

# The China Threat: Myths, Realities, and Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

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*The relationship between the United States and China is an extraordinarily challenging one, giving rise to the American perception of a growing 'China Threat'. Yet there is need for a careful reappraisal of the so-called 'China Threat'. China is not only a trading partner of unparalleled importance, but an increasingly important political player, with influence in key areas of United States (U.S.) interest. A closer look at the domestic, cultural, and historical imperatives which shape Chinese foreign policy presents an alternative perspective of the China Threat. A re-interpretation of the China Threat would pave the way for increased U.S. influence in Chinese foreign policy, while reducing the likelihood of the worst of all possible outcomes: deteriorated relations and the possibility of open conflict between the two powers. The American government must use every tool at its disposal to ensure it can exert the maximum possible influence over the decisions and actions of the rising Chinese behemoth. Allowing a stark, black and white portrayal of the China Threat to fester will only restrict U.S. policy makers and increase the odds of negative outcomes.*

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## INTRODUCTION

**T** 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an evolution of unprecedented pace and scope in the world order, a trend that is accelerating as the world enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nowhere is this more evident than in the seemingly inexorable rise of modern China. President Obama's statement that United States (U.S.)-Chinese relations will shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century is undeniably true. But what shape they might take remains open to question. This relationship is an extraordinarily challenging one, giving rise to the perception of a growing 'China Threat'.

The U.S. must nonetheless seek to maintain peace and open trade at all costs. China is not only a trading partner of unparalleled importance, but an increasingly important political player, with influence in key areas of U.S. interest including the Middle East and South Asia.

Therefore the U.S. must balance its desire to encourage China's continued peaceful rise against the potential threat it poses to U.S. interests. Finding the right balance will be difficult given the pervasive national preoccupation with growing Chinese power and the pressures of *realpolitik*.

The need for a careful reappraisal of the so-called 'China Threat' is therefore evident. A closer look at the domestic, cultural, and historical imperatives which shape Chinese foreign policy presents an alternative perspective of the China Threat. In short, despite being protective of their national sovereignty, China is not necessarily interested in global hegemony. On the basis of this understanding, a more constructive U.S. foreign policy towards China would be possible. A re-interpretation of the China Threat would pave the way for increased U.S. influence in Chinese foreign policy, while reducing the likelihood of the worst of all possible outcomes: deteriorated relations and the possibility of open conflict between the two powers.

## THE CHINA THREAT

China's rise has been closely monitored among political analysts and observers for some time. Indeed the country's impressive and rapid modernisation—both military and economic—inevitably lead to speculation about the implications of this growth ten or 20 years down the road. As a result, the American public has increasingly come to perceive China as a threat: 31 percent of respondents to a 2005 poll agreed that 'China will soon dominate the world,' and 54 percent believed that China as a

superpower would represent 'a threat to world peace' (Johnson, 2009: 2). Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has also cautioned about the implications of China's growing military power (Johnson, 2009: 2). Consequently there is significant pressure on policy makers to posture aggressively and prepare for what is sometimes portrayed as an inevitable showdown.

#### BILATERAL TENSIONS

Indeed there is very legitimate cause for concern given the numerous areas of economic, military, and political tension between China and the United States. Areas of economic conflict include ongoing U.S. frustration with the low, fixed rate of the Chinese Yuan; the spectre of rising protectionism which recently saw the Obama administration levy a tariff on the import of tires manufactured in China;<sup>1</sup> and, sparring over the issue of intellectual property rights. Political tensions are equally numerous, including U.S. frustration over Chinese support for regimes such as Iran, North Korea, and Sudan; public U.S. pressure for China to allow greater civil liberties and legal transparency; Chinese outrage over U.S. recognition of the Dalai Lama; and, perhaps most prominently, the enduring U.S. commitment to protect Taiwan's independence. These conflicts give ample demonstration that the political priorities and objectives of both countries, as well as their values, are frequently at odds (Economy and Segal, 2009: web).

These tensions have been exacerbated as China has begun to assert itself as the U.S.' equal (MacKinnon, 2009: A22). Traditional signs of goodwill such as the release of political prisoners, or public concessions offered from Chinese leaders to President Obama were conspicuously absent from the President's recent state visit to China in November 2009.

Economic leverage has been steadily shifting into Chinese hands as China has become the main provider of two important pillars of the American way of life: plentiful credit and cheap goods. Additionally the value of the U.S. currency depends substantially on China's vast holdings of U.S. Treasury Bills, government bonds and dollars.

Furthermore China has in recent years significantly increased its influence with traditional U.S. allies in the region (Denmark, 2009: 159-180; Tellis, 2005: 52-55).

<sup>1</sup> This point was noted in: "US Adds Punitive Tariffs on Chinese Tires" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/12/business/global/12tires.html>).

China has surpassed the U.S. as the largest trading partner of a number of important Asian countries, including South Korea and Japan (Shaplen, 2007: 82-97). As well, China's influence is demonstrated as it becomes an increasingly important donor and source of development aid in Asia and abroad.<sup>2</sup> These deepened economic ties bring increased diplomatic leverage with traditional U.S. allies.

It is clear that a new dynamic is in place between the two nations: the Obama administration now confronts a Chinese leadership which carries itself as an equal, and shows no lack of confidence in either its recent accomplishments or its future potential.

#### MILITARY TENSIONS

U.S. military strength and clout, with its global reach and technological sophistication is unquestioned, and its military spending is unmatched. However recent developments have signalled to U.S. strategists that the overwhelming superiority of U.S. forces is a thing of the past. China has shrewdly developed specific asymmetric capabilities, which threaten to blunt many of the most important advantages held by the United States (Denmark, 2009: 164; Friedburg and Ross, 2009). As a result of these developments, American naval forces can no longer operate with impunity in the western Pacific. For example, in the event of hostilities, the Taiwan Strait would be effectively inaccessible for American naval forces (Krepinevich, 2009).

The pace of Chinese military spending continues to increase. Recent statements by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and a variety of defence documents, including the 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review and the Department of Defense's 2008 annual report on Chinese military power all make clear that the balance of power in the region is shifting, with serious implications for U.S. abilities to project power and protect its allies (Johnson, 1995).

Chinese leaders have, throughout the country's history, used a starkly realpolitik approach to international affairs, repeatedly using force to achieve political objectives based on rational calculations of risks, costs, and benefits (Johnson, 1995: 7). As well, nationalism represents a powerful and unpredictable political force in China which poses a significant risk to peaceful relations (Johnson, 1995: 7; Shinn, 1996: 79; Shaplen, 2007: 92).

<sup>2</sup> Evidenced by the recent pledge of \$10 billion in untied loans to Africa (York, 2009).

## HIGH STAKES

Given this array of actual and potential conflicts, it is clear that the 'China Threat' is not an empty fabrication. However there are strong disincentives against conflict for both countries. These two rival powers are deeply intertwined, particularly in economic terms. U.S. and Chinese trade topped \$409 billion in 2009, making war unthinkable for both parties (Denmark, 2009: 159). The nuclear balance of Mutually Assured Destruction between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union has been replaced by what Denis Ross (2007: 330) characterises as a "balance of financial terror." Currently then, Chinese collapse or open conflict between China and the U.S. represent the worst possible outcomes for both countries. Any actions that increase the possibility of conflict must be treated with extreme caution. Hostile relations—which would effectively eliminate U.S. influence as well as jeopardise U.S. prosperity—therefore represent the worst outcome of any potential U.S. policy.

## THE CHINA CONUNDRUM

U.S. policy makers face a fundamental dilemma. Though the U.S. can and must seek peaceful and cooperative relations with China, it cannot afford to interpret Chinese moves as benign or inconsequential for U.S. regional power. Nevertheless, the aim of U.S. foreign policy is first and foremost to ensure the best possible outcomes for American citizens and society. This means limiting the possibility of the most negative outcomes. It may very well be the case that a stark *realpolitik* perspective is detrimental not only to U.S. influence, but also to the likelihood of avoiding those negative outcomes. American strategists who interpret Chinese actions as designed to threaten U.S. interests risk turning this perspective into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lampton, 2007: 125; Ross, 2007: 322).

However a strong case can be made that the best way to maximise U.S. influence and promote peaceful relations between the two countries is to avoid a simplistic game theory approach to evaluating real and potential threats, and instead consider domestic, cultural, and historical factors which are likely to influence Chinese decision making far more than stark calculations of risk and reward.

## THE ALTERNATE PERSPECTIVE: PEACEFUL RISE, HARMONIOUS WORLD

Despite tensions, U.S.-Chinese relations are for the moment stable and there are many broad areas of agreement, cooperation, and mutual benefit between the two countries. China has repeatedly declared its desire to avoid conflict and maintain

good relations with the United States. Deng Xiaoping's "16 characters" policy guide for peaceful relations with the U.S. has been echoed repeatedly in policy statements: "peaceful rise" (expressed in 2003 by Hu Jintao); "peaceful development," and "peaceful coexistence" (Tellis, 2005: 1). Most recently, China's 2006 National Defence White Paper endorses a harmonious world (Johnson, 2009: 3).

Historically, the United States has displayed a poor record of fully appreciating the cultural imperatives that are behind Chinese foreign policy (Johnson, 2009: 1). In fact a closer examination of Chinese motivations and strategic imperatives could even suggest that, far from being interested in global dominance, Chinese decision makers are acting to defend themselves from U.S. containment and to ensure domestic security.

#### CHINESE IMPERATIVES

All nations have core issues or imperatives that drive foreign policy. Chinese political imperatives are demonstrated by their official statements and past actions, but understanding the cultural and historical factors that shape Chinese priorities is also critical.

Analysis by the U.S. Department of Defense has identified "a coherent set of enduring strategic priorities, which include the perpetuation of CCP [Chinese Communist Party] rule, sustained economic growth and development, maintaining domestic political stability, defending China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and securing China's status as a great power" (Denmark, 2009: 160).

Amongst these five priority areas, perpetuating the CPP's rule represents the one overarching imperative to which all other considerations are in fact subordinated. Acting in tandem with this dominant imperative is the desire to restore the ancient dignity of the Chinese empire. This cultural, historical, or even psychological factor can easily be overlooked or misunderstood; yet, this factor provides significant insight into Chinese motivations and actions.

Suggesting that all Chinese geopolitical actions can be understood on the basis of two prime motivating factors is certainly controversial. Yet this view has been supported by outside observers such as Fareed Zakaria (2009), who argues that despite China's size and complexity, its central leadership in fact defines a very narrow set of national interests. As will be discussed below, many of China's major domestic and foreign policies support or fit into these two overarching and interrelated imperatives.

### THE PRIMACY OF DOMESTIC SECURITY

Chinese leadership has, for several decades, relied on an implicit contract with its citizens and the major power brokers throughout the country: the regime will continue to rule as long as it can continue to deliver rapid growth and modernisation (Denmark, 2009: 159; Shaplen, 2007: 92). Economic growth has in many respects replaced the socialist ideology which for several generations underpinned CCP rule over the country. With the withering away of socialist ideology, the stakes have been raised even further for the ruling party. In this current arrangement, economic growth is not only politically desirable, it is in fact fundamental to maintaining control of the country.

Despite its massive power, the CCP is nonetheless perpetually nervous about the fragility and instability of the current arrangement (Denmark, 2009; Shaplen, 2007; Shinn, 1996). For example Wen Jiabao's public acknowledgement that the possibility of rural uprisings kept him awake at night provides just one indication of this fact (Ross, 2007: 323). More recently, Ugiyuhri riots in western China caused enough concern for Hu Jintao to abruptly leave the 2009 G8 L'Aquila Summit, further demonstrating that the CCP's control over the country is by no means taken for granted.

As a result, Chinese leaders perceive security entirely in domestic terms: both foreign policy and national security are viewed through the lens of domestic stability (Lampton, 2007; Shaplen, 2007). This is in stark contrast with the United States, which despite periods of isolationism has long understood its domestic security and political interests to be linked with the security and stability of the international system. This sharp contrast in perceived threats to domestic security is critical to deciphering the motivation behind a wide range of Chinese national and international activities.

### PRE-EMINENCE, NOT DOMINANCE

It is critical to see China's rise from the perspective of its own national historical narrative. The second imperative driving foreign policy—restoring national dignity—is a result of China's self-image as the world's pre-eminent civilisation. The devastating loss of sovereignty to foreign powers during the 1800s effectively "woke the Chinese people from 'the dream of 4000 years'" (Johnson, 2009: 4). Yet China remains the world's oldest continuous empire, the cradle of eastern civilisation, and was for many centuries the most advanced and powerful nation on Earth. For Chinese leaders, the

country's growing power in the 21st century does not represent the emergence of a new player onto the international scene; rather it is simply "restoring an equilibrium that persisted throughout much of recorded history" (Lampton, 2007: 117).

Furthermore the fall from power is felt to be completely the result of foreign interference, particularly by Western powers. The experiences of the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, a devastating civil war, and finally the invasion and brutal occupation at the hands of the Japanese, have come to be known in China as the Century of Humiliation. The legacy of these historical experiences cannot be overstated. The Century of Humiliation is deeply imprinted on the Chinese psyche, as it represents a "crucial national narrative" and is of central importance in understanding Chinese nationalism and its impact on China's strategic culture (Johnson, 2009: 6).

Understanding these cultural and historical factors offers an insight into Chinese policies. China's leadership is deeply suspicious of foreign powers which may seek to prevent China's rise, offering an explanation for the emphasis on protecting both their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Notably absent from the imperatives identified above is a Chinese desire for global hegemony—at least as understood by Americans (Ikenberry, 2008). This fact as well has an impact on the notion of a 'China Threat'.

Though officially a secular society, China remains strongly influenced by Confucianism. "Confucianism is undisputedly the most influential thought that forms the foundation of Chinese cultural tradition and... provides many of the essential elements in Chinese military thought and Chinese conduct of international relations" (Johnson, 2009: 3). In fact, Confucian emphasis on harmony over conflict and defence over offence has contributed to the characterisation of a uniquely defensive Chinese military culture (Johnson, 2009: 3, 22).

Zakaria (2009) contrasts the very different religious heritage of Confucian China and Christian American, placing major emphasis on Christianity's emphasis on exporting values abroad. China's long history is remarkably absent of the colonialism which characterised the rise of the West. As such, "China does not fulfill its world-historical mission by making the rest of the world like itself. It fulfills it by being Chinese, and by creating a great China.1" (Zakaria, 2009: 13). Observers have therefore pointed to China's sense of "relatively complacent superiority" (Johnson, 2009: 1).



### EXAMPLES IN CHINESE POLICY

One prominent example of Chinese policy which is driven by domestic considerations is the country's huge appetite for natural resources. This has led China to support notorious regimes such as Iran and Sudan, and to cultivate dubious relationships with resource rich developing nations, most particularly in Africa. In light of the CCP's implicit contract to provide continuous economic growth, what from the outside may appear as a naked grab for resources may instead be viewed by Chinese leaders simply as a necessity for self-preservation.

The often-cited One China policy provides another example of how domestic actions are driven by China's twin imperatives. Protecting its sovereignty over what China views as its legitimate and historical territorial boundaries is of fundamental importance in relation to both of the drivers outlined above. Chinese leaders are deeply unwilling to bow to foreign pressure over matters which are viewed as entirely of a domestic nature. At the same time, Tibetan dissidence has been met with brutal repression to ensure that domestic order and the regime's grip on power is maintained at all costs. There are echoes of this line of reasoning in the CCP's relations with Taiwan as well.

### MITIGATING U.S. CONTAINMENT

Of perhaps the greatest concern to U.S. strategists is China's rapid militarisation. This too seems a threatening and potentially aggressive policy—one which contradicts China's claimed stance of peaceful and non-expansionist rise.

According to Abraham Denmark (2009: 162), Chinese strategists operate under the assumption that the United States does not want China to achieve its full national potential. The Chinese are extremely sensitive to U.S. measures which could be aimed at containing their power. In particular, America's continued support for Taiwan is interpreted by China as an explicit attempt at containment (Johnson, 2009: 12). Another potential scenario of significant concern to Chinese strategists would be a U.S. naval blockade preventing strategic resources from reaching Chinese ports.

In response to the strategic threat posed by U.S. naval, air, and technological dominance, Chinese military expansion has largely been focussed on very specific capabilities and technology. China has developed significant "anti-access, area denial" (A2/AD) capabilities, based largely on a huge build up of conventional missiles (Friedburg, 2009; Krepinevich, 2009). The implicit purpose of this build up is to

restrict the U.S. Navy's freedom of action in Chinese coastal areas and to threaten U.S. Air Force forward operating bases in the region (Denmark, 2009: 162). Additional asymmetric capabilities designed to blunt U.S. areas of dominance have recently been deployed or demonstrated, including an anti-satellite missile, ballistic missiles capable of hitting aircraft carrier-sized targets, ultra silent diesel submarines, and crippling cyber warfare attacks.<sup>3</sup>

China's military build up can therefore be interpreted as providing the country with a necessary deterrent, in a clear effort to limit U.S. military dominance. In order to prevent any constraints on its pursuit of priorities such as economic growth or the pivotal One China policy, any U.S. efforts at containment must be neutralised. Thus, what looks like aggressive and threatening military build up from one perspective can equally be construed as primarily self-defensive or deterrent measures designed to enable China to pursue its national imperatives, and ensure the nation's legitimate sovereignty.

Understanding Chinese motivations is not the same as excusing them. Nor is it reasonable to suggest that actions motivated solely by the desire for domestic stability and national dignity are therefore benign. Nevertheless, cultural and historical factors offer additional insight into Chinese motivations and ambitions which can be of tremendous benefit to U.S. policymakers.

#### BEYOND THE 'CHINA THREAT': BENEFITS OF A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In Colonel Johnson's evaluation, a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese motivations allows better analysis of Chinese actions: "having a contextual understanding of how strategic culture impacts and influences Chinese decision making, U.S. policymakers can be in a better position to objectively evaluate the true why of a particular Chinese foreign policy, and what domestic factors may be behind it" (Johnson, 2009: 11).

Furthermore it will allow insight into how U.S. actions might be interpreted by Chinese leaders, and what types of actions are most likely to trigger dangerous or counterproductive responses from China. This additional input into policy formation

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see recent news reports such as: "Space is Suddenly on the Agenda" (<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KK12Ad01.html>); "BMD Watch: China targets U.S. carriers" ([http://www.spacewar.com/reports/BMD\\_Watch\\_China\\_targets\\_US\\_carriers\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/BMD_Watch_China_targets_US_carriers_999.html)) "China sub stalked U.S. fleet" (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/nov/13/20061113-121539-3317r/>) "China cyber espionage threatens US, report says" (<http://>

will actually help ensure that U.S. policies are best positioned to achieve the desired outcomes. Equally important, such an understanding would help the U.S. communicate its intentions more effectively, a key ingredient in successful diplomacy. This holds the possibility of thereby reducing misunderstandings, distrust, and tension while making possible more successful collaboration.

Together these factors make a strong case that a more sophisticated analysis of Chinese motivations will help increase American influence. Denmark (2009: 175) provides the following analysis:

American political, economic, and military power cannot control China's choices, but they can influence its behaviour [*sic*] if the United States properly understands the interests and motivations driving Beijing's decisions. Demonstrating an understanding of China's priorities will tremendously improve the effectiveness of any policy or initiative.

In short, a nuanced understanding of Chinese motivations, and the impact of U.S. actions on these motivations, holds the potential for better analysis, better policy making, better mutual understanding, which in turn allow a greater ability to influence Chinese actions towards positive outcomes for both nations.

## CONCLUSION

Kenneth D. Johnson notes that "misunderstanding and distrust have great consequence in foreign policy."<sup>42</sup> As such, the potential threat posed by growing Chinese power is one that cannot be ignored by U.S. leaders: to do so would be both naïve and detrimental to global stability. However, understanding the nature and extent of this potential threat represents a powerful tool for U.S. leaders, as the way in which it is understood will help determine the direction of U.S.-Chinese relations. Chinese intentions can be characterized in simplistic terms as a naked power grab. Alternatively, their intentions can be understood in context, taking into account not only international power politics, but also Chinese domestic imperatives and critical historical and cultural influences.

Successfully managing complex relations with China in a way that achieves core U.S. objectives requires going beyond superficial assumptions about China's potential threat to the U.S.. The level of sophisticated diplomacy required must be based on an in-depth understanding of the cultural, historical and domestic factors affecting

Chinese foreign policy. Doing so holds the promise of significant benefits for U.S. efforts to influence Chinese actions.

Shrewd leadership requires pursuing policy options that are based on rational analysis rather than false, simplistic assumptions. The American government must use every tool at its disposal to ensure it can exert the maximum possible influence over the decisions and actions of the rising Chinese behemoth. Allowing a stark, black and white portrayal of the China Threat to fester will only restrict U.S. policy makers and increase the odds of negative outcomes. Constructive relations, facilitating the best outcomes for both countries, require moving beyond mutual misunderstanding and distrust. Appreciating the cultural and historical context behind Chinese motivations, and demonstrating this understanding to Chinese leaders at every opportunity, offers the best chance for improved collaboration between these two rival powers.

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