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Prospects for Peace: The View from Beijing

Jacqueline N. Deal

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One hundred years ago, on the eve of our entry into World War I, Americans faced a troubling set of developments at home and abroad that bear an eerie resemblance to today's challenges. While 21st-century "home-grown" terrorists are associated with the Muslim faith, at the dawn of the 20th century anarchists and leftists of European and, particularly, Jewish descent were committing acts of violence against innocent civilians on US soil. This period was the last time immigrants made up such a large proportion of the US population, and the country was riven not only by domestic unrest, but also by disagreement over whether to intervene in conflict on the other side of the ocean. Woodrow Wilson prevailed in the 1916 election on the platform, "He kept us out of war," but ultimately, even the most cosmopolitan occupant of the Oval Office before President Obama could not avoid sending American troops to defend US allies and interests overseas.

Then, as today, it was tempting to view the use of force through the prism of what it would mean for progressive American ideals. Opponents of intervening in World War I argued it would unleash nationalist, industrialist, profiteering tendencies at home, and thus the wise course was to refrain. Humanity would eventually converge on peace. Confronted with imperial Germany's ambition to conquer Europe, President Wilson had to disabuse his own supporters of the notion that international comity was on the march. And though Wilson propounded "peace without victory," Americans would have to give their lives to oppose German expansionism, not once, but twice over the next two-and-a-half decades.

At a time when domestic terrorism and tensions with immigrants appear to be returning to the fore, Americans would do well to remember this history. When we have turned inward in the face of domestic tensions and hoped international developments would go our way, we have been bitterly disappointed. While it is tempting to think we can retreat back within our borders and await the end of history, the other guys get a vote, and as it turns out they frequently have other plans.

For this reason, it is important for national security planners to perform emulative analysis—to try to think like the decision-makers of our rivals or adversaries, who may not share our cosmopolitan, progressive ideals. The recent record suggests today, as in the World War I period, we may be so caught up in domestic deliberations—or what the president calls "nation-building at home"—we have neglected the emulative analysis mission. The shock of 9/11 can, in part, be traced to the paucity of national security professionals who had read and internalized the writings of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. The missing nuclear arsenal of Saddam Hussein after the Second Gulf War seems to have reflected a perspective few, if any, American national security experts considered—Saddam was bluffing because he wanted his near enemies, the Shia, to believe he was nuclear-armed and assumed the United States

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had sufficient intelligence to understand this. And while the sinister creativity of Putin's Crimea incursion may have stymied even the most sincere effort at emulative analysis, it would be more reassuring today if we could look back and cite indicators we had been tracking, but had discounted.

None of these episodes rises to the level of World War I, of course. We currently consider ourselves to be the beneficiaries of a "long peace," one that has kept the world free of global conflict since the Korean War. But from 9/11 to Russia's forays into Ukraine and Syria, we have at least learned important lessons about taking seriously the perspectives of decision-makers from Raqqa and Baghdad to Moscow. We may not be so lucky with Beijing. Of all our global interlocutors, the People's Republic of China (PRC) seems most adept at employing a "salami slicing" or "silkworm" strategy; it is confronting our allies and partners in a way that does not breach the threshold of alarming us, even as the balance of power in contested areas, such as the South China Sea, now tilts in its favor.

It is thus especially important for us to understand how Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elites see the world. If the lesson of the 20th century is the other guys get a vote about the prospects for peace, we should focus on how Chinese decision-makers understand that set of questions. Fortunately, we can avail ourselves of a thriving Chinese-language publishing scene. Authoritative outlets in Beijing put out stacks of important works on historical and contemporary national security topics each year.¹ A review of these official and quasi-official sources, along with secondary works citing them, indicates the PRC's national security elites have a very different perspective from ours on the current long peace. They do not take it for granted and, unfortunately, I fear, they do not expect it to last.

For us, the long peace starts at home with a political system that is basically legitimate. The American people elect their leaders, who lead with the consent of the governed, or we throw the bums out, and they go back to their private lives, often making a lot of money. But one only has to observe the CCP's ongoing anti-corruption campaign to understand the stakes associated with losing power in the PRC. Since 2013, roughly 200,000 party members and officials have been investigated, with a 99 percent conviction rate. That means once the Party's Central Discipline Inspection Commission turns its eyes on you, you are finished. You go to jail or disappear; your assets are seized; and your family lives in penury and fear.

Xi Jinping, the current Chinese leader, has shown no hesitation to go after very senior people in the Party, from Bo Xilai, the famous princeling who may have been Xi's key rival to succeed Hu Jintao, to Zhou Yongkang, the former internal security czar and oil baron, to Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, Chinese generals and former vice chairmen

1 Both the Academy of Military Science and the National Defense University in Beijing have publishing houses that put out journals and textbooks on security issues, the contents of which are vetted by senior officers within those institutions. The Chinese Ministry of Defense has also published Defense White Papers bi-annually since 1998. The Chinese military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), boasts its own daily newspaper, and the individual service branches within the PLA also publish periodicals, as did the PLA's old military regions, which were abolished at the end of 2015 in favor of new theater commands.

of the Central Military Commission (the 11-member body composed of officers and Xi himself that runs China's military).

The current campaign Xi is leading has aroused fears he is recreating the climate that existed during Mao's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Xi is what is called a CCP "princeling," because his father was the Party's head of propaganda when Xi was born (and later a vice-premier) who fell from favor and was sent to prison in this period, and Xi himself was rusticated during the Cultural Revolution, forced to do hard labor in the countryside.² So he knows firsthand the rough and tumble of all-or-nothing, violent Chinese political campaigns. Xi is a survivor. And, he eventually turned the hardship he experienced because of his elite Communist pedigree into an opportunity to take over all of China. The person running the anti-corruption campaign was another "princeling" who was rusticated in the same area as Xi in the mid-1960s.

Think about this personal history. If Americans tend to take peace for granted, as the natural state of affairs in a civilized, cosmopolitan world, for Chinese elites like Xi Jinping, the world is both full of danger and freighted with opportunity. In fact, right after the 9/11 attacks, Chinese defense strategists designated the first two decades of the 21st century the "period of strategic opportunity" (重要战略机遇期, *zhongyao zhanlue jiyuqi*), signifying that it was a rare chance for them to restore China to its natural position as a world-leading power because the United States would be diverted and distracted by the War on Terror in the Middle East.³

They do not believe we defend the current international order simply because we think respect for international law and free trade will boost prosperity and promote peace globally. Rather, they think we set up the system to benefit us and to keep everyone else down, because that is how hegemons (霸, *ba*) behave. By contrast with our cosmopolitanism, today's CCP elites are the heirs of a kind of Darwinian nationalism imported from Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴ In other words, they see competition and conflict as endemic. Chinese defense strategists describe an ongoing global competition for resources and for control over key geographic points. This competition is zero-sum and cutthroat. It is very much a dog-eat-dog world, and Chinese culture even tends to describe this competition in racial terms. The CCP still oversees a "Patriotic Education" (爱国教育, *aiguo jiaoyu*) curriculum for all Chinese students, emphasizing this period as the "Century of Humiliation" (百年国耻, *bainian guochi*) when European colonial powers and the United States, Russia, and Japan conspired to prey on China at a moment of weakness, as the last dynasty, the Qing, decayed and declined.⁵ These outside powers stole Chinese money by taking over the revenues from trade through Chinese ports, and they also stole Chinese land—not only the ports, but also the 1.5 million square kilometers of Manchuria or Eastern Siberia Russia acquired through "unequal treaties."

2 Evan Osnos, "Born Red," *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2015, 42-55.

3 "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at the 16th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of China, 2002," *Xinhua*, November 18, 2002.

4 Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, "China's Nationalist Heritage," *The National Interest*, Jan.-Feb. 2013, 44-53.

5 Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012).

The “Patriotic Education” curriculum was promoted by the man we think of as the father of modern China, Deng Xiaoping. Deng launched Patriotic Education after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, when he wanted to fight an influx of dangerous Western, or American, democratic ideas into the country.⁶ To some extent, he knew, the Tiananmen Square protests were the logical culmination of the reforms he had pioneered. When Deng—who, like Xi was purged but came back from the political wilderness—took power after Mao’s death in 1979, he saw how weak the PRC was, even compared to Southeast Asian countries, and he knew something had to be done. The Soviet model of economics clearly was not delivering, so he launched a revolutionary policy of “Reform and Opening” to the West.

We now know Deng was no liberal; he viewed this policy purely instrumentally, as a means to ensure the CCP’s survival.⁷ The idea was to allow foreign (American, European, and Japanese) money and know-how into China, so the PRC would grow economically and, eventually, be able to modernize militarily. This would ensure China would finally be in the driver’s seat vis-à-vis outside rivals—such as the West and Russia and Japan—which had preyed on it when it was weak. It could coerce, deter, and, if necessary, defeat any potential opponent. Wealth and military strength were keys to staying in power and succeeding in a dangerous world.

It should be striking to us that one of Deng’s first moves upon taking power was to launch an invasion of Vietnam in 1979 that seems to have been the product of a very particular set of calculations about the balance of power. The Russians had signed a defense treaty with the Vietnamese in 1978, so Deng feared the PRC was going to be surrounded. Deng also appears to have believed he needed to fight the Vietnamese to ensure the United States would see China as a friend and back it against the Russians. And, Vietnam gave him the pretext by mistreating ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and invading Cambodia. What Deng was after by this time was American economic and technological support.⁸ By taking on our old foe, he wanted to prove the Chinese could be trusted allies against the Russians in order to get US investment, technology, and defense support.

The Chinese also worked with us in the period to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan, gaining valuable defense support and establishing an important intelligence relationship with Washington. And, in 1986 Deng propounded the “State High Technology Research and Development Plan,” better known as the “863 Program” (standing for 1986, March), which entailed spending billions of dollars to improve the PRC’s technological position—gaining access to cutting-edge information technology, automation or computing power, space capabilities, lasers, energy technologies, and new materials.⁹ This initiative has been called

6 Christopher R. Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006).

7 Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, “Tracing China’s Long Game Plan,” *The National Interest*, Sept.-Oct. 2013, 77-88; and Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Random House, 2013).

8 Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015).

9 Mark A. Stokes, *China’s Strategic Modernization: Implications for the United States* (Carlisle, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, September 1999).

the PRC's "Sputnik" moment, and it worked, yielding the space weapons and high-powered lasers the PLA has acquired over the past decade.

Even after the turbulence of Tiananmen Square in 1989, Deng advocated a strategy of patience; he told the Party elites the PRC should "bide its time and hide its capabilities" while they built up wealth and power. Successive CCP leaders followed this advice closely, at least until the last few years. They were able to take advantage of massive investment from the outside world, and they benefited militarily from the fact we are in an era of dual-use information technology.¹⁰ The modernization of their civilian economy helped them upgrade their military for high-tech war. Any impulses to flex their growing strength were checked, at least in the 1990s, by evidence of how far ahead the United States still was, given the relatively easy American victory over Iraq in 1990-91 and the US campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo, culminating in the accidental US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. These experiences demonstrated the potency of the American military's penetrating, highly accurate weapons. So even after the accidental bombing, China's leaders, now under Deng's successor Jiang Zemin, elected to stay the course with hiding and biding.

In pursuit of wealth and power, Jiang encouraged Chinese firms to "go out" internationally through the decade, acquiring overseas technology, investments, and interests. China became a net energy importer back in 1993, and its appetite for energy from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa steadily grew as it industrialized to become the world's leading manufacturer, ushering in a remarkable period of export-led growth. By 2000, China's GDP was already the fifth largest in the world. And then, in 2001 the United States was hit with the 9/11 attacks, creating the aforementioned "period of strategic opportunity."

However, several ominous developments have surfaced over the last few years. At home, the PRC's economic growth has begun to slow down, potentially dramatically. The scale of corruption has become undeniable; environmental pollution is taking its toll on mortality rates and the health of new babies born in China; the crackdown on civil society and religious organizations suggests a major fear of civil unrest; and there have been a number of terrorist incidents involving Chinese Muslim Uighurs that suggest the situation in Xinjiang (Western China) is not stable.

So Xi has tightened his grip over the domestic situation, with human rights conditions deteriorating beyond anyone's memory in recent years. Meanwhile, he is not only head of the CCP, head of the government, and head of the military, but he has also made himself the leader of the Party's most powerful committees on foreign policy, Taiwan, and the economy, and he has created new bodies he runs to oversee the Internet, government restructuring, national security, and military reform. Xi has effectively taken over not only the country's military and foreign policy, but also the PRC's economy, courts, police, and secret police.

Abroad, Xi's control is less clear. The United States and its allies have begun to realize there is trouble in East Asia. That Beijing doesn't really accept the current map or boundaries. That, as the then-Foreign

¹⁰ Jacqueline Newmyer, "The Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33 no. 4 (2010) 483-504.

Minister Yang Jiechi told Hillary Clinton in Hanoi in 2010, their view is “there are big countries, and there are small countries, and that’s just a fact”—the smaller countries in Southeast Asia should come into line and respect the PRC’s claims to most of the South China Sea.

As Yang Jiechi implied, Beijing hopes to achieve its aims peacefully, through deterrence or coercion. The smaller or more distant countries should defer to the PRC’s wishes. Chinese political-military leaders do not count on this. It is no accident Xi Jinping announced a major restructuring of the Chinese armed forces on December 31, 2015. Consistent with a decade of the People’s Liberation Army planning to take on a greater role in the world, the restructuring was designed to facilitate expeditionary joint operations along the PRC’s periphery and outside its borders.¹¹ Other indicators of this new external thrust include the acquisition of increasingly long-range missiles, the deployment of the PRC’s first aircraft carrier and construction of follow-on carriers, the announcement of the PLA Navy’s first overseas base in Djibouti last year, and the PLA’s ongoing nuclear modernization.

Perhaps the most benign interpretation is Chinese decision-makers believe the best way to keep the peace is to prepare for war. Unlike us, Chinese elites seem to believe the global environment is naturally conflictual. The “period of strategic opportunity” was only projected to last for a couple decades at best. Our long peace has been an aberration, and successive CCP leaders have exploited it to amass the wealth and power they think the PRC will need to survive in a dangerous world. Western concepts of an international balance of power or convergence around cosmopolitan norms are not reassuring or even intelligible. In a highly competitive security environment, the PRC must strive to be recognized as dominant. For this reason, Chinese pessimism about the prospects for peace may be more realistic than American hopes for international stability and tranquility.

The US Department of Defense should therefore develop strategies for deterring Chinese aggression and out-competing the PRC over the long term. Since we cannot rule out the possibility the competition will devolve into another major-power war, American defense planners must also prepare to win such a conflict. Unfortunately, in this connection as well, the conditions of 1916 should serve as a warning: the dynamics of the conflagration in Europe defied the expectations of planners from each of the principal belligerents. Still, they were much closer to being prepared than they would have been had they simply hoped for peace.

11 “China Releases Guideline on Military Reform,” *China Military News*, January 1, 2016, accessible at: http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-01/01/content_6840071.htm.