
The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia[†]

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The United States has been the most powerful state on the planet for many decades and has deployed robust military forces in the Asia-Pacific region since the early years of the Second World War. The American presence has had significant consequences for Australia and for the wider region. This is how the Australian government sees it, at least according to the 2009 Defence White Paper: 'Australia has been a very secure country for many decades, in large measure because the wider Asia-Pacific region has enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace and stability underwritten by US strategic primacy'.¹ The United States, in other words, has acted as a pacifier in this part of the world.

However, according to the very next sentence in the White Paper, 'That order is being transformed as economic changes start to bring about changes in the distribution of strategic power'.² The argument here, of course, is that the rise of China is having a significant effect on the global balance of power. In particular, the power gap between China and the United States is shrinking and in all likelihood 'US strategic primacy' in this region will be no more. This is not to say that the United States will disappear; in fact, its presence is likely to grow in response to China's rise. But the United States will no longer be the preponderant power in the Asia-Pacific region, as it has been since 1945.

The most important question that flows from this discussion is whether China can rise peacefully. It is clear from the Defence White Paper—which is tasked with assessing Australia's strategic situation out to the year 2030—that policymakers in Canberra are worried about the changing balance

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¹ Department of Defence, Australian Government, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, p. 49. http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf, accessed on October 20, 2010.

² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

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of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Consider these comments from that document: ‘As other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably change. When this happens there will be the possibility of miscalculation. There is a small but still concerning possibility of growing confrontation between some of these powers’.³ At another point in the White Paper, we read that, ‘Risks resulting from escalating strategic competition could emerge quite unpredictably, and is a factor to be considered in our defence planning’.⁴ In short, the Australian government seems to sense that the shifting balance of power between China and the United States may not be good for peace in the neighborhood.

Australians should be worried about China’s rise because it is likely to lead to an intense security competition between China and the United States, with considerable potential for war. Moreover, most of China’s neighbors, to include India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam—and Australia—will join with the United States to contain China’s power. To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully.

It is important to emphasize, however, that I am not arguing that Chinese behavior alone will drive the security competition that lies ahead. The United States is also likely to behave in aggressive ways, thus further increasing the prospects for trouble in the Asia-Pacific region.

Naturally, not everyone will agree with my assessment of the situation. Many believe that China can rise peacefully, that it is not inevitable that the United States and a powerful China will have confrontational relations. Of course, they assume that China will have peaceful intentions, and that welcome fact of life can help facilitate stability in this region, even though the underlying balance of power is expected to change dramatically.

The Case for China’s Peaceful Rise

I examine here three key arguments that are often employed to support this optimistic prognosis. First, some claim that China can allay any fears about its rise by making it clear to its neighbors and the United States that it has peaceful intentions, that it will not use force to change the balance of power. This perspective can be found in the Defence White Paper, which states: ‘The pace, scope and structure of China’s military modernization have the potential to give its neighbors cause for concern if not carefully explained, and if China does not reach out to others to build confidence regarding its military plans’.⁵ In essence, the belief here is that Beijing has the ability to

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

signal its present and future intentions to Australia and other countries in compelling ways.

Unfortunately, states can never be certain about each other's intentions.⁶ They cannot know with a high degree of certainty whether they are dealing with a revisionist state or a *status quo* power. For example, there is still no consensus among experts as to whether the Soviet Union was bent on dominating Eurasia during the Cold War. Nor is there a consensus on whether Imperial Germany was a highly aggressive state that was principally responsible for causing the First World War. The root of the problem is that unlike military capabilities, which we can see and count, intentions cannot be empirically verified. Intentions are in the minds of decision makers and they are especially difficult to discern. One might think that Chinese leaders can use words to explain their intentions. But talk is cheap and leaders have been known to lie to foreign audiences.⁷ Thus, it is hard to know the intentions of China's present leaders, which is not to say that they are necessarily revisionist.

But even if one could determine China's intentions today, there is no way to know what they will be in the future. After all, it is impossible to identify who will be running the foreign policy of any country 5 or 10 years from now, much less whether they will have aggressive intentions. It cannot be emphasized enough that we face radical uncertainty when it comes to determining the future intentions of any country, China included.

A second line of argument is that a benign China can avoid confrontation by building defensive rather than offensive military forces. In other words, Beijing can signal that it is a *status quo* power by denying itself the capability to use force to alter the balance of power. After all, a country that has hardly any offensive capability cannot be a revisionist state, because it does not have the means to act aggressively. Not surprisingly, Chinese leaders often claim that their military is designed solely for defensive purposes. For example, the *New York Times* recently reported in an important article on the Chinese navy that its leaders maintain that it is 'purely a self-defense force'.⁸

One problem with this approach is that it is difficult to distinguish between offensive and defensive military capabilities. Negotiators at the 1932 Disarmament Conference tried to make these distinctions and found themselves tied in knots trying to determine whether particular weapons like

⁶ Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), Chapter 1; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 94–99, 131, 169–70, 194; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), Chapter 2.

⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Edward Wong, 'Chinese Military Seeks to Extend its Naval Power', *New York Times*, April 23, 2010.

tanks and aircraft carriers are offensive or defensive in nature.⁹ The basic problem is that the capabilities that states develop to defend themselves often have significant offensive potential.

Consider what China is doing today. It is building military forces that have significant power projection capability, and as the Defence White Paper tells us, China's 'military modernization will be increasingly characterized by the development of power projection capabilities'.¹⁰ For example, the Chinese are building naval forces that can project power out to the so-called 'Second Island Chain' in the Western Pacific. And they also say that they are planning to build a 'blue water navy' that can operate in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. For understandable reasons, they want to be able to protect their sea lanes and not have to depend on the American navy to handle that mission for them. Although they do not have that capability yet, as Robert Kaplan points out in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, 'China's naval leaders are displaying the aggressive philosophy of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century US naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who argued for sea control and the decisive battle'.¹¹

Of course, most Chinese leaders think that their navy is defensively oriented, even though it has considerable offensive capability and will have much more in the future. Indeed, they refer to their naval strategy as 'Far Sea Defense'.¹² As Kaplan's comments indicate, it seems almost certain that as the Chinese navy grows in size and capability, none of China's neighbors, including Australia, will consider it to be defensively oriented. They will instead view it as a formidable offensive force. Thus, anyone looking to determine China's future intentions by observing its military is likely to conclude that Beijing is bent on aggression.

Finally, some maintain that China's recent behavior toward its neighbors, which has not been aggressive in any meaningful way, is a reliable indicator of how China will act in the decades ahead. The central problem with this argument is that past behavior is usually not a reliable indicator of future behavior because leaders come and go and some are more hawkish than others. Also, circumstances at home and abroad can change in ways that make the use of military force more or less attractive.

The Chinese case is illustrative in this regard. Beijing does not possess a formidable military today and it is certainly in no position to pick a fight with the United States. This is not to say that China is a paper tiger, but it

⁹ Marion W. Boggs, *Attempts to Define and Limit "Aggressive" Armament in Diplomacy and Strategy* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1941); Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 12–13, 35–7.

¹⁰ Department of Defence, Australian Government, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, p. 34.

¹¹ Robert D. Kaplan, 'The Geography of Chinese Power', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (2010), p. 34.

¹² Edward Wong, 'Chinese Military'.

does not have the capability to cause much trouble, even in the Asia-Pacific region. However, that situation is expected to change markedly over time, in which case China will have significant offensive capability. Then, we will see how committed it is to the *status quo*. But right now we cannot tell much about China's future behavior, because it has such limited capability to act aggressively.

What all of this tells us is that there is no good way to define what China's intentions will be down the road or to predict its future behavior based on its recent foreign policies. It does seem clear, however, that China will eventually have a military with significant offensive potential.

The Not-So-Benign United States

Up to now, I have been concerned with how an American or an Australian might assess China's future behavior. But to fully understand how China's rise will affect stability in the Asia-Pacific region, we must also consider what Chinese leaders can explain about future American behavior, by looking at its intentions, capabilities, and present behavior.

There is obviously no way China's leaders can know who will be in charge of American foreign policy in the years ahead, much less what their intentions toward China will be. But they do know that all of America's post-Cold War presidents, including Barack Obama, have stated that they are committed to maintaining American primacy.¹³ And that means Washington is likely to go to considerable lengths to prevent China from becoming too powerful.

Regarding capabilities, the United States spends nearly as much money on defense as all the other countries in the world combined.¹⁴ Moreover, because the American military is designed to fight all around the globe, it has abundant power projection assets. Much of that capability is either located in the Asia-Pacific region or can be moved there quickly should the need arise. China cannot help but see that the United States has formidable military forces in its neighborhood that are designed in good part for offensive purposes.¹⁵ Surely, when Washington moves aircraft carriers into

¹³ In April 2010, the Australian journalist, Kerry O'Brien asked President Obama, 'How hard is it going to be to for Americans to adjust in a mature way to the increasing prospect that you can't be number one forever?' Obama replied: 'I actually think that America can be number one for a very very long time but we think that there can be a whole host of countries that are prospering and doing well. Here's one way to think about it. The Chinese standard of living and industrial output per capita is about where the United States was back in 1910, I mean they've got a lot of catching up to do'. Transcript of 'Face to Face with Obama', *The 7:30 Report*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, April 14, 2010.

¹⁴ The United States accounted for 43 percent of worldwide spending on defense in 2009, according to the *SIPRI Yearbook 2010: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, Summary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 11.

¹⁵ Toshi Yoshihara, 'Chinese Missile Strategy and the US Naval Presence in Japan: The Operational View from Beijing', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2010), pp. 39–62.

the Taiwan Straits—as it did in 1996—or when it redeploys submarines to the Western Pacific, China sees these naval assets as offensive, not defensive in nature.

This is not to deny that most Americans, like most Chinese, think that their military is a defensive instrument; but that is not the way it looks when you are at the other end of the rifle barrel.¹⁶ Thus, anyone in China seeking to gauge American intentions by assessing its military capabilities is likely to think it is a revisionist state, not a *status quo* power.

Lastly, there is the matter of America's recent behavior and what that might tell us about future US actions. As I said earlier, past actions are usually not a reliable indicator of future behavior, because circumstances change and new leaders sometimes think differently about foreign policy than their predecessors. But if Chinese leaders try to gauge how the United States is likely to act down the road by looking at its recent foreign policy, they will almost certainly conclude that it is a war-like and dangerous country. After all, America has been at war for 14 of the 21 years since the Cold War ended. That is two out of every three years. And remember that the Obama administration is apparently contemplating a new war against Iran.

One might argue that this is all true, but the United States has not threatened to attack China. The problem with this argument is that American leaders from both the Democratic and Republican parties have made it clear that they believe the United States, to quote Madeleine Albright, is the 'indispensable nation' and therefore it has both the right and the responsibility to police the entire globe.¹⁷ Furthermore, most Chinese are well aware of how the United States took advantage of a weak China by pushing forward the infamous 'Open Door' policy in the early twentieth century. Chinese officials also know that the United States and China fought a bloody war in Korea between 1950 and 1953. It is not surprising that the *Economist* recently reported that, 'A retired Chinese admiral likened the American navy to a man with a criminal record "wandering just outside the gate of a family home"'.¹⁸ It seems that this is a case where we should be thankful that countries usually do not pay much attention to a potential rival's past behavior when trying to determine its future intentions.

¹⁶ This phenomenon where the measures a state takes to increase its own security decrease the security of other states is commonly referred to as the 'security dilemma'. See Charles L. Glaser, 'The Security Dilemma Revisited', *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (1997), pp. 171–201; John H. Herz, 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1950), pp. 157–80; Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978), pp. 167–214.

¹⁷ Secretary of State Albright said on February 19, 1998 that, 'If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further than other countries into the future'.

¹⁸ 'Naked Aggression', *Economist*, March 14, 2009, p. 45.

What all of this tells us is that the future security environment in the Asia-Pacific region will revolve around China and the United States, and each of those great powers will have a military with significant offensive capability and unknowable intentions.

There is one other factor that matters greatly for future Sino–American relations. There is no centralized authority that states can turn to for help if a dangerous aggressor threatens them. There is no night watchman in the international system, which means that states have to rely mainly on themselves to ensure their survival.¹⁹ Thus, the core question that any leader has to ask him or herself is this: what is the best way to maximize my country's security in a world where another state might have significant offensive military capability as well as offensive intentions, and where there is no higher body I can turn to for help if that other state threatens my country? This question—more than any other—will motivate American as well as Chinese leaders in the years ahead, as it has in the past.

The Pursuit of Regional Hegemony

I believe there is a straightforward answer to this question and that all great powers know it and act accordingly.²⁰ The best way for any state to ensure its survival is to be much more powerful than all the other states in the system, because the weaker states are unlikely to attack it for fear they will be soundly defeated. No country in the Western Hemisphere, for example, would dare strike the United States because it is so powerful relative to all its neighbors.

To be more specific, the ideal situation for any great power is to be the hegemon in the system, because its survival then would almost be guaranteed. A hegemon is a country that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states. In other words, no other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it. In essence, a hegemon is the only great power in the system.

When people talk about hegemony these days, they are usually referring to the United States, which they describe as a global hegemon. I do not like this terminology, however, because it is virtually impossible for any state—including the United States—to achieve global hegemony. The main obstacle to world domination is the difficulty of projecting power over huge distances, especially across enormous bodies of water like the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

The best outcome that a great power can hope for is to achieve regional hegemony, and possibly control another region that is close by and easily

¹⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 91, 107, 111.

²⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Chapter 2.

accessible over land. The United States, which dominates the Western Hemisphere, is the only regional hegemon in modern history. Five other great powers have tried to dominate their region—Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union—but none have succeeded.

The United States, it should be emphasized, did not become a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere by accident. When it gained its independence in 1783, it was a weak country comprised of 13 states running up and down the Atlantic seaboard. Over the course of the next 115 years, American policy-makers worked unrelentingly in pursuit of regional hegemony. They expanded America's boundaries from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean as part of a policy commonly referred to as 'Manifest Destiny'. Indeed, the United States was an expansionist power of the first order. Henry Cabot Lodge put the point well when he noted that the United States had a 'record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century'.²¹ Or I might add the twentieth century.

But America's leaders in the nineteenth century were not just concerned with turning the United States into a powerful territorial state. They were also determined to push the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere, and make it clear to them that they were not welcome back. This policy, which is still in effect today, is known as the 'Monroe Doctrine'. By 1898, the last European empire in the Americas had collapsed and the United States had become a regional hegemon.

States that achieve regional hegemony have a further aim: they seek to prevent great powers in other geographical regions from duplicating their feat. A regional hegemon, in other words, does not want peer competitors. The United States, for example, played a key role in preventing Imperial Japan, Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union from gaining regional supremacy. Regional hegemons attempt to check aspiring hegemons in other regions, because they fear that a rival great power that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is essentially free to roam around the globe and cause trouble in their backyard. Regional hegemons prefer that there be at least two great powers located together in other regions, because their proximity will force them to concentrate their attention on each other rather than the distant hegemon. Furthermore, if a potential hegemon emerges among them, the other great powers in that region might be able to contain it by themselves, allowing the distant hegemon to remain safely on the sidelines.

The bottom line is that for sound strategic reasons the United States labored for more than a century to gain regional hegemony, and after achieving that goal, it has made sure that no other great power dominated either Asia or Europe the way it dominates the Western Hemisphere.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Imitating Uncle Sam

What does America's past behavior tell us about the rise of China? In particular, how should we expect China to conduct itself, as it grows more powerful? And how should we expect the United States and China's neighbors to react to a strong China?

I expect China to act the way the United States has acted over its long history. Specifically, I believe that China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. For good strategic reasons, China will seek to maximize the power gap between itself and potentially dangerous neighbors like India, Japan, and Russia. China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it. It is unlikely that China will pursue military superiority so that it can go on the warpath and conquer other countries in the region, although that is always a possibility. Instead, it is more likely that Beijing will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries, much the way the United States makes it clear to other states in the Americas that it is the boss. Gaining regional hegemony, I might add, is probably the only way that China will get Taiwan back.

A much more powerful China can also be expected to try to push the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region, much the way the United States pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere in the 19th century. We should expect China to come up with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine, as Imperial Japan did in the 1930s. In fact, we are already seeing inklings of that policy. Consider that in March, Chinese officials told two high-ranking American policymakers that the United States was no longer allowed to interfere in the South China Sea, which China views as a 'core interest' like Taiwan and Tibet.²² And it seems that China feels the same way about the Yellow Sea. In late July 2010, the United States and South Korean navies conducted joint naval exercises in response to North Korea's alleged sinking of a South Korean naval vessel. Those naval maneuvers were originally planned to take place in the Yellow Sea, which is adjacent to the Chinese coastline, but vigorous protests from China forced the Obama administration to move them further east into the Sea of Japan.²³

These ambitious goals make good strategic sense for China. Beijing should want a militarily weak Japan and Russia as its neighbors, just as the United

²² Edward Wong, 'Chinese Military'.

²³ Chico Harlan, 'South Korea and US Send Message to North Korea with Drills in Sea of Japan', *Washington Post*, July 26, 2010; Peter Lee, 'South Korea Reels as US Backpedals', *Asia Times online*, July 24, 2010; Ben Richardson and Bill Austin, 'US-South Korea Drills to Avoid Yellow Sea amid China Concern', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 13, 2010; Michael Sainsbury, 'Don't Interfere with Us: China Warns US to Keep its Nose Out', *The Australian*, August 6, 2010.

States prefers a militarily weak Canada and Mexico on its borders. No state in its right mind should want other powerful states located in its region. All Chinese surely remember what happened in the last century when Japan was powerful and China was weak. Furthermore, why would a powerful China accept US military forces operating in its backyard? American policymakers, after all, express outrage whenever distant great powers send military forces into the Western Hemisphere. Those foreign forces are invariably seen as a potential threat to American security. The same logic should apply to China. Why would China feel safe with US forces deployed on its doorstep? Following the logic of the Monroe Doctrine, would not China's security be better served by pushing the American military out of the Asia-Pacific region?

Why should we expect China to act any differently than the United States over the course of its history? Are they more principled than the Americans? More ethical? Are they less nationalistic than the Americans? Less concerned about their survival? They are none of these things, of course, which is why China is likely to imitate the United States and attempt to become a regional hegemon.

And what is the likely American response if China attempts to dominate Asia? It is crystal clear from the historical record that the United States does not tolerate peer competitors. As it demonstrated over the course of the 20th century, it is determined to remain the world's only regional hegemon. Therefore, the United States can be expected to go to great lengths to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer a threat to rule the roost in Asia. In essence, the United States is likely to act toward China similar to the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

China's neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region are certain to fear its rise as well, and they too will do whatever they can to prevent it from achieving regional hegemony. Indeed, there is already substantial evidence that countries like India, Japan, and Russia, as well as smaller powers like Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, are worried about China's ascendancy and are looking for ways to contain it. India and Japan, for example, signed a 'Joint Security Declaration' in October 2008, in good part because they are worried about China's growing power.²⁴ India and the United States, which had testy relations at best during the Cold War, have become good friends over the past decade, in large part because they both fear China. In July 2010, the Obama administration, which is filled with people who preach to the world about the importance of human rights, announced that it was resuming relations with Indonesia's elite special forces, despite their rich history of human rights abuses. The reason for this shift was that

²⁴ David Brewster, 'The India–Japan Security Relationship: An Enduring Security Partnership', *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2010), pp. 95–120.

Washington wants Indonesia on its side as China grows more powerful, and as the *New York Times* reported, Indonesian officials 'dropped hints that the group might explore building ties with the Chinese military if the ban remained'.²⁵

Singapore, which sits astride the critically important Straits of Malacca and worries about China's growing power, badly wants to upgrade its already close ties with the United States. Toward that end, it built a deep-water pier at its new Changi Naval Base so that the US Navy could operate an aircraft carrier out of Singapore if the need arose.²⁶ And the recent decision by Japan to allow the US Marines to remain on Okinawa was driven in part by Tokyo's concerns about China's growing assertiveness in the region and the related need to keep the American security umbrella firmly in place over Japan.²⁷ Most of China's neighbors will eventually join an American-led balancing coalition designed to check China's rise, much the way Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and even China, joined forces with the United States to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.²⁸

Contrasts with the Cold War

There will be important differences, however, between the superpower competition during the Cold War and a future rivalry between China and the United States. For starters, the Soviet Union was physically located in both Asia and Europe, and it threatened to dominate both of those regions. Therefore, the United States was compelled to put together balancing coalitions in Asia as well as Europe. China, on the other hand, is strictly an Asian power and is not likely to threaten Europe in any meaningful way. As a result, the major European states are unlikely to play an active role in containing China, but will probably be content to remain on the sidelines.

The United States and the Soviet Union also competed with each other in the oil-rich Middle East. Both superpowers had allies in the region that sometimes fought wars with each other, and the United States was seriously

²⁵ Elisabeth Bumiller and Norimitsu Onishi, 'US Lifts Ban on Indonesian Special Forces Unit', *New York Times*, July 22, 2010. Also see Robert Dreyfuss, 'Containing China is A Fool's Errand. Yet Obama's Deal with Indonesian Thugs is Aimed at Exactly That', *The Nation*, July 23, 2010; John Pomfret, 'US Continues Effort to Counter China's Influence in Asia', *Washington Post*, July 23, 2010.

²⁶ 'Singapore Changi Naval Base', <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/singapore.htm>, accessed on October 20, 2010.

²⁷ Blaine Harden, 'Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama Resigns', *Washington Post*, June 2, 2007; 'Japan Agrees to Accept Okinawa Base', http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2010/05/23/Japan-agrees-to-accept-Okinawa-base/UPI-72831274623169/, accessed on May 23, 2010.

²⁸ For more evidence of Asian countries beginning to balance against China, see Andrew Jacobs, 'China Warns US to Stay Out of Islands Dispute', *New York Times*, July 26, 2010; Jay Solomon, Yuka Hayashi, and Jason Dean, 'As China Swaggers, Neighbors Embrace US', *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2010.

worried about a Soviet invasion of Iran following the ouster of the Shah in 1979. Given China's dependence on oil from the Persian Gulf, it is likely to compete with the United States for influence in that strategically important region, much as the Soviets did. But a Chinese invasion of the Middle East is not likely, in part because it is too far away, but also because the United States would surely try to thwart the attack. China is more likely to station troops in the region if a close ally there asked for help. For example, one could imagine China and Iran establishing close ties, and Tehran then asking Beijing to station Chinese troops on its territory. In short, while the Americans and the Soviets competed actively in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, China and the United States are likely to compete in only the latter two regions.

Although the Soviet–American rivalry spanned most of the globe, the main battleground was in the center of Europe, where there was the danger of a large-scale conventional war for control of the European continent. That scenario was especially important to both sides not only because there was considerable potential for nuclear escalation in the event of a war, but also because a decisive Soviet victory would have fundamentally altered the global balance of power. It is hard to imagine similar circumstances involving China and the United States, mainly because Asia's geography is so different from Europe's. Korea is probably the only place where those two countries could get dragged into a conventional land war; in fact, that is precisely what happened between 1950 and 1953, and it could happen again if conflict broke out between North and South Korea. But the stakes and the magnitude of that conflict would be nowhere near as great as a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact for control of Europe would have been.

In addition to Korea, one can imagine China and the United States fighting over Taiwan, over disputed islands or islets off China's coast, or over control of the sea lanes between China and the Middle East. As with Korea, the outcome of all of these scenarios would be nowhere near as consequential as a superpower war in the heart of Europe during the Cold War. Because the stakes are smaller and a number of the possible conflict scenarios involve fighting at sea—where the risks of escalation are more easily contained—it is somewhat easier to imagine war breaking out between the China and the United States than between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. It is also worth noting that there was no territorial dispute between the superpowers—Berlin included—that was as laden with intense nationalistic feelings as Taiwan is for China. Thus, it is not hard to imagine a war breaking out over Taiwan, which is not to say that the odds of such a war are high.

Another important difference between the Cold War and a future Sino–American rivalry concerns ideology. The superpower competition was especially intense because it was driven by sharp ideological differences between the two sides as well as by geopolitical considerations. Communism and

liberal capitalism were potent ideological foes not only because they offered fundamentally different views about how society should be ordered, but also because both American and Soviet leaders thought that communism was an exportable political model that would eventually take root all over the globe. This notion helped fuel the infamous 'domino theory', which helped convince US leaders that they had to fight communism everywhere on the planet. Soviet leaders had real concerns, as the spread of liberal capitalism posed a serious threat to the legitimacy of Marxist rule. The incompatibility of these rival ideological visions thus reinforced the zero-sum nature of the rivalry, and encouraged leaders on both sides to wage it with unusual intensity.

There are certainly some ideological differences between China and the United States, but they do not affect the relationship between the two countries in profound ways, and there is no good reason to think that they will in the foreseeable future. In particular, China has embraced a market-based economy, and does not see its current version of state capitalism as an exportable model for the rest of the world. If anything, it is the United States that shows a greater tendency to want to export its system to others, but that ambition is likely to be tempered by setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the impact of the 2008 recession. This situation should work to make a future rivalry between Beijing and Washington less intense than the ideological-laden competition between the superpowers.

Finally, the Soviet Union and its close allies had remarkably little economic intercourse with the West during the Cold War. Indeed, there was little direct contact between the elites, much less the broader publics, on the two sides. The opposite is the case with China, which is not only deeply integrated into the world economy, but is also actively engaged with Western elites of all kinds. For those who believe that economic interdependence produces peace, this is good news.²⁹ However, it is bad news for those who think that these ties are often a major source of friction between great powers.³⁰ My view is that economic interdependence does not have a significant effect on geopolitics one way or the other. After all, the major European powers were all highly interdependent and prospering in 1914 when First World War broke out.

²⁹ See Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1912); Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999); Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

³⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 7.

Rising China and Australia

I would like to discuss in more detail how I think China's rise will affect Australia in particular. There is no question that geography works to Australia's advantage; it is located far away from China and there are large bodies of water separating the two countries. Australia, of course, faced a similar situation with regard to Imperial Japan, which helps explain why the Japanese military did not invade Australia when it went on a rampage across the Asia-Pacific region in December 1941.

One might be tempted to think that Australia's location means that it has little to fear from China and therefore it can stay on the sidelines as the balancing coalition to contain China comes together. Indeed, the 2009 White Paper raises the possibility that 'an Australian government might take the view that armed neutrality was the best approach in terms of securing its territory and people'.³¹ This is not going to happen, however, because China—should it continue its rapid rise—will eventually present a serious enough threat to Australia that it will have no choice but to join the American-led alliance to contain China. I would like to make three points to support this claim.

First, remember that we are not talking about the threat posed by today's Chinese military, which does not have a lot of power projection capability and is not much of a danger to its neighbors. We are talking about how Australians will think about China after it has undergone two more decades of impressive economic growth and has used its abundant wealth to build a military that is filled with highly sophisticated weaponry. We are talking about a Chinese military that comes close to rivaling the US military in terms of the quality of its weaponry. That Chinese military, however, should have two important advantages over its American counterpart. It should be larger, maybe even much larger, since China's population will be at least three times bigger than the US population by the middle of this century.³² Furthermore, the United States will be at a significant disadvantage in its competition with China because the American military will be projecting its power across 6000 miles of ocean, while the Chinese military will be operating in its own backyard. In short, China is likely to have far more offensive military power in 2030 than it has in 2010.

Second, although Imperial Japan did not launch an amphibious assault against Australia in 1942, it seriously contemplated that option, and decided against it not only because of the difficulty of the operation, but also because

³¹ Department of Defence, Australian Government, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, p. 46.

³² According to the UN, China will have about 1.417 billion people in 2050, while the United States will have 0.404 billion, which would give China a 3.5:1 advantage. These numbers are taken from the 'population database' in UN Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision* (New York, 2009).

Japan thought that it had an alternative strategy for dealing with Australia.³³ Specifically, it felt that it could use its control of the Western Pacific to effectively blockade Australia and neutralize it. Although that strategy failed, we should not lose sight of the fact that Imperial Japan was a grave threat to Australia, which is why Australia enthusiastically fought alongside the United States in the Second World War.

Third, Chinese strategists are going to pay serious attention to Australia in the years ahead, mainly because of oil. China's dependence on imported oil, which is already substantial, is going to increase markedly over the next few decades. Much of that imported oil will come out of the Middle East and most of it will be transported to China by ship. For all the talk about moving oil by pipelines and railroads through Burma and Pakistan, the fact is that maritime transport is a much easier and cheaper option.³⁴ The Chinese know this and it is one reason why they are planning to build a blue water navy. They want to be able to protect their sea lanes that run to and from the Middle East.

China, however, faces a major geographical problem in securing those sea lanes, which has significant implications for Australia. Specifically, there are three major water passages that connect the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Otherwise, various Southeast Asian countries separate those two large bodies of water. That means China must have access to at least one of those passages at all times if it hopes to be able to control its sea lanes to and from the oil-rich Middle East.

Chinese ships can go through the Straits of Malacca, which are surrounded by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, or they can go further south and traverse either the Lombok Strait or the Sunda Strait, both of which cut through Indonesia, and both of which bring you out into the open waters of the Indian Ocean just to the north-west of Australia. China, however, is not likely to be able to get through the Straits of Malacca in a conflict with the United States, because Singapore, which is closely allied with Washington, sits astride that passageway. This is what Chinese strategists call 'the Malacca dilemma'.³⁵ Therefore, China has a powerful incentive to make sure its ships can move through the two main openings that run through Indonesia.

This situation almost certainly means that China will maintain a significant military presence in the waters off the northern coast of Australia and maybe even on Indonesian territory. China will, for sure, be deeply concerned about Australia's power projection capabilities, and will work to make sure that they cannot be used to shut down either the Lombok or

³³ H. P. Wilmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies, February to June 1942* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1989), Chapter 2.

³⁴ Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel B. Collins, 'China's Oil Security Pipe Dream', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (2010), pp. 89–111.

³⁵ Toshi Yoshihara, 'Chinese Missile Strategy', p. 42.

Sunda Straits or threaten China shipping in the Indian Ocean. The steps that China takes to neutralize the threat that Australia poses to its sea lanes—and remember, we are talking about a much more powerful China than exists today—will surely push Canberra to work closely with Washington to contain China. In short, there are serious limits to how much geography can shield Australia from an expansive China.

The picture I have painted of what is likely to happen if China continues its impressive economic growth is not a pretty one. Indeed, it is downright depressing. I wish that I could tell a more optimistic story about the prospects for peace in the Asia-Pacific region. But the fact is that international politics is a nasty and dangerous business and no amount of good will can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia. And there is little doubt that there is one on the horizon.