China II

Beijing as a Conservative Power

Robert S. Ross

NEITHER BELLIGERENT NOR BENIGN

Recent discussion of Sino-American relations has focused on the development of a U.S. policy for managing a rising power and potential rival. The debate over containment versus engagement is at the center of this discussion. Advocates of containment foresee the rise of a belligerent power, a process that will inevitably destabilize Asia and challenge vital U.S. interests. Arguing that a powerful China will be intent on achieving a long list of unrealized territorial and political ambitions, they insist that the United States must respond to China’s rise by strengthening its alliances on the Chinese periphery and increasing U.S. military deployments in Asia. Advocates of engagement agree that China is growing stronger but argue that Chinese intentions remain fluid and that premature adoption of belligerent policies risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy—treat China as an enemy and it will be one. They assert that expanded economic relations and official dialogues on security issues, human rights, and the global commons will maximize the prospect that China will use its power in a manner conducive to U.S. interests.

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Robert S. Ross

The difference between these two policy packages is significant, but they share a concern for China's increasing ability to destabilize the regional balance of power and threaten vital American interests. In both cases, this concern is based on incorrect assumptions about Chinese strategic capabilities. The reason there is not a "China threat" is not because China is a benign status quo power, but rather because it is too weak to challenge the balance of power in Asia and will remain weak well into the 21st century. Nonetheless, China is not a second-rate power. It has the ability to inflict considerable damage on a wide range of U.S. interests.

The United States needs a policy to contend with China's potential for destabilizing the region, not a policy to deal with a future hegemon. What is most striking about Chinese foreign policy is its effort to consolidate regional trends and promote stability. In its policies toward Russia, North and South Korea, Thailand, Burma, and the countries of Indochina, Central Asia, and South Asia, China has emphasized cooperative measures to consolidate existing relationships rather than forceful measures to promote new patterns of relations. China is a revisionist power, but for the foreseeable future it will seek to maintain the status quo—and so should the United States.

BALANCING ACT

In the late 1980s, the People’s Republic of China emerged as one of the most powerful countries on the East Asian mainland. It had established its strategic authority on the Korean peninsula in the early 1950s, when it held the U.S. military to a standstill and inflicted unacceptable casualties on American soldiers. Since then its capabilities in northeast Asia have grown, giving it a strong voice in peninsular affairs. After the demise of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Russian armed forces, China established conventional military control along the full length of its border with Russia and projected a powerful presence throughout the region. What is most striking about this development is that the United States and its allies have accommodated themselves to Chinese power in northeast Asia. Because of a continued U.S. regional presence, America's allies have not considered China's strategic power a threat to the regional balance.
China has also established superiority in Indochina with the acquiescence of the United States. Indeed, the United States welcomed China as a substitute for American power in Indochina throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In an era of declining U.S. capability, the Nixon Doctrine explicitly called for American reliance on regional powers as counterweights to the U.S.S.R. In Indochina and much of Southeast Asia, China was the regional power of choice. Washington was grateful for Beijing's ability to reassure Thailand against the Soviet Union and Vietnam in the wake of its withdrawal from the Vietnam War. Throughout the 1980s Washington supported Chinese efforts to roll back Soviet influence in Southeast Asia by helping the Khmer Rouge to resist the Soviet-sponsored Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

In 1989, when the Vietnamese military finally withdrew from Cambodia, Indochina fell within China's strategic sphere of influence. Having ousted the French, the Americans, and the Russians, China no longer confronts a rival in this region. As in northeast Asia, America and its allies accommodated themselves to China's preeminence. Neither the United States nor its traditional partners in Southeast Asia have considered the substitution of Chinese strategic dominance for Soviet power a challenge to their vital security interests.

Chinese strategic authority on mainland East Asia is a long-established characteristic of the region's balance of power. Since the early 1970s, it has not elicited fears of Chinese regional hegemony or calls for China's containment. On the contrary, East Asia's status quo is widely considered an appropriate foundation for a stable regional order. Concern over a Chinese challenge to the regional balance of power—the most vital U.S. interest in East Asia—must focus on the rise of Chinese power beyond the mainland and into the maritime regions of East Asia. Specifically, it must focus on China's ability to become a military power in the East China Sea or the South China Sea.

**CHINA AT SEA**

China's authority in the East China Sea relies on firepower. Its proximity to the East China Sea allows it to use land-based firepower to influence naval activities in the region. But China's air force remains a primitive war-fighting machine. Its inventory is composed
Robert S. Ross

mainly of 1950s- and 1960s-generation aircraft. While China is working to develop modern planes, its most advanced domestically produced fighter, the F8-11, is the equivalent of a late 1960s U.S. warplane. Even this primitive plane has yet to enter fully into operation. Besides American airpower, China must also contend with the Japanese air force, one of the most advanced in the world. Japanese production of the F2 fighter jet will assure it of defensive air superiority over the East China Sea for the foreseeable future. Moreover, Japanese aircraft are armed with air-to-air missiles far more advanced than their Chinese counterparts, and they enjoy the support of advanced AWACS aircraft and other sophisticated defense technologies. Add to this imbalance in air capability Japan's large fleet of advanced surface warships, its vastly superior technological base, and its self-restraint in defense spending as a share of GNP, and it becomes clear not only that China cannot dominate the East China Sea, but that it is not even a player in the naval balance. Recent acquisitions of Soviet Su-27s, a late 1970s fighter jet, fail to alter this reality since China cannot offset Japan's indigenous ability to manufacture 21st century aircraft. Should a Sino-Japanese arms race develop, Japan could easily augment its superiority in regional waters.

Chinese power could also destabilize the South China Sea, which comprises two distinct military theaters. Its northern reaches include the waters east of Vietnam and the Paracel Islands, territory contested by China, Vietnam, and Taiwan. Here, absent outside influence, Chinese military modernization and arms imports can make a difference. Because this part of the South China Sea is within range of Chinese land-based aircraft, improved Chinese capabilities would challenge Vietnam's ability to defend its coastal waters and its claims to the Paracel Islands. But such a development would merely reinforce current trends in Sino-Vietnamese relations, not destabilize the existing order.

The southern reaches of the South China Sea, including Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines, comprise another distinct military region, well beyond the reach of China's land-based aircraft. Air support for Chinese ground forces and naval vessels in the distant waters of the South China Sea would require carrier-based air support. Even air refueling of Su-27s is
Beijing as a Conservative Power

insufficient. Air refueling is complex and does not enable aircraft to loiter over distant waters, providing around-the-clock support for troops and surface vessels deployed near potential adversaries. The Chinese navy would lose a battle in this region against Singapore, Malaysia, or Indonesia, all of which possess advanced American or British aircraft. This fact explains the evident willingness and ability of these countries to occupy Chinese-claimed islands in the South China Sea. Indonesia, for example, has used a show of force to warn China from contesting its claim to the economic zone surrounding Natuna Island.

Despite common fears, China’s possession of the Spratly Islands would not offset its poor power projection capability. The Spratly Islands are not strategically significant. They are either underwater much of the time or are too small to support the logistical support for naval operations and the deployments required to protect such support from an adversary’s aircraft. The military reality of the Spratly Islands is that they are easy to occupy but difficult to hold. Defending them would drain, not enhance, China’s power projection capability.

China will need aircraft carriers to become a great power in the distant waters of the South China Sea, capable of challenging America’s influence in the maritime countries of Southeast Asia and its access to the region’s strategic shipping lanes. It is not clear that China could meet such an enormous challenge. Construction and deployment of an aircraft carrier requires the most modern technology, advanced pilot skills, and astronomical funding. Moscow did not deploy its first true aircraft carrier until after the Cold War. China is far from possessing the power plant, avionics, and metallurgy technologies required to manufacture a plane that can take off and land on an aircraft carrier in any weather. Its pilots have minimal training over blue water and little experience flying without ground control. Its systems engineers cannot manage the logistics of supplying resources to a carrier and its half-dozen support vessels, the equivalent of a small city at sea. The expense of outfitting a carrier group would require China to skew its defense procurement toward naval power or divert significant resources from important civilian infrastructure projects.
Power projection cannot be purchased abroad. Not only would the expense be prohibitive, requiring import of aircraft carriers, appropriate aircraft, and high-technology avionics, but the necessary managerial expertise is not for sale. Moreover, there are limits to what countries will export to China. Obsolete sample carriers from France, for example, may become available, but the hardware for full power projection can only be developed indigenously.

Despite the obstacles and costs, China might still decide to build an aircraft carrier. Experts estimate that if China began today, the vessel would become operational between 2005 and 2010. And that would be only one carrier. The U.S. Navy estimates that keeping one carrier on location at all times requires a fleet of three. China could not build a third carrier until approximately 2020. Due to inferior managerial skills and logistical facilities, China would probably need more than three carriers to keep one on location in the distant regions of the South China Sea. Moreover, these first-generation Chinese carriers would be half the size of an American carrier, deploying aircraft inferior to those currently deployed by the maritime Southeast Asian countries, much less those deployed by the United States on its far larger and more sophisticated vessels.

Finally, even if China does pursue significant military advancements, its rivals will not be standing still. Given its head start and cooperation with Japan and other regional allies, the United States could maintain its current defense posture and the South China Sea would remain an “American lake” well into the 21st century. But the United States continues to modernize all branches of its military. In developing power projection capability, China would risk a U.S.-Japanese arms buildup, leaving itself relatively weaker, while diverting scarce funds from more pressing military objectives, such as securing its coastal waters.

CHINA’S WILD CARD

Despite its technological and military backwardness, China can still heighten regional instability by threatening U.S. forces, exacerbating local conflicts, and refusing to cooperate with international regimes, thus requiring the United States to commit additional resources to defend its interests.
China is dissatisfied with many aspects of East Asian politics, Taiwan’s independence foremost among them. Reunification with Taiwan is a nationalist objective that reflects Beijing’s intent to restore China’s dynastic borders and conclude the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party. Taiwan is thus a sensitive issue in succession politics. China’s interests in Taiwan also reflect its objective of establishing secure borders. Located less than 100 miles off the Chinese coast, Taiwan truly can serve as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier.” As in the 1950s, it can be employed by an adversary to undermine Chinese security. In this respect, its geopolitical significance is similar to Cuba’s importance to the United States. Thus, Chinese leaders actively challenge Taiwan’s flexible diplomacy and any indication that it can secure international support for a formal declaration of independence. They are intent on minimizing Taipei’s foreign policy independence and ultimately establishing mainland control over Taiwan. As Chinese military maneuvers in March 1996 revealed, they are prepared to worsen regional tensions to promote this objective.

Taiwan is only the most prominent of China’s territorial objectives. Beijing rejects Japan’s territorial claim to the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands, Vietnam’s claim to the Paracel Islands, and the claims by Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei to the Spratly Islands. It also has a territorial dispute with Vietnam over the demarcation of the Gulf of Tonkin. There is considerable potential for exploiting natural resources, including oil, particularly in the disputed waters in the northern sector of the South China Sea. China insists that it is the rightful claimant to these territories and that its neighbors are taking advantage of its military weakness to infringe on Chinese sovereignty. Territorial ambitions, domestic political instability, and desire for recognition as a regional power encourage Chinese leaders to resist these perceived challenges.

China is a constant threat to engage in weapons proliferation. As a regional power, it has minimal national interest in stability in the Middle East and northern Africa. Hence, it has little incentive for arms control or to forgo profits from weapons or technology exports. Should Chinese leaders decide to maximize profits, disregard
Robert S. Ross

U.S. threats of sanctions, and provide missiles to Syria or unsuper-
vised dual-use nuclear technologies to Iran, they could foster re-
gional arms races and embroil the United States in regional
conflicts. A resumption of Chinese nuclear testing would under-
mine America’s effort to ban nuclear tests entirely. China could also
destabilize the international liberal trade order. Should it develop a
mercantilist economic policy or fail to reform its trading system,
China could damage global trade more than Japan at the height of
its global economic power.

Beijing can use military power to destabilize Taiwan and regional
politics. China had a similar ability in the 1950s, when its shelling of
the offshore islands caused a crisis in Sino-American relations. Simi-
larly, Chinese missiles can threaten U.S. naval vessels. But this capa-
bility is shared by the most primitive militaries, including those of Iran
and Argentina. As Iraq showed during the 1991 Persian Gulf War,
even a 1960s Scud missile can disrupt local economies and menace
U.S. forces. Indeed, the gravest danger posed by China’s 1996 missile
tests was their obsolescence: the missiles were so primitive that they
could have veered off course and hit Taiwan. America must be con-
cerned by Chinese military power not because China will develop
hegemonic power but because it can raise the cost of defending Amer-
ican interests and spoil the prospects for a cooperative regional order.

CHINA’S CONSERVATIVE FOREIGN POLICY

China’s ability to wreak havoc is not new to East Asia. Since
1949 the United States has had to cope with U.S.-Chinese conflicts
of interest. In many respects, it is easier to deal with these conflicts
today than ever before. Indochina is no longer an issue. China is col-
laborating with South Korea to encourage North Korean moder-
tion. Even the conflict with Taiwan has become more manageable.
Taiwan now has a stable government, a prosperous economy, and a
vastly improved military. The mainland’s ability to challenge Tai-
wan’s security is less today than ever before. Moreover, the mainland
is no longer allied with a global superpower that can shield it in a
conflict with the United States over Taiwan. Nor is it an antagonist
in a polarized East Asian balance of power. Participation in the
global economy and a stake in regional stability encourage China to avoid confrontations with the United States over Taiwan.

Despite cooperative relations with almost all of its neighbors in Asia, Chinese foreign relations have not been perfectly harmonious. But the friction does not reflect Beijing's restlessness. It is true that China's Taiwan policy contains significant coercive elements and that Beijing has not relinquished its right to use force against the island. But China's intent is to deter Taipei and Washington from changing the status quo, not to compel Taiwan to expedite the pace of formal reunification. Beijing has made clear that it is prepared to return to the rules that governed U.S.-Taiwan-mainland relations prior to 1994, when Washington did not allow Taiwan's senior officials to visit the United States but supplied it with large quantities of advanced weapons. The friction in Sino-American relations since June 1989 has stemmed primarily from bilateral trade relations, U.S.-Taiwan relations, and American criticism of China's human rights record. Moreover, China has acquiesced to U.S. pressure regarding weapons proliferation. With the exception of its security relationship with Pakistan, since the end of the Cold War Beijing has not exported any missiles in violation of international agreements, nor has it exported technology for use in nuclear reactors not under the International Atomic Energy Agency's supervision.

China's relationship with Japan has become more difficult, but this primarily reflects changes in Japanese politics. Japan's development of a competitive multiparty electoral system has politicized its policy toward Taiwan and Sino-Japanese territorial disputes and promoted linkage between Japanese aid and China's human rights record. Japan has also become a more confident country, less willing to abide Chinese demands that it maintain a low international profile as penance for its military expansionism in the 1930s and 1940s. During the 1996 dispute over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) islands, China adopted a cautious policy, waiting for Japanese policy to change after the November general elections.

The striking exception to this conservative trend is the Spratly Islands. Since the mid-1970s, China has been trying to diminish the impact of the South China Sea territorial disputes on its relations with the countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Since the early 1990s, it has advocated cooperative economic ventures in the disputed waters and shelving of the sovereignty disputes. But
in early 1995 Beijing expanded its control of territory also claimed by
the Philippines, arousing heightened concern throughout the region.
This action remains an anomaly in China's relations with the ASEAN
countries. It is too early to say whether this incident reflects a new
trend in Chinese policy or a brief digression designed to deter wide-
spread land seizures in Southeast Asia.

Since the early 1980s, the world’s major industrial economies have
been eager to participate in Chinese modernization. The prospect of
China's economic growth and greater domestic employment has
encouraged them to expand trade and investment ties with China.
They have also been willing to extend considerable foreign aid and
technical assistance through bilateral and multilateral institutions.
The accompanying technology and capital transfers have played an
important role in modernizing Chinese industry and stimulating
economic growth. Beijing realizes that conservative international be-
havior was the precondition that encouraged the advanced industrial
countries to participate in China's economy. They also realize that
provocative policies risk ending China's economic success story.

A stable regional order is conducive to Chinese ambitions insofar
as it allows Beijing to focus its domestic resources on the economic
foundations of strategic power. The growth of the Chinese military
budget since the late 1980s has been significant, if only because it has
allowed China to import advanced Russian weaponry. Recent in-
creases in the military budget partially reflect high inflation affecting
soldiers' salaries and the cost of consumer goods purchased by the
Chinese military. Nonetheless, estimates of the overall size of China's
military budget indicate that China's defense spending remains rela-
tively low, both as a share of gross national product and compared
with the spending of other great powers.

THE LUXURY TO ENGAGE

Thus far, post-Cold War international relations have not hardened
into opposing blocs. The opportunity still exists to establish a stable
international order. But the sine qua non of such an order is Chinese
participation in its creation. Chinese leaders remain committed to
seeking constructive relations with all their neighbors. Given the
Beijing as a Conservative Power

costs that China can impose on America and its allies, U.S. policy should take advantage of that posture to reinforce China's interest in regional stability and strengthen its commitment to global stability. Engagement, not isolation, is the appropriate policy.

Engagement must mean more than simply offering China the opportunity to follow the rules. It requires acknowledging Chinese interests and negotiating solutions that accommodate both American and Chinese objectives. In bilateral relations, this will entail compromise approaches over the future of Taiwan. It will require mutual accommodation to prevent nuclear proliferation on the Korean peninsula and accommodation of Chinese interests in Sino-Pakistani security ties. Washington must acknowledge the economic sources of trade imbalances and the Chinese government's limited ability to enforce its domestic laws and international commitments.

Engagement also requires multilateral collaboration with Chinese interests. The United States and the other major powers must invite China to participate in international rule-making. This includes encouraging Chinese membership as well as leadership responsibilities in various arms control regimes, including the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Zangger Committee, and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which regulate nuclear-related exports, the Australia Group on chemical precursors and biological agents, and the Wassenaar Arrangement, the successor to the Coordinating Committee on Multilateral Export Controls, which tracks trade in conventional weapons and technologies. It also entails admitting China into the World Trade Organization on terms that reflect both U.S. concern for China's significant influence in the international economic system and the less-developed conditions of China's domestic economy.

Engagement will not be easy. For it to succeed, China must be willing to accommodate important U.S. interests in controlling proliferation of all kinds of weapons, whether or not proscribed by international regimes, in regions where the United States has vital interests, including the Middle East. China will have to make a formal commitment to reform its economic system and sustained efforts to enforce its international economic commitments. It will also have to make allowances for American domestic conditions and political values, especially as they affect U.S. economic policy and human
rights diplomacy. Finally, China will have to use its leadership responsibilities wisely, seeking to consolidate a broadly beneficial international society, rather than striving for unilateral gains at the expense of international stability.

There is no guarantee that engagement will work. It will often involve acrimonious negotiations as the two sides make difficult policy adjustments and seek compromise solutions. At times, Washington will have to protect its interests unilaterally. It will also have to maintain its current military deployments in Asia. U.S. strategic retrenchment would do far more to alter the Sino-American bilateral balance of power and the regional balance of power than any combination of Chinese military and economic policies. But it is also clear that reliance on purely coercive measures will not elicit Chinese cooperation. Rather, it would almost guarantee renewed tension in Sino-American relations and heightened instability in East Asia. Given the strategic head start the United States and its allies enjoy, Washington has the luxury of observing Chinese modernization before adopting a more assertive posture.\[44\]