
SUMMARY

Accurately understanding and effectively responding to the rise of China constitutes one of the most important challenges facing the United States in the early 21st century. China has always been an important state in the international system, thanks to its great potential power: large territory, vast resources, and a large population. But its significance for international politics has dramatically increased since 1978 when the market reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping placed China on a course of action that could rapidly transform its latent potential into actual power. This process is significant not only because it promises the internal transformation of one of the world's oldest civilizations but also because, if concluded successfully, it could result in a dramatic power transition within the international system. The rise of China, consequently, embodies great analytical and policy interest and examining the determinants of China's basic approach to political-military security (i.e., its grand strategy) is critical to any assessment of current and future Chinese security behavior, especially Chinese behavior toward the United States and its allies.

This study examines China's grand strategy from historical and conceptual perspectives, identifies the major features of the strategy and the major factors driving it, and assesses how the strategy will likely evolve in the future.

Despite the fact that China's grand strategy has never been explicitly presented in any comprehensive manner by its rulers, there is little doubt that China, like any other state, has pursued a grand strategy conditioned substantially by its historical experience, its political in-

terests, and its geostrategic environment. China's grand strategy is keyed to the attainment of three interrelated objectives: first and foremost, the preservation of domestic order and well-being in the face of different forms of social strife; second, the defense against persistent external threats to national sovereignty and territory; and third, the attainment and maintenance of geopolitical influence as a major, and perhaps primary, state.

For most of Chinese history, the efforts to attain these objectives have produced a security strategy oriented toward the maintenance, as a first priority, of internal stability and prosperity and the attainment of Chinese preeminence, if not control, along a far-flung and vulnerable geographic periphery. To carry out this strategy, China has relied upon a strong, authoritarian government employing a monolithic, hierarchical value system, the frequent and at times intense application of coercive force, a wide range of diplomatic stratagems of balance and maneuver, and the numerous advantages resulting from the maintenance for centuries of a dominant cultural and economic system throughout most of Central and East Asia. In general, strong, unified Chinese states have sought to control their strategic periphery and assert Chinese primacy by eliciting various forms of deference from periphery peoples, preferably through the establishment of unambiguous suzerainty relations backed, if possible, by superior military force. When faced with various internal and external obstacles to such methods (including domestic resistance to a prolonged, intensive use of force), strong Chinese states have relied upon a variety of noncoercive, suboptimal external security strategies, including appeasement, alliances, culturally based sinocentric patterns of interaction, and various types of personal understandings among rulers, as well as a heavy reliance on static defenses. Weak or declining Chinese states have relied primarily on noncoercive tactics to stave off foreign attacks or maintain stability along the periphery.

During the modern era (from roughly 1850 to the present), China's basic security objectives have remained unchanged. However, significant changes have occurred in China's threat perceptions, definition of the periphery, requisites for periphery control, and internal and external requirements of domestic order and well-being that together have implications for the specific type of security strategies pursued by the Chinese state. The modern era has witnessed the

emergence of a hybrid “weak-strong” state security strategy that combines elements of traditional “strong-state” efforts to control the strategic periphery through military and political means with elements of a “weak-state” approach employing a primarily territorial-defense-oriented force structure and a relatively high level of involvement in diplomatic balance and maneuver.

In recent decades, following both the absorption of many former periphery areas into the Chinese state and the emergence of strong industrial powers along China’s periphery, China’s weak-strong state security approach has produced a “calculative” strategy, characterized by (a) a nonideological policy approach keyed to market-led economic growth and the maintenance of amicable international political relations with all states, especially the major powers; (b) a deliberate restraint in the use of force, whether toward the periphery or against other more distant powers, combined with efforts to modernize and incrementally streamline the Chinese military; and (c) an expanded involvement in regional and global interstate politics and various international, multilateral fora, with an emphasis, through such interactions, on attaining asymmetric gains. Under China’s calculative strategy, confrontation or conflict with the United States or its allies in Asia would most likely occur as a result of “normal” disputes between states—especially those disputes arising from perceived threats to China’s domestic order and well-being and China’s territorial integrity—and not from explicit or implicit great power struggles over control of the international system.

Assuming that no catastrophic revisions of the calculative strategy are forced in the near to mid term, the natural longevity of this strategy then becomes largely a function of long-term economic, military, and domestic political developments. If present trends in these areas hold, it is only by the period 2015–2020 at the very earliest—and more likely 2020–2025—that China might begin an extended transition phase to a new security strategy. This transition phase could last for one or two decades, and its span will be determined largely by how quickly and durably Beijing can consolidate its power capacities relative to other great powers in the international system, including the United States.

Although certainly possible, it is on balance unlikely that China’s political, economic, and social order will disintegrate into chaos

either during the period of the calculative strategy or during the transition beyond that strategy. It is also unlikely that a more cooperative China will emerge during this period if Beijing's relative power grows to the point where a systemic power transition becomes plausible. Instead, growing Chinese power will most likely result, over the very long term, in a more assertive China. As part of this process, China could reasonably be expected to pursue most, if not all, of the core elements of those assertive grand strategies pursued by major powers in the past. These elements include efforts 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 China's 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 better reflect its own interests; and, in the most extreme policy choice imaginable, even perhaps ready itself to thwart preventive war or to launch predatory attacks on its foes.

Even if the rise of Chinese power and its associated assertiveness occur, however, both preemptive containment and preemptive appeasement strategies toward a rising China would be counterproductive, for two reasons. First, so long as there is some chance that the predicted outcome of assertiveness may not occur, U.S. strategy ought to neither create the preconditions for its occurrence nor retreat in the expectation that its occurrence is inevitable. Second, if there exists some hope that the worst ravages of future security competition between the United States and China can be avoided, U.S. grand strategists are bound both by the dictates of prudence and by moral sensibility to explore every possibility that reduces the prospects of international turmoil. Hence, a policy that assumes the need to realistically engage China over the course of the calculative strategy is the most optimal approach.

To maximize the desired effects of such engagement however, U.S. policy must

- Orient the concept of engagement to include three related strands of policy: to *pursue*, whenever feasible, the possibilities of cooperation with China aimed at attaining deeper levels of en-

counter, stronger degrees of mutual trust and confidence, more clearly defined notions of reciprocity or equity, and greater levels of Chinese 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; to discourage or, if ultimately necessary, *prevent* acquisition by China of capabilities that could unambiguously threaten the most fundamental core national security interests of the United States in Asia and beyond; and 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;

- Clearly appraise the multiple instruments available to support the three central strands of engagement described in the paragraph above and assess the tradeoffs inherent in the use of these instruments;
- Maintain a clear understanding of the ends to which engagement is pursued, by developing a very short list of objectives, preferably centered on China's external security behavior, particularly as manifested in key issue-areas of interest to the United States, such as the U.S. presence and alliance structure in Asia, the open economic order, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- Evaluate the range and types of hedging strategies required of the United States and assess how the pursuit of some hedging strategies could either undermine or enhance the success of engagement to begin with. Overall, the development of a more effective engagement policy requires a more thorough understanding of how the operational elements of China's calculative strategy might evolve over time, as China's capabilities change.

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. pri-

macy 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 assisting Beijing to recognize 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 arguably will 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 pressures toward an antagonistic interaction between these entities at the core of the global system.