

The Future of U.S.-China Relations

Aaron L. Friedberg

Is Conflict Inevitable?

For four years following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) appeared to be on a steadily rising course. As U.S. decisionmakers turned their attention to the urgent dangers of terrorism and proliferation, they seemed less inclined to view China as an actual or potential strategic competitor and more hopeful that, in the post-September 11 world, all the great powers would be "united by common dangers . . . [and] increasingly . . . by common values."¹

As President George W. Bush began his second term in office, however, there were signs of mounting friction between Washington and Beijing and increasing skepticism, on the U.S. side at least, that the relationship was as harmonious, and the interests (still less the values) of the two parties as compatible, as had often been claimed. Alarm over the possible lifting of the European arms embargo helped to draw renewed attention to the pace and scope of China's military buildup. Frustration with stalled negotiations over North Korea's nuclear weapons program caused some observers to question whether Beijing truly shared the U.S. commitment to halting proliferation. Reports of a PRC diplomatic "charm offensive" in Southeast Asia stirred fears of waning U.S. influence and incipient Chinese regional hegemony. Meanwhile, evidence that China was expanding its interactions with Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East raised the specter of a new global rivalry for power and influence. To this combustible mix was added an official spat over trade balances and currency values, as well as a flurry of sensational news stories about the impact of China's extraordinary demand on world prices of energy and materials and the planned purchases of U.S. companies by their newly flush Chinese rivals.² "The old China bet is off," announced one

Aaron L. Friedberg is Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University. From June 2003 to June 2005, he served as Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs and Director of Policy Planning in the Office of the Vice President. The views expressed here are his alone.

1. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002), p. 5.

2. For an overview of these developments, see Bonnie S. Glaser, "Rice Seeks to Caution, Cajole, and Cooperate with Beijing," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (April 2005), http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/0501Qus_china.html.

observer in mid-2005, while another (surveying the economic scene) proclaimed “the end of the China love affair.”³

Recent events may prove to be little more than a passing chill. Whatever their ultimate significance, however, these developments raise fundamental questions about the future direction and underlying determinants of U.S.-China relations. What is likely to be the character of the relationship between the United States and the PRC over the next two or three decades? Will it be marked by convergence toward deepening cooperation, stability, and peace or by deterioration, leading to increasingly open competition, and perhaps even war?

The answers to these questions are of enormous importance. If tensions between the two Pacific powers worsen, the whole of Eastern Eurasia could become divided in a new cold war, and the prospects for confrontation and conflict would seem certain to rise. On the other hand, a deepening U.S.-China entente could bring with it increased possibilities for sustained worldwide economic growth, the peaceful resolution of outstanding regional disputes, and the successful management of pressing global problems, including terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Whether for good or ill, the most significant bilateral international relationship over the course of the next several decades is likely to be that between the United States and the PRC.

As far-reaching as its impact may be, however, the future character of the U.S.-China relationship is also profoundly uncertain. Most experts have opinions about this question but, if pressed, few would claim to be sure about what lies ahead. Such modesty is entirely appropriate. Not only are the answers to the questions posed here unknown; they are also, at present, unknowable. Twenty years ago, few people foresaw that the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union was about to undergo a radical transformation, and fewer still imagined that the latter might soon cease to exist. As regards their ability to anticipate events, today’s observers are no better equipped than their counterparts of the early 1980s. At this point, scholars and analysts lack the kinds of powerful predictive tools that would allow them to say with any degree of assurance what the state of relations between the United States and China will be in five years time, to say nothing of ten or

3. Amity Shales, “U.S. Begins Rethink on China,” *Financial Times* (London), June 26, 2005; and Jonathan Anderson, “The End of the China Love Affair,” *Far East Economic Review*, May 2005, <http://www.feer.com/articles1/2005/0505/free/p020.html>.

twenty. And although opinions vary about what kinds of analytical advances are possible, there are good reasons to believe that such instruments are, in fact, unattainable.⁴

While they differ in their degree of confidence, and in their willingness to make explicit predictions, most of those who think and write about the U.S.-China relationship nevertheless have beliefs and expectations about where it is headed and about the factors that will be most influential in determining its course. Not all of the participants in this discussion are theorists of international relations, to be sure, and many would eschew the labels and language of academic debate. To the extent that they have coherent and internally consistent views, however, most analysts deploy arguments that derive from one or the other of the three main camps in contemporary international relations theorizing: liberalism, realism, and constructivism. To make matters more interesting, and more complicated, those whose basic analytical premises place

4. For the best brief overview of the difficulties involved in trying to predict the future, see Robert Jervis, "The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble the Past?" *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Winter 1991/92), pp. 39–46. Among other problems, Jervis notes that international relationships are likely to be characterized by what he has elsewhere termed "system effects." Systems composed of densely interconnected units are often characterized by feedback loops and nonlinear interactions. In such circumstances, small causes will often have large effects that are difficult to predict or to control. Although efforts to anticipate the future trajectory of complex political systems may not be an utter waste of time, Jervis concludes that the "interactive, strategic, and contingent nature of systems limits the extent to which complete and deterministic theories are possible." Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 295. Another useful examination of the difficulties of prediction, occasioned by the evident failure of most analysts to foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, is John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 1992/93), pp. 5–58. Gaddis reaches conclusions that are similar to Jervis's. He surmises that many important political phenomena and historical events are actually the product of nonlinear processes that cannot be adequately modeled using existing analytical techniques. The social sciences, Gaddis argues, have embraced "the traditional methods of the physical and natural sciences. But they did so at a time when physicists, biologists, and mathematicians, concerned about the disparities between their theories and the reality they were supposed to characterize, were abandoning old methods in favor of new ones that accommodated indeterminacy, irregularity, and unpredictability—precisely the qualities the social sciences were trying to leave behind." *Ibid.*, p. 54. Gaddis elaborates on these observations in *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially pp. 53–128. See also Steven Bernstein, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, and Steven Weber, "God Gave Physics the Easy Problems: Adapting Social Science to an Unpredictable World," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 2000), pp. 43–76. For earlier discussions of these issues, see Gabriel A. Almond and Stephen J. Genco, "Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (July 1977), pp. 489–522; Stanley H. Hoffmann, "International Relations: The Long Road to Theory," *World Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (April 1959), pp. 346–377; and Ithiel de Sola Pool, "The Art of the Social Science Soothsayer," in Nazli Choucri and Thomas W. Robinson, eds., *Forecasting in International Relations: Theory, Methods, Problems, Prospects* (San Francisco, Calif.: W.H. Freeman, 1978), pp. 23–34.

them in one of these three broad schools of thought do not necessarily have similar views regarding the future of U.S.-China relations. On this issue, it is possible to identify liberals who expect confrontation and conflict, realists who believe that the relationship will basically be stable and peaceful, and constructivists who think that events could go either way. Each of the three theoretical schools, in sum, has two variants, one of which is essentially optimistic about the future of U.S.-China relations, the other distinctly pessimistic.

Perhaps the most common manifestation of the debate over the future of U.S.-China relations is the disagreement between liberal optimists and realist pessimists. Following an examination of the views of those who reside in these contending camps, I next turn to a discussion of their somewhat less familiar cousins: the realist optimists, on the one hand, and those who can best be described as liberal pessimists, on the other. An exploration of the assertions made by adherents of constructivism rounds out this survey. Although scholars who fall into this broad category have tended to be optimistic about U.S.-China relations (and about East Asian international politics more generally), the perceptual and ideational factors they emphasize could just as easily be invoked to arrive at considerably gloomier conclusions, a fact that some self-avowed constructivists have been at pains to point out.

Each of the positions elaborated below makes claims about the importance of a particular causal mechanism or a set of similarly aligned causal forces. It is possible that, in the real world, one set of forces will be so powerful in its effects as to overwhelm the rest. It may turn out, in other words, that one of the six camps identified here is basically "right" and the others "wrong." But it is also conceivable that the future will be shaped by a confluence of different forces, some mutually reinforcing and others opposed. Indeed it may be that all of the arguments examined here are in some sense correct, at least to the extent that they identify causal mechanisms that are actually at work, albeit perhaps with less ultimate impact than their analytical advocates expect.

Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara have observed that intellectual discourse in the field of international relations has come increasingly to be dominated by "paradigmatic clashes" in which champions extol "the virtues of a specific analytical perspective to the exclusion of others." Driven by the desire to construct parsimonious theories and to establish the preponderance of one paradigm or school, scholars have often been inclined to adopt an all-or-nothing attitude, asserting the overwhelming importance of the causal mechanisms central to their preferred paradigm while downplaying or ignoring the possible significance of others. Katzenstein and Okawara argue that, whatever

else can be said for it, this approach ultimately hinders efforts to understand the complexities of the real world. In its place they urge a posture of “analytical eclecticism” and an awareness that important empirical puzzles in international relations can often best be explained by a combination of forces and factors, including those highlighted by paradigms that are typically regarded as being diametrically opposed to one another.⁵

If such an approach is helpful in explaining past events and emerging patterns, it is absolutely essential to any attempt to think about the longer-term future of U.S.-China relations. As Robert Jervis pointed out in his post-Cold War meditation on the future of world politics, “Only rarely does a single factor determine the way politics will work out.”⁶ Instead, significant outcomes are invariably shaped by what John Lewis Gaddis describes as “the convergence or intersection of complementary processes [and] . . . the potential fratricide of contradictory ones.”⁷ Having catalogued a wide array of such processes, I then speculate on the various ways in which they could converge and combine to mold the future of U.S.-China relations.

Before turning to the present and the future, it is helpful for a moment to reflect on the past. In his brilliant analysis of the “rise of the Anglo-German antagonism,” Paul Kennedy describes how an assortment of factors—including bilateral economic relations; shifts in the global distribution of power; developments in military technology; domestic political processes; ideological trends; questions of racial, religious, cultural, and national identity; the actions of key individuals; and the sequencing of critical events—combined to lead Britain and Germany to the brink of World War I.⁸ Whether the story turns out well or poorly, tomorrow’s historians will have to do something similar if they are to construct satisfactory explanations for the evolution of U.S.-China relations in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first. As they try to peer into a future that is necessarily obscured from their view, today’s political scientists and foreign policy analysts also need to

5. Peter J. Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, “Japan, Asian-Pacific Security, and the Case for Analytical Eclecticism,” *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Winter 2001/02), p. 154. See also Peter J. Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, “Rethinking Asian Security: A Case for Analytical Eclecticism,” in J.J. Suh, Peter J. Katzenstein, and Allen Carlson, eds., *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 1–33.

6. Jervis, “The Future of World Politics,” p. 40.

7. Gaddis, “International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War,” p. 44 (emphasis in original).

8. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982).

try to find ways of apprehending the full array of causal forces that are at work, assessing their relative strengths and thinking about the ways in which they are likely to combine with one another. This is not an easy task and, indeed, it is impossible to accomplish with any degree of assurance or precision. Nevertheless, it is an important exercise to attempt.

Liberal Optimists

In foreign affairs, most Americans are liberals.⁹ As regards the prospects for peace, cooperation, and understanding among nations, most liberals are optimists. It should therefore come as no surprise that liberal optimists are common and probably, in numerical terms, dominant among U.S. analysts, policymakers, and China watchers. On the question of the future of U.S.-China relations and, more generally, regarding the future of world politics, liberal optimists believe in the pacifying power of three interrelated and mutually reinforcing causal mechanisms: economic interdependence, international institutions, and democratization.¹⁰

ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE

Liberal optimists believe that bilateral economic exchange creates shared interests in good relations between states. The greater the volume of trade and investment flowing between two countries, the more groups on both sides will have a strong interest in avoiding conflict and preserving peace.

Liberal optimists note that economic exchange between the United States and China has increased dramatically since the onset of market reforms in China in the late 1970s. From the start of reform in 1978 to the end of the twentieth century, the value of the trade moving between the two countries grew by more than two orders of magnitude, from \$1 billion to almost \$120 billion annually.¹¹ By 2004 that figure had doubled to a reported total of \$245 billion.¹²

9. This is a fact lamented by U.S. realists. See, for example, the writings of George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, Hans Morgenthau and, most recently, John Mearsheimer.

10. For an examination of the original formulation of these arguments by Immanuel Kant, see Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 251–300. For an overview of recent evidence regarding the existence of what liberal optimists describe as the “Kantian triangle,” see Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

11. U.S.-China Security Review Commission, *The National Security Implications of the Economic Relationship between the United States and China* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, July 2002), pp. 38–39.

12. U.S.-China Business Council, “U.S.-China Trade Statistics and China’s World Trade Statistics,” <http://www.uschina.org/statistics/tradetable.html>, updated February 28, 2005.

Capital flows have also risen, with U.S. investors pouring significant resources each year into China.¹³ As China enters the World Trade Organization (WTO) and opens its markets even wider to foreign goods and capital, the density of commercial linkages between the United States and the PRC will increase.¹⁴ Economic interdependence has already helped to create a strong mutual interest in peace between the two Pacific powers. Barring some major disruption, economic forces will probably continue to draw them together, constraining and damping any tendencies toward conflict.¹⁵

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

In addition to their faith in trade as an instrument of peace, liberal optimists place great store in the role of international institutions of various kinds. These can help to improve communication between states, reducing uncertainty about intentions and increasing the capacity of governments to make credible, binding commitments to one another. By so doing, they can help to ease or counteract some of the pernicious effects of international anarchy, clearing the way for higher levels of cooperation and trust than would otherwise be attainable.¹⁶

As regards U.S.-China relations, liberal optimists note that since the end of the Cold War there has been a proliferation of regional institutions in East Asia. Included among these are APEC (the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum); the ARF (the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] Regional Forum); ASEAN + 3; the East Asia Summit; an expanding network of

13. According to U.S. government figures, U.S. foreign direct investment in China increased from \$354 million in 1990 to \$9.58 billion in 2000. U.S.-China Security Review Commission, *The National Security Implications of the Economic Relationship between the United States and China*, p. 47.

14. See Robert D. Hormats, Elizabeth Economy, and Kevin Nealer, eds., *Beginning the Journey: China, the United States, and the WTO* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2001); Shuxun Chen and Charles Wolf Jr., eds., *China, the United States, and the Global Economy* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001); and "China and the WTO: The Real Leap Forward," *Economist*, November 20, 1999, pp. 25–28.

15. For a statement of the argument regarding the pacifying effects of trade in Asia generally, see, for example, James L. Richardson, "Asia-Pacific: The Case for Geopolitical Optimism," *National Interest*, No. 38 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 28–39. Regarding trade and U.S.-China relations in particular, see, for example, the remarks of President Bill Clinton at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C., March 8, 2000, in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton: 2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), Vol. 1, pp. 404–408.

16. The classic statement of many of these arguments is Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). For a summary of the literature, see Lisa L. Martin and Beth A. Simmons, "Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Autumn 1998), pp. 729–757.

bilateral military-to-military talks; and an even wider array of quasi-official track-2 security dialogues involving scholars, analysts, and bureaucrats from countries in the region. Over the course of the last decade, China has also sought entry into several important global institutions, including the WTO (which it entered in 2001) and the nuclear nonproliferation regime (which it joined in 1996). In addition, it has begun to play a more active and prominent role in the United Nations. By one count, the PRC's membership in formal, international governmental organizations more than doubled between 1977 and 1997 (from 21 to 52), while its membership in international nongovernmental organizations soared during the same period from 71 to 1,163.¹⁷

The growth of international institutions in Asia and the expansion of both U.S. and Chinese participation in them are drawing the United States and the PRC into a thickening web of ties that liberal optimists believe will promote contact, communication and, over time, greater mutual understanding and even trust, or at the very least, a reduced likelihood of gross misperception. Aside from whatever direct effects it may have on bilateral relations with the United States, China's increasing participation in international institutions should also give it a growing, albeit more diffuse, stake in the stability and continuity of the existing global order. The desire of China's leaders to continue to enjoy the benefits of membership in that order should make them less likely to take steps that would threaten the status quo. This, in turn, should reduce the probability that the PRC will act in ways that could bring it into conflict with the United States, which is, after all, the principal architect, defender, and beneficiary of the contemporary international system.¹⁸

17. David M. Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations, 1989-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 163. For a brief summary of the recent mutual entanglement of China and the United States in institutions and regimes, see *ibid.*, pp. 161-188.

18. Making the case for the stabilizing effects of China's increasing participation in international institutions are (among many others) Michael Oksenberg and Elizabeth Economy, eds., *China Joins the World: Progress and Prospects* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999), pp. 1-41; Paul Evans, "The New Multilateralism and the Conditional Engagement of China," in James Shinn, ed., *Weaving the Net: Conditional Engagement with China* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), pp. 249-270; and Alastair Iain Johnston and Paul Evans, "China's Engagement with Multilateral Security Institutions," in Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 235-272. Belief in the virtues of institutions has had a real impact on U.S. policymakers. See, for example, the discussion in an article by a former commander in chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific and his top strategic adviser, Dennis C. Blair and John T. Hanley Jr., "From Wheels to Webs: Reconstructing Asia-Pacific Security Arrangements," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2001), pp. 7-17.

DEMOCRATIZATION

Above all else, liberal optimists believe that democracy is a force for peace. Regimes that rely for their power and legitimacy on the consent of the governed are less likely to enter lightly into military adventures or to engage in wars whose true purpose is to line the pockets, and satisfy the vainglory, of their leaders. Although democracies may at times behave belligerently toward nondemocracies, they have rarely, if ever, gone to war with one another. As the number of democracies in the world increases (as it has quite dramatically, albeit at an uneven pace, over the course of the last two centuries), the likelihood of international conflict should diminish.¹⁹

Liberal optimists believe that, although it is still far from finished, the process of democratization is already well under way in China.²⁰ This process is being driven largely by economic development, which, in turn, is being accelerated by China's increasing openness to trade. Rising per capita incomes are creating a growing Chinese middle class. In Europe and North America, and more recently in Asia, those whose rising incomes allow them to do more than attend to the struggle for daily existence have been the prime movers behind progress toward democracy, and there is every reason to hope that they will play a similar role in China.²¹

Liberals also believe that, in addition to stirring the desire for political rights, economic development creates an objective, functional need for political liberalization. Without courts, contracts, and a reliable rule of law, economic progress will surely falter. Moreover, in an era in which sustained growth depends increasingly on free flows of information, regimes that seek to restrict speech and control communications will be at a fatal disadvantage. Over time, if it wishes even to approach the levels of well-being already attained by its advanced industrial counterparts (all of which are democracies),

19. The literature on this subject is vast. For useful overviews, see Miriam Fendius Elman, "The Need for a Qualitative Test of the Democratic Peace Theory," in Elman, ed., *Paths to Peace: Is Democracy the Answer?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 1–57; and Russett and Oneal, *Triangulating Peace*, pp. 81–124.

20. See, for example, Minxin Pei, "Creeping Democratization in China," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (October 1995), pp. 64–79; and Minxin Pei, "China's Evolution toward Soft Authoritarianism," in Edward Friedman and Barrett L. McCormick, eds., *What If China Doesn't Democratize? Implications for War and Peace* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), pp. 74–98.

21. For the most clear-cut statement of this argument, see Henry S. Rowen, "The Short March: China's Road to Democracy," *National Interest*, No. 45 (Fall 1996), pp. 61–70. For a somewhat more cautious, but still basically optimistic assessment of likely near-term developments, see George Gilboy and Eric Heginbotham, "China's Coming Transformation," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (July/August 2001), pp. 26–39. See also Elizabeth Economy, "Don't Break the Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (May/June 2004), pp. 96–109.

China too must become democratic.²² As it does, the liberal optimists expect that its relations with the United States will stabilize and that, ultimately, it will enter into the democratic “zone of peace.” Although the process may take time fully to unfold, before too long open conflict between the United States and a democratic China will be as improbable as war among the members of the European Union appears to be today.

Since the mid-1990s the presumed links between trade, growth, democracy, and peace have been staple features of official U.S. rhetoric regarding relations with China. President Bill Clinton began to make these arguments after abandoning his initial flirtation with the idea of linking China’s access to the U.S. market to its performance on human rights issues.²³ Despite his harsh criticisms of some aspects of the Clinton administration’s policy of “engagement,” candidate and later President George W. Bush embraced the basic logic of the idea that trade promotes democracy, and, ultimately, peace. Thus in a 1999 campaign speech, Bush declared, “Economic freedom creates habits of liberty. And habits of liberty create expectations of democracy. . . . Trade freely with China, and time is on our side.”²⁴

Realist Pessimists

In contrast to liberals, most realists are pessimists. Where liberals see progressive forces leading the world ineluctably to ever-higher levels of prosperity and peace, realists see inescapable laws of nature compelling a recurrent struggle for power and survival. For liberals, history is a smoothly ascending curve;

22. Thus, according to one study, “The rule of law, public disclosure of financial data, and managerial accountability corrode command economies. These liberal practices are necessary for sustained growth in a market economy and . . . will inevitably spill over into civil society and the world of politics, thus leading to a more moderate China.” Shinn, *Weaving the Net*, p. 40. Similarly, one of the arguments in favor of the incorporation of China into the WTO was that it would promote domestic economic change and hence political reforms. In the words of a former Clinton administration national security adviser, “To enter the WTO, China must speed the demise of the state-run economy through which the Communist Party has wielded much of its power. . . . Just as NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] membership eroded the economic base of one-party rule in Mexico, WTO membership . . . can help do the same in China.” Samuel R. Berger, “A Foreign Policy for the Global Age,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 6 (November/December 2000), pp. 28–29.

23. Regarding the shifts in Clinton’s policies, see James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp. 274–314.

24. Governor George W. Bush, “A Distinctly American Internationalism,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, November 19, 1999, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/wspeech.htm>.

for realists, it is a vicious circle. The reason, most contemporary realists claim, is the persistence of international anarchy. In the absence of any higher authority to resolve disputes and impose order, peace has usually proved fleeting and conflict has been the norm. Under conditions of anarchy, it is the material power and, in particular, the military strength of the various units in an international system that has typically been decisive in shaping the patterns of relations among them.²⁵

CHINA'S POWER: RISING

For realist pessimists, the single most important feature of the PRC today is its rising power. Everything else, including the likely character of the U.S.-China relationship, follows from this fact. Taking aggregate economic capacity as a rough surrogate for overall national power, it is apparent that China's growth has been extraordinarily rapid. Since the start of economic reforms in 1978, the PRC's gross national product (GNP) is thought to have increased by a factor of four and, according to some estimates, it could double again by the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century.²⁶ What is especially impressive about the Chinese economy is not only the speed with which it appears to be expanding but its growing mass and enormous potential. Given the sheer size of its population and the rising productivity of its workers, China may one day regain its historic position as the world's largest economy. Although such projections are fraught with difficulties and uncertainties, some experts have calculated that China's economy could overtake that of the United States as early as 2015.²⁷ The combination of the speed and the magnitude of China's growth in recent decades appears to be unprecedented. The closest analogy is proba-

25. Regarding the impact of anarchy, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 89–93; and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), pp. 29–54.

26. For an estimate of China's past growth, see Central Intelligence Agency, *World Fact Book, 2005*, <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ch.html#Econ>, updated July 28, 2005. For other assessments of China's past performance and future prospects, see K.C. Yeh, "China's Economic Growth: Recent Trends and Prospects," in Chen and Wolf, *China, the United States, and the Global Economy*, pp. 69–97; and Angang Hu, "The Chinese Economy in Prospect," in Chen and Wolf, *China, the United States, and the Global Economy*, pp. 99–146.

27. See Angus Maddison, *Chinese Economic Performance in the Long-Run* (Paris: Development Center of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1998), pp. 95–99. See also the projections in Yeh, "China's Economic Growth," p. 110. These estimates are all based on optimistic projections of China's future growth rates and the use of purchasing power parity (as compared to exchange rate) conversion methods that tend systematically to increase the apparent size of the Chinese economy in relation to that of the United States. For an estimate that shows China's gross domestic product exceeding that of the United States in current dollar terms by 2039, see Dominic

bly the emergence of the United States as the world's preponderant economy over the course of the nineteenth century.

As was true of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so too is China's rapidly growing economy bringing expanding military capabilities in its train. A fast-growing GNP has made it comparatively easy for the PRC to sustain a large and expanding military effort and, in recent years, China's spending on arms and military equipment has grown at an impressive pace.²⁸ The rising levels of productivity, per capita incomes, and technological competence that accompany economic growth should also translate into an increasing ability both to absorb sophisticated weapons imported from foreign suppliers and eventually to develop such systems indigenously.²⁹ Although the picture is mixed, and the PRC continues to lag in many areas, these expectations too are borne out by the general pattern of Chinese military development over the last several decades. There are good reasons to expect that China will be able to build and deploy more increasingly capable military systems in the years ahead.³⁰

CHINA'S AIMS: EXPANDING

Realist pessimists note that, throughout history, rising powers have tended to be troublemakers, at least insofar as their more established counterparts in the international system are concerned. This is the case, in the realists' view, regardless of regime type; it was as true of a rising, democratic United States as it was of a rising, autocratic Germany. As Samuel Huntington has pointed out,

Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, "Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050," Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper No. 99 (New York: Goldman Sachs Group, 2003).

28. For estimates of China's defense spending, see U.S.-China Security Review Commission, *The National Security Implications of the Economic Relationship between the United States and China*, pp. 167-177.

29. For an analysis of Chinese military imports, see Bates Gill and Taeho Kim, *China's Arms Acquisitions from Abroad: A Quest for "Superb and Secret Weapons"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Regarding China's protracted and painful efforts to develop its own ballistic missile submarines, see John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China's Strategic Seapower: The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

30. Regarding the progress of China's military modernization efforts, see *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, May 28, 2004, <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/d20040528PRC.pdf>. See also Mark A. Stokes, *China's Strategic Modernization: Implications for the United States* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1999); James R. Lilley and David Shambaugh, eds., *China's Military Faces the Future* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1999); Col. Susan M. Puska, ed., *People's Liberation Army after Next* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2000); and David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

"The external expansion of the UK and France, Germany and Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States coincided with phases of intense industrialization and economic development."³¹

There appear to be a number of reasons for this pattern. As a state's capabilities grow, its leaders tend to define their interests more expansively and to seek a greater degree of influence over what is going on around them. Rising powers seek not only to secure their frontiers but to reach out beyond them, taking steps to ensure access to markets, materials, and transportation routes; to protect their citizens far from home, defend their foreign friends and allies, and promulgate their values; and, in general, to have what they consider to be their legitimate say in the affairs of their region and of the wider world. This correlation between growing power and expanding interests has been succinctly summarized by Robert Gilpin: "A more wealthy and more powerful state . . . will select a larger bundle of security and welfare goals than a less wealthy and less powerful state."³²

As they seek to assert themselves, rising powers are often drawn to challenge territorial boundaries, international institutional arrangements, and hierarchies of prestige that were put in place when they were relatively weak. Their leaders and people often feel that they were unfairly left out when the pie was divided up, and may even believe that, because of their prior weakness, they were robbed of what was rightfully theirs. Like Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, rising powers tend to want their "place in the sun," and this often brings them into conflict with more established great powers, which are typically the architects and principal beneficiaries of the existing international system.³³

The collision between the expanding interests of a rising power and those of its more established counterparts can be dealt with in a number of ways, but the resulting disputes are seldom resolved peacefully. Recognizing the growing threat to its position, a dominant power (or coalition of status quo powers)

31. Samuel P. Huntington, "America's Changing Strategic Interests," *Survival*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January/February 1991), p. 12.

32. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 22–23. On the links between growth and expansion, see Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

33. Regarding the connections between national growth, expanding interests, and international conflict, see Robert North and Nazli Choucri, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth and International Violence* (San Francisco, Calif.: W.H. Freeman, 1975).

may attempt to use force preventively to destroy a rising state before it can achieve its full potential. Less bellicose, established powers have also at times sought to appease emerging states, looking for ways to satisfy their demands and ambitions without conflict and to engage them and incorporate them peacefully into an existing international order. However sincere and well intentioned these efforts may be, they have usually failed. Sometimes the reason is clearly the character of the demands of the rising state. As was true of Adolf Hitler's Germany, for example, a rising power may have ambitions that are so extensive as to be impossible for the status quo powers to satisfy without effectively committing suicide. Even when the demands being made of them are less extensive, the status quo powers may be too reluctant to make reasonable concessions, thereby fueling the frustrations and resentments of the rising power, or too eager to do so, feeding its ambitions and leading to escalating demands. Successful policies of engagement/appeasement are certainly possible in theory, but in practice they have proven to be difficult to implement.³⁴

Looking at the raw facts of its expanding economy and growing military capabilities, most realist pessimists would be content to conclude that China is a rising power and that, as such, it is unlikely to behave differently than have others of its type throughout history. Thus Huntington, after describing the correlation in past cases between rapid internal growth and external expansion, predicts that China too will "undoubtedly be moving into such a phase in the coming decades."³⁵ Similarly, according to John Mearsheimer, so long as China's power continues to grow, "China, like all previous potential hegemons, [will] be strongly inclined to become a real hegemon."³⁶

Some analysts go a step further, arguing that China is especially likely to behave assertively, even at the risk of coming into conflict with others. Recent Chinese history, the "century of humiliation" that began with the Opium Wars of the 1840s and ended only with the final expulsion of foreign powers from the mainland after World War II, appears to have left China's leaders and its people acutely sensitive to perceived slights to national honor and prestige

34. For an overview of the various alternative strategies states have used to deal with rising powers, see Randall L. Schweller "Managing the Rise of Great Powers: Theory and History," in Johnston and Ross, *Engaging China*, pp. 7–17. For an analysis of the unhappy history of past efforts to incorporate rising powers peacefully into existing international systems, see Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000), pp. 197–229.

35. Huntington, "America's Changing Strategic Interests," p. 12.

36. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 400.

and especially alert to threats around their periphery.³⁷ As a result of the painful experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contemporary Chinese strategists may be even more eager than they might otherwise be to establish a sphere of influence or zone of control that would prevent such threats from reemerging in the future.³⁸

Reaching even further back into the past, other observers point to the fact that, before its decline and domination by outside powers, China was for many centuries the preponderant force in Asia and the hub of a Sinocentric Asian international system. As they adapt to the reality of their growing power and look for models to guide their behavior under increasingly favorable conditions, the leadership in Beijing could hearken back to this earlier era of glory and seek to reestablish China as East Asia's preponderant power.³⁹

Some U.S. government agencies have concluded that China's current leaders aim to "maximize [China's] influence within East Asia relative to the U.S." or, more bluntly, to become "the preeminent power in Asia."⁴⁰ If this is true, and assuming that the United States continues to adhere to its century-old policy of

37. See Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 43–53.

38. For an analysis that stresses the connections between the past two hundred years of "national decline" and China's likely goals in "a renewed period of international strength and power," see Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), especially pp. 51–81, at p. 53. Although they reach different conclusions about the likely implications for China's external behavior, Sinologists Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross also place considerable emphasis on China's comparatively recent experiences of vulnerability and weakness. See Nathan and Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 19–34.

39. One observer goes so far as to suggest that, at the time of the Qing dynasty, a tendency toward authoritarianism and imperialism "entered China's cultural DNA and continued to replicate itself down through the centuries and the dynasties." Steven W. Mosher, *Hegemon: China's Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (San Francisco, Calif.: Encounter Books, 2000), p. 26. In this view, China is essentially "hardwired" by its history and culture to seek domination. For a more measured attempt to draw links between China's distant past and its possible future behavior, see Swaine and Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, especially pp. 1–95. See also Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: And What It Means for the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2004). Regarding the possible reemergence of a Sinocentric system in Asia, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 218–238; and David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and Stability in Asian International Relations," in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 163–190.

40. These statements are taken, respectively, from Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, "The Worldwide Threat in 2003: Evolving Dangers in a Complex World," February 11, 2003, http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/2003/dci_speech_02112003.html; and *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, p. 10.

opposing the dominance of either half of Eurasia by a hostile power or coalition, the stage will be set for an intense and possibly protracted strategic competition between the two Pacific giants.⁴¹

THE SECURITY DILEMMA: INTENSE

Even if one does not accept the view that the PRC's goal is to displace the United States as East Asia's preponderant power, it is still possible to reach fairly pessimistic conclusions about the likely future character of the U.S.-China relationship by invoking the mechanism of the security dilemma.⁴² In other words, even if the larger political goals of both sides are, in some sense, purely defensive, the measures that each takes to secure its position and achieve its objectives may still arouse alarm and stimulate countermeasures on the other side. Such processes appear to be at work in several aspects of contemporary U.S.-China relations.

As regards Taiwan, China's goal may be only to prevent that island from sliding toward independence. The PRC's leaders may be perfectly willing to live with the status quo indefinitely, but they may believe that they have to issue periodic threats to prevent Taiwan from breaking free. The U.S. objective may be only to prevent forceful reunification. But China's threats and ongoing military buildup may increase fears that Beijing will eventually feel capable of achieving its objectives through the use of force. To maintain deterrence, Washington may then feel compelled to increase military assistance to Taipei and to take other measures designed to make it appear more likely that the United States would intervene if Taiwan were attacked. But these steps will almost certainly make the PRC more fearful of a Taiwanese bolt for independence, which will cause Beijing to further intensify its military efforts and heighten its rhetoric, and so on.⁴³

41. For a restatement of the view that "America's geopolitical objective must remain to prevent Asia's domination by any single power or its coalescence into an unfriendly bloc," see Henry A. Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Towards a Diplomacy for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), pp. 110–163, at p. 112.

42. The distinction here is between so-called offensive realists, who believe that states necessarily aim to enhance their power to the greatest extent possible, and "defensive realists," who believe that most states seek security. See Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–174; and Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 58–113. For an insightful application to the East Asian context, see Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 49–80.

China's aim in deploying large numbers of theater ballistic missiles may be primarily to deter Taiwan from declaring independence. But those deployments inevitably appear threatening not only to Taiwan but also to Japan, the United States, and others in the region. Conversely, the U.S. aim in moving toward deployment of some kind of theater missile defense (TMD) system may be to provide a measure of protection to U.S. friends and allies and to its bases and forces in the Western Pacific. But the possibility of such a deployment is obviously deeply threatening to the Chinese, who see it as undermining their ability to prevent unfavorable regional developments, especially if a U.S.-orchestrated TMD system is extended to include Taiwan. Beijing's concerns about TMD will be further heightened by the deployment of a U.S. national missile defense system, which the Chinese could see as reducing their ability to deter an attack on their own territory. The Chinese response to these developments is likely to include steps to augment both their theater- and intercontinental-range strike forces, which will tend to heighten U.S. anxieties about their intentions.⁴⁴

U.S. government officials see regional alliances as defensive bulwarks of stability and bend over backward to disclaim any intention of encircling or containing China. Not surprisingly, however, Chinese strategists tend to see U.S. behavior in a less benign light. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been busy trying to strengthen and solidify its ties to its traditional regional allies (including Japan, South Korea, and Australia) in large part out of concern over the growth of Chinese power. Especially since the latter part of the 1990s, the United States has also been working to expand its network of alliances and quasi alliances in Southeast, South, and Central Asia. The September 11 terrorist attacks have only intensified this trend. Whatever U.S. spokespeople may say, Chinese observers are likely to view much of this activ-

43. On this issue, see, for example, Denny Roy, "Tensions in the Taiwan Strait," *Survival*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 76–96; June Teufel Dreyer, "Flashpoint: The Taiwan Strait," *Orbis*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Autumn 2000), pp. 615–629; and Andrew J. Nathan, "What's Wrong with American Taiwan Policy," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 93–106.

44. See, for example, Michael McDevitt, "Beijing's Bind," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Summer 2000), pp. 177–186; Evan S. Medeiros, rapporteur, "Ballistic Missile Defense and Northeast Asian Security: Views from Washington, Beijing, and Tokyo," report of the Stanley Foundation and the Center for Nonproliferation Studies (Monterey, Calif.: Monterey Institute of International Studies, April 2001); Kenneth W. Allen et al., "Theater Missile Defense in the Asia-Pacific Region," Working Group Report No. 34 (Washington, D.C.: Henry L. Stimson Center, June 2000). On the links between the TMD and Taiwan issues, see Thomas J. Christensen, "Theater Missile Defense and Taiwan's Security," *Orbis*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 79–90.

ity as directed at China and as hostile to its interests. Should China seek to oppose U.S. actions, however, by criticizing the persistence of American alliances, or by attempting to bolster its own relationship with Russia or with the Central Asian republics, its actions will be seen by many in the United States as evidence of hostile, expansionist tendencies.⁴⁵

Realist Optimists

Although most realists are pessimists, it is nevertheless possible to arrive at fairly optimistic conclusions about the future of U.S.-China relations on what are essentially realist grounds (i.e., having to do primarily with the distribution of material power and without invoking the Kantian trinity of trade, institutions, and democracy). As discussed earlier, most realist pessimists see China's power growing and its aims expanding. Even those who do not believe that the emergence of a rising power must lead inevitably to conflict worry about the pernicious workings of the security dilemma. Still, some realists maintain that China's power is not increasing as rapidly as is often claimed and that its ambitions are, and are likely to remain, modest, even conservative. As to the security dilemma, optimistic realists argue that there may be a variety of other factors at work that will mitigate its effects and help keep relations between Washington and Beijing from spiraling out of control.

CHINA'S POWER: LIMITED, AND LIKELY TO REMAIN SO

All realists would agree that the balance of power between the United States and China will be critical in determining the character of their unfolding relationship. Most would also acknowledge that, at the moment, the United States is vastly more powerful than China, but that, at least in some respects, over the last several decades the PRC's power has been increasing relative to that of the United States. Where disagreements arise is over the slopes of the two power curves.

Optimistic realists believe both that China is weaker today than it is sometimes made to appear and that the growth of its power over the next several

45. Regarding Chinese concerns over U.S. alliances and, in particular, its alliance with Japan, see Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia." See also David Shambaugh, "China's Military Views the World: Ambivalent Security," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Winter 1999/2000), pp. 52-79, especially pp. 65-67. Chinese assessments of U.S. actions in Asia since September 11 are discussed in Aaron L. Friedberg, "11 September and the Future of Sino-American Relations," *Survival*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2002), pp. 33-50.

decades is likely to be a good deal slower than the pessimists assume.⁴⁶ Both in the economic and military domains, there are substantial obstacles to be overcome if recent rates of growth are to be sustained. In fact, there is a significant probability that China's power will not continue to grow at anything resembling the pace of the past two decades. The process of economic expansion, in particular, may well be disrupted by domestic social and political turbulence. Moreover, even in the absence of major upheavals, growth could be significantly slowed by difficulties in creating efficient, equitable, and open legal and financial institutions.⁴⁷ Substantially slower or more uneven economic growth will make it more difficult for Beijing to fund a sustained expansion in military capabilities. Noneconomic factors, such as shortcomings in organization, education, training, and doctrinal development, may also impede China's emergence as a first-class military power.⁴⁸

Far from drawing closer to the United States in most measures of national power (to say nothing of surpassing it), China will most likely continue to lag and may fall even further behind. The likelihood that Beijing will want (or be able) to mount a serious challenge to the United States is therefore small. To the contrary, assuming that they are rational, China's leaders will try to lie low and to avoid tension or confrontations with the United States, more or less as they are doing today. China's continuing weakness, in short, will help to keep the peace.⁴⁹

Some realist optimists argue that the United States is now so overwhelmingly powerful that its position is essentially unassailable. For the first time in

46. For the argument that China's power and importance have been greatly overstated, see Gerald Segal, "Does China Matter?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 5 (September/October 1999), pp. 24–36.

47. For a useful survey of China's economic challenges, see Nicholas R. Lardy, *China's Unfinished Economic Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1998). Some observers believe that the pace of China's recent economic growth has been considerably overstated. See Thomas G. Rawski, "China by the Numbers: How Reform Has Affected China's Economic Statistics," *China Perspectives*, No. 33 (January–February 2001), pp. 25–34. Making the case that China's growth continues to be robust is Nicholas R. Lardy, "China's Economy after the WTO," paper presented to the Thirty-first Sino-American Conference on Contemporary China, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, June 2–4, 2002. For the argument that China is on the brink of collapse, see Gordon G. Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).

48. On China's present and likely future military shortcomings, see, for example, Solomon Karmel, *China and the People's Liberation Army: Great Power or Struggling Developing State?* (London: St. Martin's, 2000); Michael G. Gallagher, "China's Illusory Threat to the South China Sea," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 169–194; Bates Gill and Michael O'Hanlon, "China's Hollow Military," *National Interest*, No. 56 (Summer 1999), pp. 55–62; and Michael O'Hanlon, "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 51–86.

49. For a statement of many of the arguments laid out above, see Michael R. Chambers, "Rising

modern history, the structure of the international system is truly unipolar. As a result, many traditional assumptions and expectations regarding the conduct of international politics no longer apply. Neither China, nor any other potential rising power, nor any plausible combination of potential opposing nations has sufficient resources to match those of the United States. Instead of balancing against American power, most other states will seek to jump on the U.S. bandwagon, or at least to stay well out of its way. Moreover, the very size of the power gap separating the United States from the rest of the world is so large as to diminish the prospects for misperception or miscalculation. Fine-grained calculations of relative capabilities will not be necessary to determine the likely outcome of any direct confrontation with the United States. This fact should help to reduce the likelihood that China's leaders or those of any other country will be able to convince themselves that they stand to gain by challenging U.S. interests.⁵⁰

CHINA'S AIMS: LIMITED

Realist pessimists tend to infer intentions from capabilities, and they generally assume the existence of certain universally applicable principles of international behavior: China is a rising power; rising powers tend to have expanding interests and to be prone to assertive or aggressive behavior; and therefore China will very likely behave in similar fashion.

Not all realists are willing to follow this chain of reasoning to its conclusion, however. Even those who accept that China's power is growing, and who believe that rising powers tend to be dissatisfied, do not necessarily believe that China will behave in an especially assertive or aggressive fashion. This may not simply be a function of China's capabilities but a reflection of its underlying intentions. As Randall Schweller notes, rising powers can differ in the extent of their dissatisfaction with the status quo, and hence in the scope of their ambitions. Some rising powers have truly revolutionary objectives; they seek, in other words, to overthrow an entire system of international rules and institutions. But others may have more modest, limited aims; they may be revision-

China: A Threat to Its Neighbors?" in Carolyn W. Pumphrey, ed., *The Rise of China in Asia: Security Implications* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), pp. 65–91. See also Patrick E. Tyler, "Who's Afraid of China?" *New York Times Magazine*, August 1, 1999, pp. 46–49.

50. See William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (July/August 2002), pp. 20–33.

ists rather than revolutionaries, states that seek marginal adjustments to the status quo rather than fundamental change.⁵¹

In contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, China today does not appear to be a revolutionary power in any sense of the term. It has abandoned its earlier goal of spreading communism throughout Asia and, indeed, is no longer itself an adherent to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology. The concrete changes to the status quo that China's leaders seek are, arguably, comparatively limited: the reintegration of Taiwan with the mainland, rectification of some disputed borders, and the acceptance by the international community of its claims to portions of the South China Sea. If these issues can be peacefully resolved, China could well enter the ranks of the satisfied states.⁵² Chinese spokespeople assert (and many American China-watchers agree) that China has no modern history of extensive territorial conquest and, with the few exceptions already noted, no visible desire to expand. China may not yet be a status quo power, but it is a cautious power with limited aims, a "conservative power," in the words of one leading American China expert.⁵³ Putting aside the question of the rate at which its capabilities are growing, China's ambitions are such that the prospects for conflict with the United States should be limited.

THE SECURITY DILEMMA: MUTED

Even those observers who accept the realist optimists' judgments about China's true power and capabilities might still be concerned about the workings of the security dilemma. Whatever the objective realities, mutual fear and suspicion can still fuel arms races and trigger downward spirals. Realist optimists respond to this concern by pointing to the existence of several counter-

51. In addition, Schweller points out that rising powers may vary in their propensity to take risks, with some risk acceptant and others highly risk averse. See the discussion in Randall L. Schweller, "Managing the Rise of Great Powers: Theory and History," in Johnston and Ross, *Engaging China*, pp. 18–22.

52. For the argument that China is neither a fully satisfied power nor a revolutionary threat to the status quo, see Nathan and Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress*. See also Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 5–56. Other recent assessments that describe China's strategic aims as limited include Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005); and David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/05), pp. 64–99.

53. Robert S. Ross, "Beijing as a Conservative Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (March/April 1997), pp. 33–44. In 2004 China's leaders introduced (but later abandoned) a slogan meant to convey a reassuring message about its intentions. See Robert L. Suettinger, "The Rise and Descent of 'Peaceful Rise,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 12 (Fall 2004), <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20044/rs.html>.

vailing mechanisms that they believe will tend to reduce the danger of misperception and conflict.

First, some realist optimists argue that the structure of the emerging post-Cold War East Asian system is essentially bipolar. The Soviet Union's collapse and Japan's prolonged economic stagnation have left the United States and the PRC as the two leading regional powers. Assuming that the United States remains engaged and that China's power continues to grow at least to some degree, the basic trend toward bipolarity should become even more pronounced over the next several decades. Following the logic developed by Kenneth Waltz, and drawing on the experience of the Cold War, realist optimists believe that a bipolar Asia is likely to be tense but basically stable. Under conditions of bipolarity, the two preeminent powers will eye each other with mistrust. In part because they focus so intently on each other, however, they are less likely to make misjudgments about their respective capabilities and intentions. The huge gap between the two poles and other states in the system also reduces the possibility of sudden shifts in the balance of power resulting from changes in the allegiance of third parties.⁵⁴

As during the Cold War, the mutual possession of nuclear weapons by the two polar powers should serve as an additional source of constraint on their behavior. This factor is stressed, for example, by Avery Goldstein who argues that it provides "the strongest reasons to expect that the dangers associated with China's arrival as a full-fledged great power will be limited." Goldstein suggests that, as participants in what Robert Jervis has called the "nuclear revolution," the United States and China have already entered into an "easily established [relationship] of mutual deterrence that provide[s] not only a robust buffer against general war, but also a strong constraint on both limited war and crisis behavior."⁵⁵

Finally, realist optimists such as Robert Ross and Michael McDevitt believe that geography will greatly enhance the stability of the emerging U.S.-China

54. For the general argument that bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar systems, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 161–193. On the supposed emergence of bipolarity in Asia, see Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 81–118. Because it focuses only on East Asia, this view does not take into account the possible role of India.

55. Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 1997/98), p. 70. For general arguments regarding the presumed stabilizing effects of nuclear weapons, see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

relationship. The United States, in this view, is a maritime power. Its interests and sphere of influence are, and likely will remain, centered offshore in North-east and maritime Southeast Asia. China, by contrast, is and has historically been primarily a land power. Its “natural” sphere of influence will include Central Asia and continental Southeast Asia. Ross maintains that these spheres of influence do not overlap, with the possible exceptions of the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and the Spratly Islands. Provided that the issues relating to these three areas can be properly managed, there should be little reason or occasion for the United States and China to come into direct conflict. These circumstances stand in marked contrast to those that prevailed during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union had overlapping, physically contiguous spheres of influence in Central Europe, a situation that produced much tension and considerable danger, especially during the initial stages of the superpower competition.⁵⁶

Liberal Pessimists

Just as there can be optimistic realists, so also it is possible to be pessimistic on what are essentially liberal grounds—that is, with reference primarily to the internal structures and domestic political dynamics of the United States and China—and to the interactions between them that may arise as a result of their very different regimes.⁵⁷

CHINA: AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IN TRANSITION?

Whatever it may eventually become, most observers would agree that China today is neither a totalitarian state nor a democracy, but rather an authoritarian regime of dubious legitimacy with an uncertain grip on power. Its leaders are the inheritors of an ideology that has lost most of its appeal and, far from being able to rely on the freely given support of their people, they are heavily dependent on the military and domestic security services for the preservation

56. On the impact of geography, see Ross, “The Geography of the Peace”; and Michael McDevitt, “Roundtable: Net Assessment—Objective Conditions versus the U.S. Strategic Tradition,” in Paul D. Taylor, ed., *Asia and the Pacific: U.S. Strategic Traditions and Regional Realities* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2001), pp. 101–105.

57. For a similarly broad use of the term “liberal,” see Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 513–553.

of domestic order. The Beijing government now bases its claim to rule less on communist principles than on the promise of continued increases in prosperity (and the avoidance of social chaos), combined with appeals to nationalism. This is a dangerous and unstable mixture. If economic progress falters, the present government will have little choice but to lean even more heavily on nationalist appeals as its sole remaining source of support. It may also be inclined to resort to assertive external policies as a way of rallying the Chinese people and turning their energies and frustrations outward, most likely toward Taiwan or Japan or the United States, rather than inward, toward Beijing. Indeed, many analysts believe that China's rulers have already shown an increased inclination to behave in this way over the course of the past decade.⁵⁸

These tendencies toward hypernationalist rhetoric and action may actually be made worse by movement toward a more open and competitive political system. Based on a statistical analysis of historical cases, Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder have concluded that it is precisely when nations are in transition from authoritarianism toward democracy that they are most likely to initiate conflict with their neighbors. Both stable autocracies and stable democracies are generally less war-prone.⁵⁹ The reasons for this pattern appear to lie in the internal processes of societies in which the pressures for political participation are increasing, but in which effective democratic institutions have yet to emerge. Elites in such societies often use militant nationalist appeals in an attempt to mobilize and channel mass support without surrendering their grip on power. In Snyder's words, the resort to nationalism has often been accompanied by militarism and by "the scapegoating of enemies of the nation at home and abroad."⁶⁰ If past patterns hold, and if China is indeed in the early

58. On the role of nationalism in shaping Chinese foreign policy, see Allen S. Whiting, "Chinese Nationalism and Foreign Policy after Deng," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 142 (June 1995), pp. 295–316; David Shambaugh, "Containment or Engagement of China? Calculating Beijing's Responses," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 180–209; Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, "Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 114–146; and Suisheng Zhao, "We Are Patriots First and Democrats Second: The Rise of Chinese Nationalism in the 1990s," in Friedman and McCormick, *What If China Doesn't Democratize?* pp. 21–48.

59. See Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 5–38; and Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength, and War," *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 297–337. For the most recent and comprehensive version of Mansfield and Snyder's argument, see Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

stages of democratization, the road ahead may well be bumpy. Ironically, the prospects for a worsening in U.S.-China relations may actually be greater than they would be if China were to remain a stable autocracy.

Suppose that China does come to more closely resemble a fully functioning democracy, with elections, competing political parties, and an open press. Will this lead to a transformation in relations between it and the United States? Liberal pessimists might agree that, in the long run, this will probably be the case. But they would also point out that even a much more democratic China may still be prone to behave in ways that could bring it into conflict with the United States. Democracies are not always placid or peaceful, especially in the early stages of their political development. Some observers have suggested that, at least for a time, a democratic government in Beijing could well be more nationalistic and assertive than the present regime. According to one scholar, such a regime “free from the debilitating concerns for its own survival but likely driven by popular emotions, could make the rising Chinese power a much more assertive, impatient, belligerent, even aggressive force, at least during the unstable period of fast ascendance to the ranks of a world-class power.”⁶¹

THE UNITED STATES: A CRUSADING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY?

Changes in Chinese political institutions may increase the likelihood that China will collide with the United States. If China does not change, however, certain persistent features of America’s domestic regime appear likely to incline the United States toward conflict with the PRC. This conclusion follows first of all from the obverse of the “democratic peace” argument. Democracies may be less likely to come into conflict with other democracies, but they have historically been more prone to be suspicious of, and hostile toward, what they perceive to be nondemocratic regimes. As Michael Doyle has pointed out, “The very constitutional restraint, shared commercial interests, and international respect for individual rights that promote peace among liberal societies

60. Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), p. 158.

61. Fei-Ling Wang, “Self-Image and Strategic Intentions: National Confidence and Political Insecurity,” in Yong Deng and Wang, eds., *In the Eyes of the Dragon: China Views the World* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), p. 35. For the contrary argument, see Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “The Prospects of Political Liberalization in China,” paper presented at a seminar of the Project for the New American Century, Washington, D.C., October 8, 1999. See also the provocative analysis in Bruce Gilley, *China’s Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 227–241.

can exacerbate conflicts in relations between liberal and nonliberal societies." Relations between liberal and nonliberal states are always conducted in an "atmosphere of suspicion" in part because of "the perception by liberal states that nonliberal states are in a permanent state of aggression against their own people."⁶²

Whatever it may ultimately become, China is not now a liberal democracy. It should therefore come as no surprise that many Americans regard it with suspicion and a measure of hostility. Seen in this light, disputes between the United States and China over human rights (for example) are not just a minor irritant in the relationship. They are instead symptomatic of a deeper difficulty that cannot easily be smoothed over. From the U.S. perspective, human rights violations are not only intrinsically wrong; they are also a sure sign that a regime is evil and illegitimate, and therefore cannot be trusted. The possibility of a stable relationship with such a regime is remote, at best.

If the United States is more likely to be hostile toward China because it is not a democracy, it is also more inclined to assist polities that it perceives to be democratic if they are threatened by China, even if this is not what a pure realpolitik calculation of its interests might seem to demand. Thus it was one thing for Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon to distance the United States from Taiwan when it was widely perceived by Americans to have a corrupt, authoritarian government. It will be considerably more difficult for future U.S. leaders to do so to the extent that the American people come to regard Taiwan as a functioning fellow democracy—even if U.S. support for Taiwan risks a worsening in relations with the PRC and perhaps even if it threatens to lead to war. For better or worse, the United States is a profoundly ideological country, and its foreign policy has always been shaped by its ideals, even when those might appear to conflict with its material interests.⁶³

62. Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 1983), pp. 325–326.

63. The influence of ideology on U.S. foreign policy is well analyzed in two recent surveys. See Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); and Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001). Regarding shifting U.S. perceptions of Taiwan and their impact on U.S. policy, see Mann, *About Face*, pp. 315–338. For a recent Chinese assessment of the alleged messianic and aggressive tendencies in U.S. foreign policy, see Lanxin Xiang, "Washington's Misguided China Policy," *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 7–23.

INTERACTIVE EFFECTS

Liberal pessimists worry that the disparate character of the U.S. and Chinese regimes could produce a vicious cycle of mutually reinforcing suspicions and fears. As has already been suggested, many Americans regard China as a repressive, authoritarian country. Actions that the present Chinese regime has taken in the past and may take in the future to retain its grip on power—such as cracking down on dissidents, persecuting religious groups, restricting access to the internet, or issuing blood-curdling threats against Taiwan—are merely going to bolster this view. For its part, no matter what the U.S. government says, the present Chinese leadership is likely to remain convinced that the ultimate goal of the American policy of “engagement” is to undermine their legitimacy and to overthrow them through a process of “peaceful evolution.”⁶⁴ Actions that the U.S. government (or simply the Congress or even private American citizens) have taken and are likely to take to express disapproval of Chinese behavior—such as criticizing Beijing on human rights, funding Radio Free Asia, issuing statements of support for Taiwan, or displaying sympathy for the Dalai Lama—will inevitably confirm some Chinese leaders’ darkest view of U.S. intentions. Ideological differences, and ideologically rooted animosities, may thus tend to reinforce the dynamics of mutual insecurity at work in the U.S.-China relationship in ways that an exclusively realist analysis would tend to downplay or ignore.

Even though the domestic structures of the Chinese and U.S. regimes are obviously profoundly different, their internal workings may be similar in certain respects. Some liberal pessimists would argue that, just as there are groups in China whose narrow political or bureaucratic interests may be served by a competitive relationship with the United States, so also there may be groups in the United States whose members believe they will gain from U.S.-China tension. Such groups will naturally be inclined to favor more confrontational policies, and they will point to each other’s utterances as evidence of the need for such policies. In short, there may exist a tacit, mutually reinforcing alliance of “hawks” that will make it much harder to achieve better, more stable relations. Assessments that overlook the existence of such factors will overstate the prospects for harmony between the United States and the PRC.⁶⁵

64. Regarding Chinese suspicion of engagement, see Shambaugh, “Containment or Engagement of China?” pp. 206–207; and Wu Xinbo, “China: Security Practice of a Modernizing and Ascending Power,” in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 132–133.

65. Although his conclusions are not entirely pessimistic, David Lampton describes how domestic

Constructivist Optimists

Constructivists believe that international relationships (like all political relations) are “socially constructed.” The nature of the interactions between two states is not simply the product of objective, material factors, such as the balance of trade or the balance of military power or the structure of domestic institutions. Interstate relations are also shaped to a considerable degree by subjective factors, by the beliefs and ideas that people carry around in their heads and that cause them to interpret events and data in particular ways. The most important of these can be grouped into three categories: “identities” (i.e., the collective self-perceptions of political actors and their shared perceptions of others); “strategic cultures” (i.e., sets of beliefs about the fundamental character of international politics and about the best ways of coping with it, especially as regards the utility of force and the prospects for cooperation); and “norms” (i.e., beliefs not only about what is efficacious but also about what is right or appropriate in the international realm).⁶⁶

Identities, strategic cultures, and norms are strongly shaped by the prevailing interpretations of a society’s shared historical experiences. They are transmitted across generational lines by processes of education and acculturation and, though not cast in stone, they do tend to be highly resistant to change. The primary mechanism by which widely held beliefs evolve and are sometimes transformed is through interaction with others. Such interactions convey new information and ideas that can help to displace prevailing conceptions.⁶⁷

Because their theoretical perspective causes them to be attentive to the po-

political processes in both the United States and China can make it extremely difficult for them to improve their bilateral relationship. Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams*, pp. 279–309. A number of analysts have emphasized the role of “domestic political incentives for hard-line policies in both countries” in explaining specific incidents, such as the 1995–96 downturn in Sino-American relations. See, for example, Phillip C. Saunders, “China’s America Watchers: Changing Attitudes towards the United States,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 161 (March 2000), p. 59.

66. For statements of the constructivist approach to the study of international relations, see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (April 1992), pp. 391–425; Alexander Wendt, “Constructing International Politics,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 71–81; and Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security,” in Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 33–75.

67. See Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 384–396.

tential malleability of social relationships, constructivists tend to be optimists. If international politics is truly governed by scientific laws rooted in material reality, like the laws of physics, then what people believe about how the world works will matter only to the extent that it conforms to or deviates from reality. A man who chooses to step off the roof of a tall building because he prefers not to believe in the force of gravity will nevertheless fall quickly to the ground. Similarly, in the view of the pessimistic realists, the leader of a dominant state who does not believe that his country's position will be challenged by a rising power (or who believes that such a power can be dissuaded from pursuing its ambitions by gentle diplomacy) is destined to be disappointed. But if relations between nations are shaped above all by beliefs, rather than objective material factors, there is always the possibility that people can change the world by changing how they think. At the most general level, constructivists assert that international politics tends to be competitive and violent, not because some immutable principles of human behavior require that it be so but rather because, across the centuries, national leaders have tended to believe this to be the case. By acting in accordance with their pessimistic expectations, leaders have helped to make them come true. As Alexander Wendt puts it, "Realism is a self-fulfilling prophecy."⁶⁸ Provided that it was widely shared among the world's most powerful nations, a more optimistic assessment of the prospects for, and benefits of, international cooperation could achieve similar status.

As regards the U.S.-China relationship, optimistic constructivists generally emphasize the possibility that China's increasing participation in international institutions of various kinds will lead to shifts in its strategic culture, in the norms of international behavior accepted by its leaders, and ultimately in their conceptions of national identity. In contrast to liberal optimists, who stress the role of institutions in altering the narrow cost-benefit calculations of rational decisionmakers, constructivists believe that repeated interactions can actually change the underlying beliefs, interests, and mental categories of those who participate in them. Thus it may be true that some significant fraction of China's rulers are still in the grips of old-fashioned ideas about the zero-sum character of international relations and about the potential utility of deception, surprise, and force in resolving interstate disputes. These ideas may appear to be deeply rooted in traditional Chinese statecraft, as passed down in ancient

68. Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It," p. 410.

texts, taught in military academies, and absorbed through the skin, as it were, by anyone raised in Chinese culture. But what Iain Johnston has referred to as the “parabellum paradigm” can be softened over time by repeated contacts between Chinese statesmen, scholars, and soldiers and their less fatalistic foreign counterparts.⁶⁹ Optimistic constructivists believe that it was exactly these types of interactions between Soviet and Western scientists and arms control experts that helped to alter the course of Soviet foreign policy in the 1980s and to bring the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion.⁷⁰ A similar process of externally induced intellectual evolution is certainly possible in China and indeed, in the view of some optimists, it may already be well under way.

At the same time as China’s strategic culture is shifting, its leaders may be moving toward a much broader embrace of what are essentially liberal norms and expectations regarding international behavior. Again, the mechanism at work here is not merely a calculation of material benefits but a process of socialization that reflects China’s profound desire to be accepted as a modern, advanced country and a citizen in good standing of the world community. According to Johnston and coauthor Paul Evans, China’s recent willingness to enter into multilateral international institutions such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty reflects the fact that its leaders are becoming “more sensitive to social incentives” and more fearful “of appearing to be the pariah.”⁷¹ Whereas only a few years ago China’s rulers would have shunned participation in international institutions in the belief that it would impose unacceptable constraints on their freedom of action, today they are increasingly ready, even eager to join up. Participation and norm change are thus mutually reinforcing mechanisms: the more deeply embedded China becomes in the web of regional and global institutions, the more the beliefs and expectations of its leaders will come to conform to the emerging universal consensus that those institutions embody.⁷²

69. This is the term that Alastair Iain Johnston uses to describe the long-standing, dominant Chinese approach to the conduct of international affairs. See Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995). Regarding the persistence of realism in China, see also Thomas J. Christensen, “Chinese Realpolitik,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (September/October 1996), pp. 37–52.

70. See, for example, Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

71. Alastair Iain Johnston and Paul Evans, “China’s Engagement with Multilateral Security Institutions,” in Johnston and Ross, *Engaging China*, p. 265.

72. For a careful assessment of what he describes as China’s gradually increasing “comfort level” with regional security institutions, see Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Myth of the ASEAN Way? Ex-

Constructivist Pessimists

Optimistic constructivists hope that repeated interactions with the outside world will cause the beliefs of China's leaders and its people to evolve in ways that are conducive to and, indeed, productive of, long-term improvements in U.S.-PRC relations. But there is no reason why this must necessarily be the case and several reasons to fear that it might not be. First, as constructivists of all types would be quick to point out, existing mental constructs and the social structures to which they give rise are deeply rooted.⁷³ Even under the best of conditions, positive change is likely to be a long time in coming; it may be the product of years, even decades of dialogue and exchange. In the meantime it may well be, as Thomas Berger claims, that "the chief source of instability in [Asia] today lies in the peculiar construction of national identity and interest on the part of the chief regional actors."⁷⁴ Scholars have noted the intensity and persistence of the hostile images that Chinese and Korean observers have of Japan.⁷⁵ The mutual perceptions of Americans and Chinese are not nearly so problematic, at least at present. As has already been noted, however, there is a significant measure of suspicion on both sides. Pending some truly dramatic shift in the character of the Chinese regime, many Americans are likely to continue to regard it as illegitimate and potentially dangerous and to see themselves as the defenders of freedom in Asia. Unless the United States draws back from its present position of preponderance in the region or simply changes its policies on Taiwan, many Chinese are likely to continue to regard it

plaining the Evolution of the ASEAN Regional Forum," in Helga Haftendorn, Robert O. Keohane, and Celeste A. Wallander, eds., *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 287–324. For a general argument about the role of institutions and dialogue in promoting the evolution of "security practices" throughout Asia, see Muthiah Alagappa, "Asian Practice of Security: Key Features and Explanations," in Alagappa, *Asian Security Practice*, pp. 611–676.

73. Indeed, as Wendt notes, "Sometimes social structures so constrain action that transformative strategies are impossible." Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," p. 80.

74. Thomas Berger, "Set for Stability? Prospects for Conflict and Cooperation in East Asia," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (July 2000), p. 420.

75. See, for example, Allen S. Whiting, *China Eyes Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Robert Manning, "Burdens of the Past, Dilemmas of the Future: Sino-Japanese Relations in the Emerging International System," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 45–58; and Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Problem of Memory," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 6 (November/December 1998), pp. 37–49. See also Gerrit Gong, ed., *Remembering and Forgetting: The Legacy of War and Peace in East Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1996).

as an intrusive bully and to see themselves as the aggrieved victims of yet another aggressive foreign power.

Repeated interaction can erode old identities and transform existing social structures, but it can also reinforce them. Indeed, as Wendt notes, the tendency of any structure of beliefs and expectations, once established, is to become “an objective social fact that reinforces certain behaviors and discourages others.” Thus, in situations characterized by intense competition and minimal trust, self-denying gestures intended to reduce tensions are prone to misinterpretation or exploitation, thereby making them less likely to be repeated. Participants in an established social system may also have a strong desire to maintain “relatively stable role identities,” in part because of the psychological need “to minimize uncertainty and anxiety.” Frequent contact with others, especially those who challenge existing identities, can lead to “perceptions of threat and these may cause resistance to transformations of the self and thus to social change.”⁷⁶

It is not difficult to imagine how such processes might be at work in the current U.S.-China relationship. Ritualized U.S. criticism of the PRC’s human rights practices probably reinforces the impression that the United States seeks to undermine the current Chinese regime. Repeated instances of what the United States regards as cheating or evasion on agreements intended to limit the proliferation of missiles and weapons of mass destruction give credence to the view that Chinese and U.S. interests on this important issue do not truly coincide. And despite all that has been claimed for them, there is no guarantee that repeated contacts between U.S. and Chinese military officers will build trust or make either side regard the other as less threatening.⁷⁷

In addition to regular, sustained, and institutionalized contact, existing beliefs can be shaped, and sometimes either transformed or strongly reinforced, by more dramatic forms of interaction. Intense, often unanticipated crises, in particular, can be defining moments that leave people on one side or the other (or both) convinced that those they are confronting are good (or bad), friends (or foes). So, for example, the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Serbia in 1999 during the Kosovo conflict may appear, in retrospect, as one such moment. Future historians may come to regard it as a critical turning

76. Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” p. 411.

77. See the discussion of U.S. suspicions in David Shambaugh, “Sino-American Strategic Relations: From Partners to Competitors,” *Survival*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 110.

Table 1. Optimists, Pessimists, and the Future of U.S.-China Relations

Theorists	Optimists	Pessimists
Liberals	Interdependence	PRC regime: Authoritarian/insecure The perils of transition U.S. regime: A crusading democracy Interactive effects
	Institutions	
	Democratization	
Realists	PRC power: limited	PRC power: rising PRC aims: expanding Security dilemma: intense
	PRC aims: constrained	
	Security dilemma: muted	
Constructivists	Identities, strategic cultures, norms: flexible and "softening" via institutional contact	Rigid and "hardening" via shocks and crises

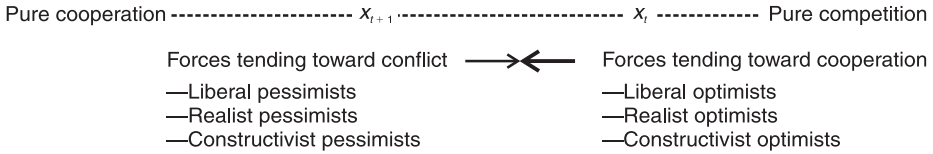
point at which a rising generation of Chinese leaders were confirmed in their realpolitik view of the world; militant, assertive forms of nationalism began to dominate Chinese political discourse; and public perceptions of the United States became harsher and less favorable.⁷⁸ Such negative shifts in attitude are not inevitable, but they are possible. A hardening of hostile images and attitudes would make it that much more difficult to steer U.S.-China relations onto a peaceful path, whatever the "objective" balance of factors and forces might be.

Synthesis

Each of the six sets of arguments reviewed here and summarized in Table 1 is at least superficially plausible; each is logical and can be bolstered with empirical evidence from contemporary U.S.-China relations or from the history of great power politics. It may be, in fact, that each of the six positions surveyed captures some aspect of reality and that most, and perhaps all, of the causal mechanisms that they describe are at work simultaneously. The real questions concern the comparative strength and combined effects of those mechanisms.

78. Similarly, the April 2001 EP-3 incident, in which the crew of a downed U.S. spy plane was detained for several days by the Chinese authorities, appears at least temporarily to have had a strong negative impact on perceptions in each country. See Craig S. Smith, "Chinese Youths Adopt a Darkening View of U.S.," *New York Times*, April 22, 2001; and "Poll Shows Americans Think Less of China after Spy Plane Incident," *CNN.com*, April 23, 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/04/23/poll.china.us/index.html>.

Figure 1. Contending Causal Forces



A simple physical metaphor can help in thinking through this issue. The contemporary U.S.-China relationship is clearly mixed, consisting of an array of cooperative and competitive elements. At any given moment, the relationship can be pictured as residing somewhere along a spectrum that extends from pure cooperation at one extreme to unrestrained competition and conflict at the other.

There are causal forces at work today that are pushing the relationship toward conflict (those identified by the pessimists) and other, countervailing forces (emphasized by the optimists) that, operating alone, would tend to promote peace. The future of the U.S.-China relationship will be determined by the collision between these two opposing sets of forces; where matters stand in ten or twenty years will depend either on the relative strength of those two causal vectors over time or on the shifting size and direction of the resultant vector that is produced by their collision. In Figure 1, by way of illustration, the forces tending toward cooperation are pictured as stronger than those that point toward competition. As a result, the relationship improves with the passage of time, moving from a state in which the competitive aspects dominate (x_t) to one in which there is a larger element of cooperation (x_{t+1}).

How might the assortment of causal mechanisms discussed earlier combine to shape the future of U.S.-China relations? There are three broad categories of answers to this question. I discuss each briefly below, concluding with the one that, for reasons I suggest later, seems the most plausible.

SIMPLE PREPONDERANCE

The first possibility is the one asserted or implied by the advocates of what might be termed “simple paradigmatic preponderance.” Such individuals (usually either liberal optimists or realist pessimists) believe that the mechanisms they have identified are so powerful as to outweigh the effects of any

other forces, whether opposing or reinforcing. Thus a true realist pessimist would argue that, assuming China's power continues to grow, the PRC will be led inevitably into conflict with the United States, regardless of whatever changes may occur in the character of its domestic regime. The mutual hostilities and suspicions that liberal and constructivist pessimists point to as contributing causes to possible conflict are, in this view, mere by-products of the shifting power relations between the United States and the PRC; they lack independent causal significance. The allegedly peace-producing mechanisms emphasized by the optimists, on the other hand, are, at best, weak reeds and more likely illusions. Optimistic realists who believe that China's ambitions will be limited (assuming, again, that the PRC's power grows), or who put their faith in the possibility that geography or technology (or arms control treaties) can mute the security dilemma, are misguided and perhaps should not even be considered realists. As in the past, the liberal panaceas of international trade and institutions will prove insufficient to keep the peace between contending great powers. The notion that dialogue between U.S. and Chinese government officials will lead to a convergence of norms, identities, and strategic cultures is laughable, if not downright dangerous. To return to Figure 1, if these assertions are correct, the vector pointing toward conflict will be far larger than the one opposing it, and it will derive most, if not all, of its strength from the causal forces identified by the realist pessimists.

A thoroughgoing liberal optimist would follow a similarly linear chain of reasoning to arrive at opposite conclusions. Thus even as China becomes wealthy and powerful, the attractive force of shared economic interests and the soothing effects of institutional integration will be sufficient to forestall any prospect of direct conflict. China's inevitable transition to democracy will effectively eliminate the possibility of a U.S.-PRC war and smooth the way for a lasting accommodation between the two great powers. All the forces that might seem to oppose this development will appear in retrospect to have been weak and, in the grand sweep of history, insignificant.

ADDITIVE EFFECTS

A second possibility is that the future will be determined by the combined effects of similarly aligned causal forces. Thus, the deepest and most fundamental cause of an emerging U.S.-China competition may well be the kind of raw power political competition emphasized by the realist pessimists. As has been suggested, however, the dynamics of power politics can be amplified by other

types of forces that fall outside the realists' ken. As some liberal pessimists suggest, the evolution of the U.S.-PRC relationship may be strongly shaped by ideological factors. Certainly if China were a liberal democracy instead of a one-party authoritarian state, it would be easier to imagine that Americans would not feel as threatened by a continuing expansion in its national power. For as long as they persist, the differences in ideology and regime type that presently separate the United States and China will make it far more difficult for the two countries' leaders to work out some kind of mutually acceptable *modus vivendi*. The reinforcement of hostile images and opposing identities that pessimistic constructivists worry about could also play a critical role in this process. If Americans or Chinese (or both) become convinced that their counterparts are implacably hostile and that conflict is therefore inevitable, they will no doubt act in ways that make it far more likely.

The factors stressed by the different brands of optimism could also act in mutually reinforcing ways. It may be the case, for example, that the processes of economic growth, institutional entanglement, and domestic liberalization on which liberal optimists pin their hopes will exert profound, albeit gradual, effects on U.S.-China relations. The softening of strategic cultures and the normative convergence that optimistic constructivists believe to be possible could also take years, if not decades, to make their impact felt. In the meantime, however, if China's power grows relatively slowly, if its ambitions stay constrained, and if the security dilemma is muted, the prospects for direct confrontation with the United States could remain limited. Absent the mechanisms identified by the realist optimists, the prospects for peace might not be very good, especially in the near term; once they are factored into the equation, the chances for an eventual stable, cooperative outcome appear much better. In this case, the vector pointing toward peace will be the product of several contributing forces, and it will be all the more potent as a result.

OFFSETTING EFFECTS

There is, finally, the strong possibility that, in addition to amplifying one another in certain respects, some of the forces catalogued above will prove to be mutually offsetting. The future of U.S.-China relations is likely to be determined, in short, by what John Lewis Gaddis calls the "fratricide" of contradic-

79. Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," p. 44.

tory tendencies as well as the “convergence” of complementary ones.⁷⁹ Indeed, it may be the case that the two opposing vectors pictured in Figure 1 are now of roughly equal strength and that they will remain so for some time to come. If so, then the fundamentally mixed character of the U.S.-China relationship will not change very much, perhaps oscillating within a fairly narrow range, with periodic shifts toward greater cooperation or increased competition, but without a clear trend in either direction. This is a plausible characterization of the course of events since 1989, and there are reasons to believe that the pattern will be sustained in the immediate future and perhaps well beyond.

In the near term, as in the recent past, the competition-inducing mechanisms identified by the pessimists will continue to exert a strong influence. The two most important factors on this side of the equation will be the rate of growth of China’s material power and the developmental trajectory of its domestic political institutions. If the PRC continues to grow wealthier and stronger without significant political liberalization, the tendencies toward competition with the United States will remain and will likely become more intense, amplified by the workings of the security dilemma, by mutual, ideologically rooted fear and suspicion, and, perhaps, by the expanding ambitions of China’s autocratic rulers. Even without a major, transformative crisis, under such circumstances hostile images of the other side could become more pervasive in both societies, and the domestic political incentives for tougher, more confrontational policies may also grow.

Fortunately, a number of the factors to which the optimists point seem likely to continue to act as a brake on what might otherwise be an unchecked slide toward mounting competition and increasingly open confrontation. Assuming that they persist and grow, the mutual gains from an expanding economic relationship will remain the single most important peace-inducing force at work in U.S.-China relations. The potential costs of a conflict between the two powers, especially given that both possess nuclear weapons, should also help to keep competitive impulses within bounds and to make both sides very wary of embarking on any course that could risk direct conflict. The emergence of a group of Chinese “new thinkers” could also contribute to a less zero-sum, hard real-politik approach to relations with the United States. As with the Soviet Union during the era of perestroika, so also in this case changes in high-level thinking could have a calming effect on bilateral relations, even if they were not accompanied immediately by more profound and far-reaching domestic political reforms.

The collision between these opposing sets of forces will produce a U.S.-China relationship that continues to be characterized by constrained, or bounded, competition. As they do today, the two countries will trade, talk, and cooperate on some issues, but they will still regard each other with profound mistrust, maneuvering for diplomatic advantage and developing their military capabilities with an eye toward a possible future confrontation. This kind of ambivalent situation will be different from those the United States has generally had to deal with over the past half century, a period during which the world tended to be divided neatly between major U.S. allies and economic partners, on the one hand, and open enemies (with whom the United States traded and talked relatively little, if at all), on the other. Mixed relations are, however, far more typical of the history of great power politics.

Could the competition-enhancing tendencies inherent in the growth of China's wealth and power eventually be overcome by the cooperation-inducing tendencies produced by the liberalization of its domestic political system? This is a possibility, but it is by no means a certainty. If the realist pessimist purists are right, the policies pursued by a rising, democratic China will not differ greatly from those of a rising, authoritarian state. Even if this turns out not to be the case in the long run, there may well be an uncomfortable interval during which (as the liberal pessimists predict) a more open Chinese political system gives rise to more nationalistic and assertive foreign policies. In short, relations between Washington and Beijing may worsen before they improve. Navigating the dangers of a transitional period in China could well be among the greatest geopolitical challenges facing the United States in the years ahead.

The physical image of roughly balanced opposing forces suggests a degree of tension and potential instability. In such circumstances a change on one side or the other can yield dramatic, discontinuous shifts. Such possibilities exist in the political world as well. With reference once again to the end of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, it is possible to imagine that a sudden breakthrough toward domestic political reform in China could open the way for radically improved relations with the United States. At the same time, however, it is conceivable that an unanticipated or mismanaged crisis (over Taiwan, for example, or North Korea, or in South Asia) could lead to the opposite result. If the United States and China were somehow to lurch from constrained competition to direct confrontation, their relationship would be transformed overnight. Trade and diplomacy would be disrupted; hostile images would harden; domestic

political reform in China might be derailed; and the prospect of a genuine entente between the two Pacific powers could be put off for a generation or even more.

Here again the history of the Anglo-German relationship comes to mind. At the turn of the twentieth century, many observers in both Britain and Germany predicted that the two powers would be drawn together ineluctably by their growing economic links and societal connections, by a recognition of the underlying compatibility of their strategic interests, and by the eventual convergence of their domestic political systems. Such hopes were eventually borne out, of course, but only after the passage of another half century and two horrific wars. There is every reason to hope that U.S.-China relations will follow a smoother and more peaceful course. But neither history nor theory can provide any assurances that it will be so.