What will determine whether the Asia-Pacific region will experience peace and stability, or conflict and disorder, in the next decade? Most responses to the question take either of two forms: broad and general answers (for example, the outcome will depend on continuation or interruption of the region’s dynamic economic growth, on whether or not the Asia-Pacific region proceeds toward integration into the world economy, and on the character of China’s post-Deng leadership); or specific answers that focus on particular issues or disputes in the region (for example, the status of Taiwan, how the “one-China-two systems” formula plays out, whether the disputes over the Spratly and Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands flare up, and the perennial threat on the Korean peninsula).

All of these considerations are relevant. However, none is likely to have as much effect on the region’s outlook for stability or conflict as another consideration that overarches all of the others: namely, a particular geo-political and geo-strategic perspective that China’s leaders and many of its intellectuals (including many “liberal” ones) share, and at times vigorously espouse. This perspective can be summarized in the following syllogism:

A slightly edited version was published in The Asian Wall Street Journal on December 3, 1996 under the title “Don’t Give In to China’s Tantrums.”
Peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region depend on a balance of power among the three major powers in the region: the United States, China and Japan.

At the present time, and in the immediate future, this “balance” is profoundly unbalanced because China is so much weaker than the United States and Japan—economically, militarily, and in terms of international diplomatic and political “clout.”

Therefore, peace and stability in the region depend on a substantial increase in China’s relative power (in all the dimensions referred to above), relative to the United States and Japan, so that the triangular relationship among them will be more balanced.

This strategic vision is shared not only among China’s top leaders, but among intellectuals and academics many of whom are considered, and consider themselves, to be both “liberal” and favorably disposed to the United States. According to this view, developments that contribute to the increased strength of China—relative to other members of this strategic regional triangle—should be welcomed and even encouraged. Conversely, whatever might delay or obstruct this adjustment should be opposed or eschewed.

China’s balance-of-power perspective has direct operational consequences. For example, in China’s eyes, this view justifies enhancement of China’s military capabilities to protect its 10,000 miles of land border and 3,000 miles of coastline facing neighbors who have not always been seen as friendly to China. Moreover, China’s attitude toward the forward military presence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, and in particular its attitude toward the U.S. security alliance with Japan, depend significantly on the balance-of-power idea. To the extent that the U.S. alliance with Japan has a braking effect on expansion of Japan’s military capabilities—including both conventional force modernization and theater missile defense—China not only accepts, but endorses, the U.S.-Japan alliance. But, if and when the alliance seems to encourage Japan to acquire greater military capabilities and to assume greater alliance responsibilities, as the Chinese plausibly inferred from the April 1996 joint communiqué of President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto, then China’s attitude toward the alliance becomes querulous and antagonistic.
The reason China’s balance-of-power perspective is so crucial in its effect on the outlook for peace or conflict, stability or disorder, in the Asia-Pacific region, lies in the familiar aphorism that “where you stand depends on where you sit,” and its less-familiar corollary that “what you see depends on where you stand.” From Beijing’s standpoint, the balance-of-power perspective is entirely realistic: what it sees is the decidedly unbalanced relationship among the three apexes of the triangle. From the standpoints of others in the region—from Tokyo to Seoul, to Washington, to Hanoi, to Singapore, to Kuala Lumpur, to Jakarta, and even to New Delhi—the existing imbalance, and especially the forward presence and military predominance of the United States, is a reassuring harbinger of predictability, peace, and stability in the region. Conversely, a substantial accretion in China’s relative power, especially military power, is seen as potentially threatening. Among the other countries of the region, China’s balance-of-power view of the world provides a strong reason for upgrading their own military capabilities, and developing a security structure in the region that will either counter or co-opt China’s weight. One result is that the Asia-Pacific region has become the largest regional buyer in the current $25 billion a year international weapons market.

In this dynamic relationship, China has major advantages. Its GDP growth rate, though likely to slow somewhat from the double-digit pace of the past decade, will probably be two or three times that of the United States and Japan. Its willingness to allocate resources for military spending will be greater than that of the United States or Japan and, according to recent RAND calculations, its acquisition of new military systems will probably increase relative to that of the United States and Japan over the next decade. The paradox is that the more China moves to create what it regards as a “balance” of power, the less favorable will be the outlook for stability in the region, as well as for China’s own progress, prosperity, and place in the world.

What the United States should do in these circumstances is limited, but certainly not negligible. Perhaps the best course for the United States to follow is to prevent China from gaining concessions through the use of force (as was demonstrated by the U.S. response to China’s missile launchings in the Taiwan Strait in March of 1996), while acknowledging and even adjusting to China’s interests when
force is eschewed (appropriately conditioned membership in WTO, may be an example). The United States should be prepared to check the misuse of power by China, while avoiding any temptation to misuse or overuse power itself. The less China gains through the threat or use of force, while managing to gain some without it, perhaps the more will China be motivated to pursue the non-military dimensions of its enhanced status, and the less motivated to pursue the military dimensions.

**Postaudit**

As a member of the U.S.-led post–9/11 coalition, China’s relationship to the United States has changed since this essay was written in 1996. However, the thrust of the piece—that is, balancing China’s evolving views of its own balance of power—remains relevant.