
CHINA AS A NATIONAL SECURITY CONCERN

Managing the rise of China constitutes one of the most important challenges facing the United States in the early 21st century. China has always been one of the most important states in the international system, primarily because of its large territory, vast resources, and large population. Although a relatively weak power throughout the modern era, China's significance for international politics has been dramatically increasing since 1978, when the market reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping placed it on a course of action that could lead to a rapid transformation of its latent potential into actual power, both within Asia and in the global arena. 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. Such power transitions, if the long-cycle theorists of international relations are correct, come about once every 100 years and involve fundamental shifts in the relative power relationships prevailing among the major states of the system. More important, most such shifts have often resulted in "global wars" between those dominant states that provide the vital function of order-maintenance for the international system and rising states that seek to challenge, directly or indirectly, the authority and rules of the system. Such wars usually lead to the emergence of a new pattern of dominant states that control the function of order-maintenance during the following century.¹

¹The most systematic exposition of this phenomenon can be found in Thompson (1988).

Given these considerations, the rise of China generates great analytical and policy interest, especially for the United States—the primary provider of order-maintenance for the international system since the Second World War. More specifically, China is seen to present a potential national security concern for the United States, for three reasons:

- Its general geostrategic significance and growing national capabilities,
- Its expanding involvement in and influence over the international community, and
- Unique historical and cultural factors that could exacerbate Sino-U.S. tensions over the long term.

China's huge size and geographic position as the only Eurasian continental power directly bordering on Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and Russia mark it as a major geostrategic player able to critically affect U.S. global and regional interests. Beijing's ability to influence events across Eurasia has increased greatly during the past two decades as a result of booming economic growth and an expanding involvement in the global economic and political order. China's gross domestic product (GDP) has tripled in less than two decades, leading some analysts to conclude that with average growth rates of approximately 8–9 percent per annum over the next 20 years, China's GDP could surpass that of the United States within 10–15 years.² The time frame governing such an outcome seems exceedingly optimistic, given recent drops in China's growth rate and the likely long-term adverse consequences of such current events as the Asian financial crisis and China's domestic banking crisis. However, even appreciably lower growth rates, if sustained for many years and higher than those of the United States and other Western countries, would merely delay, rather than eliminate, the possibility of China's GDP overtaking that of the United States in the next century.

China's high growth rate is increasingly driven by rapidly expanding economic and technological links with the outside, especially with

²For example, see Wolf et al. (1995).

the United States, and with the highly foreign-trade-oriented economies of South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Largely because of these trends, China is seeking greater influence beyond its borders; it is becoming an active participant in a wide variety of international diplomatic and economic institutions and fora and is increasingly emphasizing maritime Asia in its economic and geostrategic calculations. Such developments pose obvious implications for U.S. global and regional economic and political access and influence.

In addition, China's abandonment in the 1980s of the failed autarkic and centrally planned economic system of the Maoist period and subsequent adoption of a successful, market-driven and outward-oriented reform strategy have permitted significant, albeit largely incremental, increases in aggregate Chinese military power. Of particular significance to the United States is China's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile modernization, its growing capabilities in the areas of space and information operations, and its development of air and naval battlespace denial capabilities along its eastern and southern coastlines. Continued increases in China's GDP will almost certainly translate into further improvements in Chinese military capabilities and a growing maritime strategic orientation, with direct implications for the security position and capabilities of the United States and its allies in East Asia.

The potential negative implications for U.S. security interests of a possible fundamental structural shift in the distribution of economic and military power across Eurasia are increased by several specific historical and cultural features of China's strategic outlook, experience, and behavior. First, throughout most of its long imperial history, China was the predominant political, economic, cultural, and military power of East Asia. Such predominance created a deep-rooted belief in the geopolitical centrality of China to the region. As China's relative power grows, this belief could eventually predispose Beijing to seek to displace the United States as the preeminent power and central provider of security across much of the Asia-Pacific.

Second, China's modern history of defeat, subjugation, and humiliation at the hands of the West and Japan has produced an acute

Chinese desire for international respect as a great power, as well as an enduring commitment to an independent foreign policy separate from the formal collaborative or alliance structures of other major powers, especially the United States. This impulse is exacerbated by a deeply rooted strain of xenophobia in Chinese culture. These features, when combined with the current Chinese government's long-standing and deeply felt suspicion toward the United States, suggest that reaching mutual strategic understanding and accommodation with Beijing as China's capabilities increase could prove to be very difficult.

Third, China holds strong claims to contested territories along its continental borders and its maritime periphery, the most important of which are Taiwan and the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. These claims, some of which offer potentially enormous economic benefits to Beijing, receive wide support within China because both the elite and an apparently growing segment of the populace favor a state-centric nationalist ideology dedicated to national reunification and the creation of a strong and wealthy state. The usefulness of this nationalist ideology as a means of providing popular legitimacy to China's ideologically discredited communist government, reinforced by the general national pride engendered by China's impressive economic accomplishments, suggests that Beijing could become more assertive in pressing many of its irredentist claims as its overall capabilities increase. Efforts by China to employ military force in this effort would clearly challenge a vital U.S. interest in the continued peace and stability of Asia.

The continued increase in China's relative economic and military capabilities, combined with its growing maritime strategic orientation, if sustained over many years, will almost certainly produce both a redefinition of Beijing's strategic interests and increased efforts to improve Beijing's ability to protect those interests in ways that directly or indirectly challenge many of the existing equities of the United States and its allies. Although this process of geopolitical transformation will inevitably be part of a larger Chinese effort to carve a new place for itself in the international system—an effort that could eventually involve “a transformation of the existing hierarchy of states in the system and the patterns of relations dependent on

that hierarchy”³—the direct and specific challenges to existing U.S. strategic interests would likely occur in four key areas:

- The U.S. military’s freedom of action throughout East Asia,
- U.S. economic access to East Asia and beyond,
- The privileged political relations with most Asian powers enjoyed by the United States, and
- The overall U.S. emphasis on specific formal and informal alliances as a way to ensure peaceful and stable development in Asia.

Alternatively, the reversal or collapse of China’s dynamic reform process could lead to growing domestic social and political conflict and the emergence of a weak, insecure, and defensive Chinese regime that would also present major adverse challenges to the interests of the United States and its allies. Although almost certainly less able to challenge the prevailing freedom of action and predominant influence and access of the United States in Asia, such a Chinese regime could become more belligerent and assertive over critical nationalist issues such as Taiwan and less cooperative toward a variety of regional and global issues of concern to the United States, such as arms proliferation, free trade, human rights, and the peaceful resolution of the situation on the Korean peninsula.⁴

To assess China’s ability and willingness to pose such fundamental challenges to U.S. strategic interests over the long term, this study systematically identifies and examines a range of critical domestic and international factors influencing Chinese security outlook and behavior. Chapter Two assesses China’s basic and longstanding security problem and its resulting general security strategy, derived from both its geopolitical security interests as a continental Asian power and its general historical and cultural approach to security. This leads in Chapter Three to an assessment of China’s security behavior historically, especially with respect to the use of force versus diplomacy. This is followed in Chapter Four by a detailed analysis of

³Gilpin (1988), p. 596.

⁴For a more detailed examination of the likely security stance of a weak, insecure Chinese regime, see Swaine (1995b), pp. 104–109.

China's current "calculative" approach to security, its genesis, its logic, and its manifestations in various issue-areas of international politics. Chapter Five assesses both the natural longevity of the current calculative strategy and the long-term alternatives to that strategy, using theoretical and empirical arguments to speculate about China's future grand strategic trajectories as a rising power in international politics. Finally, Chapter Six presents several concluding comments about the eventual likely emergence of an assertive China, along with several general policy recommendations.

Throughout this study, China's grand strategy is assessed primarily from a power-political perspective, using elements of a realist approach to international relations. Adopting this approach implies that the focus of analysis rests principally on the state as a political entity dedicated to ensuring the internal and external security (i.e., survival and prosperity) of both elite and populace. Material factors such as the country's geographical position, resource endowment, economic size and structure, and military power, as well as the power wielded by senior political leaders, are emphasized as critical determinants of a regime's capability to provide for its security. Moreover, external and internal power relationships and power-oriented behavior among major international entities and key leaders, as measured primarily by such material factors, are stressed as basic elements determining threat perceptions and overall security calculations and actions. Hence, the international system is viewed primarily as a set of interactions among competitive, power-oriented states. At the same time, the approach used in this study acknowledges that various social and elite values and beliefs and the influence of different political systems (e.g., centralized authoritarian versus pluralist or democratic regimes) significantly condition, at times in critical ways, the perceptions of security issues held by political elites, their preferences, and their actions to ensure the security of the state. Indeed, the analysis attempts to assess the manner and degree to which such nonmaterial factors combine with structural factors to shape the formulation and implementation of China's grand strategy.

Although the analysis presented in Chapters Two through Four includes an assessment of both the subjective intentions and the objective structural conditions influencing Chinese security behavior in the past, the assessment of possible future Chinese behavior pre-

sented in Chapter Five does not assume that any particular set of Chinese intentions will shape China's future security strategy, other than a continued, general desire to strengthen and preserve economic power and regain geopolitical prominence. The attempt to identify and assess the likelihood of alternative future Chinese grand strategies is based mainly on a discussion of material elements that affect possible changes in Chinese state and national capabilities, as well as inferences drawn from China's historical experience as a unified state over many centuries and the experience of other rising states. In other words, the analysis of future Chinese security behavior presented in this study does not assume the existence or emergence of either malevolent or benevolent intentions on the part of China's leaders or populace. Rather, China's future security stance is seen to arise from primarily structural, systemic, and historical factors. Where historical evidence is available, the analysis incorporates it as appropriate; where historical evidence is inappropriate—as, for example, in the discussion of future Chinese strategic behavior—the analysis uses a mixture of deductive argument supplemented by historical insights relating to the behavior of other great powers.

Any examination of China's grand strategy, such as this, faces particular methodological problems. Clearly, many objections can be leveled against attempts to generalize about the security behavior of the Chinese state across the imperial and modern eras. For example, some China historians argue that each Chinese regime or dynasty possessed a unique set of political, social, and intellectual characteristics that prevent the drawing of any meaningful generalizations about state behavior. Other scholars question the very notion that a Chinese state (as a political and institutional, as opposed to cultural and ideological entity) existed before the modern era. Although it is extremely important to recognize (and incorporate into the analysis) differences in individual regime characteristics and structures, there are arguably sufficient similarities and continuities in the geographic location, ethnic make-up, and political structures and beliefs of the Chinese state to justify attempts to generalize about its security behavior throughout both pre-modern and modern times.

Other objections can be raised against the basic subject of this study, as well as its conceptual approach. Some analysts of China's current and historical approach to security argue that the Chinese state has never consciously and deliberately pursued a grand strategy, of

whatever type. Others argue that the imperial Chinese regime was less concerned with protecting its territory and asserting its material power over other political entities than with ensuring its cultural and ideological preeminence through proper ritual and right conduct, and that the modern Chinese nation-state similarly emphasizes status and prestige over state power. Despite the fact that China's grand strategy has never been explicitly presented in any comprehensive manner by its rulers, the historical and contemporaneous analysis presented in this study indicates that China, like any other state, has indeed pursued a grand strategy conditioned substantially by its historical experience, its political interests, and its geostrategic environment. Moreover, although there is no question that a concern with cultural or ideological preeminence has often influenced Chinese security behavior, China's historical record, as well as deductive analysis relating to the behavior of other great powers, together suggest that the ability of the Chinese state to sustain such preeminence ultimately relies greatly on both internal and external material conditions and power relationships.