategies such as preemptive containment or “polite containment,”¹⁰ since weakening or undermining China is both costly to the current U.S. desire for high absolute gains and is fraught with great risks. One of the most insightful analyses of U.S. foreign policy has claimed, however,

⁷The best discussion of how alternative theoretical formulations like realism and liberalism in their various forms generate different policy responses can be found in Betts (1993/94). For a more recent discussion of U.S. policy responses, see Khalilzad et al. (1999).

⁸Machiavelli, XII–XIII.

⁹On Machiavelli’s realism and its prescriptions for effective politics, see Tellis (1995/96), pp. 25–39.

¹⁰Betts (1993/94), p. 54.

that preemptive containment, even if desirable and effective, is not possible. Quoting John Quincy Adams who remarked that “America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” the historian Walter McDougall has argued that the U.S. national temperament, which favors late and reluctant entrance into warfare (perhaps, after having absorbed the first blow), could not countenance preemptive strategies of any kind, no matter how efficacious those might have been in retrospect.¹¹ Other scholars have argued that even if preemptive containment of China were possible, it is simply undesirable because “if you insist on treating another country like an enemy, it is likely to become one.”¹² In other words, U.S. efforts to contain China would almost certainly provoke the emergence of an assertive, and more militant, China far sooner and to a much greater degree than might have otherwise occurred and, by implication, would likely preclude the emergence of a more cooperative China through any means short of internal collapse or conquest in war. For a variety of reasons, therefore, a containment strategy configured as an anticipatory response to the potential growth in Chinese power, is not feasible or desirable as a U.S. grand strategic policy.

If preemptive containment is inappropriate, the opposite strategy of preemptive appeasement is certainly premature and probably untenable as well. The notion of appeasement has acquired a certain odium in the vocabulary of modern politics because of its association with the failure of British policies toward Hitler in the 1930s and at least one scholar has argued that because of its loaded connotations, it ought to be banished from the political lexicon altogether.¹³ If these nominalistic considerations are disregarded for the moment in favor of a more analytic approach, the fact remains that appeasement has been a time-honored strategy employed by many states, often with effective results. In the most general sense, appeasement consists of meeting a claimant's demands without asking for any reciprocal advantages. Such a strategy has often been thought to be self-defeating because of the inherently altruistic premises built into

¹¹McDougall (1997), p. 25.

¹²Harries (1997), p. 35.

¹³Medlicott (1969).

its logic.¹⁴ Yet, successful instances of appeasement in the past have had little to do with altruism. Rather, they arose because the appeaser often could do nothing other than appease in the specific situation at hand; or because the claimant's objectives were limited, justified, and legitimate; or because the appeaser simply elected to respond conciliatorily to initiate a process of diffuse reciprocity that would eventually result in higher joint gains for both sides.

The principal problem with preemptive appeasement as a grand strategic response to China, however, may not be its potential ineffectiveness but rather its prematurity. This is because China's rise to greatness is yet to be assured.¹⁵ As argued in Chapter Five, many obstacles could still undermine its acquisition of comprehensive national strength and result in the failure of China to become a global peer competitor of the United States, or delay the attainment of that status beyond even the lengthy time period identified in this study. Because China's success is not yet assured, a general strategy of preemptively appeasing China may turn out to be a case of giving away too much, too early. Consequently, so long as China is not a true superpower, that is, a state that "enjoys relatively low sensitivity, vulnerability, and security interdependence because of massive resources and skill differentials and relative economic self-sufficiency,"¹⁶ it ought not be treated as a peer competitor whose goodwill must be procured at any cost, including unilateral conciliation on important strategic issues, by the United States.

This of course does not mean that the United States should never undertake unilateral initiatives to encourage a more cooperative China, or to reassure a fearful China, or even to catalyze a cooperative relationship with a powerful China. Those decisions should depend, as Morgenthau put it, on whether the Chinese claim or concern in question embodies "rationally limited objectives which must be disposed of either on their intrinsic merits or by way of compromise."¹⁷ If this claim is not part of a "chain at the end of which

¹⁴Middlemas (1972).

¹⁵In a somewhat hyperbolic vein, one commentator has even argued that China may not even matter very much today. See Segal (1999).

¹⁶Kim (1997), p. 24.

¹⁷Morgenthau (1985), p. 78.

stands the overthrow of the status quo,"¹⁸ U.S. appeasement may be worthwhile at some future point in time. But U.S. grand strategy today is simply confronted by the *possibility* of a rising China, not the assurance of a global rival, and consequently a significant preemptive appeasement strategy that results both in the continued accretion of Chinese power and in the bolstering of Chinese status without concern for the implications such improvements pose for U.S. power and status cannot be in U.S. interests.

If both preemptive containment and preemptive appeasement of China are then judged to be premature as basic strategies, the only broad surviving policy option for the United States remains some form of realistic engagement. It may seem ironic that an analytic assessment that prognosticates the rise of Chinese power and argues that such power would eventually become assertive finally concludes that there may be no alternative to engaging China, at least in the policy-relevant future. Yet, the presumed irony rapidly disappears when it is understood that the analysis emphatically affirms the inherently high level of uncertainty afflicting all projections relating to China's future growth in power-political capacity, and the *possibility* that an assertive, strong China might become more moderate toward the use of force under some circumstances if its political system were to become democratic. If the growth in Chinese power and the resulting application of that power to external policy-related areas is a much more contingent phenomenon than is usually realized, then the mere possibility of this growth occurring cannot be reason enough for engaging in a preemptive strategy of any kind. This is especially true so long as there exists some small chance of avoiding the worst outcomes that would almost certainly result from the pursuit of a preemptive strategy.

Thus, so long as there is some chance that Chinese assertiveness may not occur for various reasons, U.S. strategy ought neither create the preconditions for its occurrence nor retreat in the expectation that its occurrence is inevitable. Further, if there is some hope that the worst ravages of future security competition between the United States and a strong China can be avoided, U.S. grand strategists are bound by

¹⁸Morgenthau (1985).

both the dictates of prudence and moral sensibility to explore every possibility that reduces the prospects of future international turmoil.

Even if the rise of Chinese power and its associated assertiveness were an absolute certainty—in terms of the “systemic” predictions deduced by some theory of world politics—the sheer length of time it would take this process to unfold allows the United States an opportunity to condition both the form and the intensity of the resulting competition. Among the first things the United States ought to do in preparing for this potential competition is to jettison the use of rhetorical labels such as “containment,” “appeasement,” and “constrainment” to define all or part of its strategic orientation toward China. It is worth remembering that an effective policy toward rising Chinese power will include various operational elements associated with each of these very different, and in many respects antagonistic, concepts. Consequently, it is more productive for U.S. security managers to focus on the *content* of desirable policies to be pursued in various issue-areas than on iconic and in some cases potentially inflammatory labels that are supposed to exhaustively describe the nature of U.S. strategic orientation.¹⁹

Unfortunately, discussing the precise content of these desirable policies would take this document too far afield²⁰ and, hence, subsequent discussion will be restricted simply to identifying the basic components that any realistic engagement of China ought to encompass. First, the process of engagement ought to include three related strands or objectives of policy: (1) to *pursue*, whenever feasible, the possibilities of cooperation aimed at attaining deeper levels of encounter, stronger degrees of mutual trust and confidence, more clearly defined notions of reciprocity or equity, and greater levels of integration into the international system, and to use the resulting expanded level of cooperation and integration to encourage movement by China toward a democratic form of government; (2) to discourage or, if ultimately necessary, *prevent* acquisition by China

¹⁹Even the term “engagement” itself can be highly misleading in this context, if it is taken to mean some form of appeasement or unqualified search for amicable relations with China at any cost. As is made clear below, the authors do not ascribe to such a flawed definition of “engagement.”

²⁰However, such an effort is currently under way, as part of a more detailed examination by the authors of China’s calculative strategy and its implications for U.S. policy.

of capabilities that could unambiguously threaten the most fundamental core national security interests of the United States in Asia and beyond; and (3) to remain *prepared*, if necessary, to cope with—by means of diplomacy, economic relations, and military instruments—the consequences of a more assertive and militant China with greater capabilities in a variety of political, strategic, and economic issue-areas.

All three of these policy strands are arguably implicit in existing U.S. strategy toward China. Yet they are rarely recognized as such; nor are they espoused, much less implemented, in a coordinated and integrated fashion across various issue areas by the multiple bureaucracies within the U.S. government. On the contrary, many observers, and some government officials, often emphasize only one strand, often at the expense of one or both of the other two.

Second, engagement should identify and maintain a clear set of operational objectives, preferably centered on China's external security behavior, given the critical significance of such behavior to core U.S. national security interests. In particular, these objectives should relate most directly to key issue-areas of interest to the United States, including the U.S. presence, access, and alliance structure in Asia, the open international economic order, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Third, engagement should be based upon a clear assessment of the multiple instruments available to support its three central strands and the tradeoffs inherent in the use of these instruments. This should include an evaluation of the range and types of hedging strategies required of the United States together with an assessment of how the pursuit of some hedging strategies could either undermine or enhance the success of engagement to begin with. Further, it should be recognized that even if engagement experiences great success in the interim, the policy may not survive unscathed over the longer term, when the superiority in Chinese power may make the necessity of accommodating the United States less pressing. Consequently, prudent forethought about what is necessary should or when engagement fails, both in the near and far term, is critical.

Finally, the overall development of a more effective engagement policy requires a better understanding of how China's calculative

strategy might evolve over time as China's capabilities change, to influence the form and intensity of both China's cooperative and its assertive behavior.

Even as this sharper reassessment of engagement is developed, however, it is important to clarify U.S. grand strategy and the objectives to which it aspires: The engagement of China should not be a policy prescription designed to assist the growth of Chinese power so that it may eventually eclipse the United States, even if peacefully. Rather, engagement must be oriented toward encouraging a more cooperative China, whether strong or weak, while also preserving U.S. primacy in geopolitical terms, including in critical military and economic arenas, given the fact that such primacy has provided the conditions for both regional and global order and economic prosperity. Together, the predicates of engagement should also focus on eliciting Beijing's recognition that challenging existing U.S. leadership would be both arduous and costly and, hence, not in China's long-term interest.

The U.S. effort in this regard will arguably be facilitated if China becomes a democratic state that is more fully integrated into the international order and less inclined to employ military means. In general, so long as Beijing eschews the use of force and works peacefully to both adjust to and shape the future international system, the most destabilizing consequences of growing Chinese power will be minimized and, if the advocates of the democratic peace are correct, a U.S.-led international order of democratic states of which China is a part might even be able to avoid the worst ravages of security competition. Yet one must also keep in mind that the historical record suggests that the challenges to the attainment of this goal are likely to prove enormous because the structural constraints imposed by competitive international politics will interact with the chaotic domestic processes in both the United States and China to most likely produce an antagonistic interaction between these entities at the core of the global system.