Managing the rise of China constitutes one of the most important challenges facing the United States in the early 21st century.


China’s reforms since 1978 have given rise to unprecedented economic growth; if this course of development is sustained, China will be able to turn its great potential power, derived from its huge population, large territory, and significant natural resources, into actual power. The result could be, in the very long term, the rise of China as a rival to the United States as the world’s predominant power. However, long before that point is reached, if it ever is, China could become a significant rival in the East Asian region, one that might attempt to reduce and, ultimately, to expel U.S. forces and influence from that region.

In this context, the issue for U.S. policy is how to handle a rising power, a problem that predominant powers have faced many times throughout history. The various possible fundamental policy directions that predominant powers have pursued are well known: pre-emption, containment, balancing, and accommodation (or

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1See this work for a discussion of the factors that will affect China’s grand strategy as it seeks to develop its “comprehensive national power.”
2Thompson (1988) discusses in detail the phenomenon of the rise and fall of predominant powers and the possibility that large-scale war will accompany the process.
appeasement). These policies are all understandable within the realist tradition, which sees other powers as having essentially fixed goals and objectives (such as security, prosperity, and the enhancement of their own influence and power within the international system). The current U.S. policy of engagement, by contrast, is more ambitious than these “realist” strategies in that it seeks to change the nature of, and, hence, the goals and objectives sought by, the Chinese regime: It seeks to make the Chinese regime more democratic and more willing to cooperate with existing international norms in such areas as nonproliferation, respect for human rights, and free trade. Ultimately, it aims at inducing China to adjust to current international norms to such an extent that its increase in political-military power and influence will have minimal effects on the rest of the world. According to DoD’s strategy for the East Asia-Pacific region: “Prospects for peace and prosperity in Asia depend heavily upon China’s role as a responsible member of the international community.” (DoD, 1998, p. 30.)

Regardless of how one assesses the likelihood that the current engagement policy will achieve its ultimate objective, the question remains of how to avoid conflict in the meantime. The engagement policy, or any policy that similarly provides important benefits to China, gives its leaders an incentive to maintain good relations with the United States. That incentive, however, may be overpowered by other considerations, such as concerns about territorial sovereignty (including Taiwan and the South China Sea) and the maintenance of

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3Robert Gilpin emphasizes the importance of the “rules of the game” and the struggle among nations to influence them:

Thus the study of international political change must focus on the international system and especially on the efforts of political actors to change the international system in order to advance their own interests. Whether these interests are security, economic gain, or ideological goals, the achievement of state objectives is dependent on the nature of the international system (i.e., the governance of the system, the rules of the system, the recognition of rights, etc.). As is the case in any social or political system, the process of international political change ultimately reflects the efforts of individuals or groups to transform institutions and systems in order to advance their interests. (Gilpin, 1983, p. 10.)

4See Khalilzad et al. (1999), pp. 63–69, for a critique of engagement policy.

5Examples of benefits would be access to U.S. markets, investment capital, and technology—all of which are important, if not crucial, for the attainment of what the Chinese refer to as “comprehensive national power.” See Khalilzad (1999), pp. 3–16, for a discussion of these conflicting motivations of Chinese policymakers.
Communist Party rule. In addition, Chinese dissatisfaction with U.S. preeminence in the world (as highlighted, for example, by Chinese opposition to the U.S. role in leading the intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] in Kosovo) also tends to counteract the Chinese desire to maintain good relations with the United States.

Thus, Chinese interest in economic and technological development does not make a conflict with the United States impossible. Accordingly, it is of interest to consider how the United States might be able to deter China from using force in a manner inimical to U.S. interests. It must be remembered, however, that this discussion should not be taken as meaning that considerations of “immediate deterrence” will, or should, dominate the Sino-U.S. relationship. As noted, the more fundamental issue involves the integration of a rising China into the international system; occasions may arise in which deterrence would be an important and perhaps even necessary part of that process, but it can only be a part and, hopefully, a small part at that.

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6 I use “immediate deterrence” in the sense of Morgan (1983), p. 30, who defines it as “the relationship between opposing states where at least one side is seriously considering an attack while the other is mounting a threat of retaliation in order to prevent it” and contrasts it with “general deterrence,” which “relates to opponents who maintain armed forces to regulate their relationship even though neither is anywhere near mounting an attack.” In the latter sense, a deterrence relationship between major powers with important opposing interests would seem to be all but inevitable.