

China's Strategic Ambitions in Asia

Aaron L. Friedberg
Princeton University
April 2007

Assessing China's intentions: "A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma"

China's long-term strategic intentions are not only unknown, they are also, at this point, unknowable.

- Structurally and by tradition, the country's one party authoritarian political system is opaque, secretive and inclined toward deliberate deception. The more ambitious their goals, the more likely it is that China's rulers will try to conceal them.
- While they no doubt agree on some broad outlines and basic principles, the PRC's present leaders may not yet have a fully developed, widely shared vision of where they would like their country to be in 20 or 30 years time. Given the sheer speed of China's rise, the outer limits of what seems achievable have probably also been expanding rapidly. There may well be as yet unresolved disagreements over how high to aim; whether to seek merely a diminution of the U.S. presence and role in East Asia, for example, or its eventual elimination.
- Finally, whatever the current batch of leaders thinks, their successors may well think differently. This is always a possibility, of course, but the range of plausible aims and strategies is greater in a country, like China, that could well undergo a fundamental political transformation in the years ahead. Nations sometimes pursue similar strategic goals across generations, but they are more likely to do so if their political systems remain essentially unchanged in the meantime.

Any discussion of China's strategic ambitions must therefore be speculative. With this in mind, the discussion that follows is based on:

- A reading of the open-source writings of Chinese academics and strategic analysts. These are often quite astute in their assessments of others, but, except for broad, bland generalizations, they are notably silent on what *China's* goals and strategies should be. While they appear to have a genuine function in ongoing, internal discussion, these writings are also clearly, albeit to varying degrees, aimed at shaping the perceptions of external observers. Still, it is possible to draw some inferences and to extrapolate from what is said to what remains unspoken.
- An examination of international relations theory and past historical cases of other rising powers.
- Reflection on China's unique historical experience and current strategic circumstances.

*China's grand strategy*¹

Since the mid-1990s, at the latest, China has been pursuing a grand strategy that can be summed up in three axioms:

¹ The discussion in this section draws on the author's monograph "'Going Out': China's Pursuit of Natural Resources and Implications for the PRC's Grand Strategy," *NBR Analysis* vol. 17, no. 3 (September 2006).

- **“Avoid conflict.”** After first expecting that the collapse of the Soviet Union would lead quickly to a new era of multipolarity, by the mid-1990s Chinese analysts had concluded that they would have to face a protracted period of American global preponderance. The combination of its overwhelming material capabilities and inclination towards ideological crusades (apparent, among other things, in its response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and in its increasing sympathy for a democratizing Taiwan) meant that the United States would pose the greatest potential threat to Chinese interests and to the survival of the CCP regime. Given its comparative weakness, and its heavy reliance on American markets, capital, and technology, China had little choice but to maintain the best possible relationship with the United States. This conviction has been reaffirmed on several occasions, including in the aftermath of the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001.
- **“Build CNP.”** The purpose of maintaining good relations with the United States and, to the extent possible, with the other major players in the international system, is to give China time to develop its “comprehensive national power;” an amalgam of economic, military, technological, diplomatic, and cultural capabilities that distinguish first from second and third-ranked states. Zheng Bijian, author of the “peaceful rise” slogan that briefly enjoyed favor among top PRC officials, has written that China will require 45 years “before it can be called a modernized, medium-level developed country.”² Many Chinese analysts place particular emphasis on the next twenty years, which are often described as a “window of opportunity” or “an important period of strategic opportunity.” Favorable international circumstances (including, at least for the moment, the post-9/11 “readjustment of the center of gravity of U.S. global strategy” away from East Asia and towards the Middle East³) make it possible for China to focus its energies on economic development. But what is at stake is not merely prosperity or quality of life. According to one writer, in the next twenty years China must improve its “economic strength . . . national defense strength, and . . . cohesiveness” in order to obtain “a more favorable position in the increasingly fierce competition in terms of overall national strength.”⁴
- **“Advance incrementally.”** Chinese strategists do not appear to believe that they can sit back passively while their country accumulates sufficient wealth and power to qualify as a “medium-level” nation. At a minimum, they must be active and diligent in seeking ways to parry the efforts of the United States and other hostile nations to contain China, subvert its government, and prevent its “peaceful rise.” China’s growing material capabilities will also increase its ability to exert influence and to shape its external environment. This is a matter of some urgency. According to an analyst at the Central Party School, the factors that have created the present period of

² Zheng Bijian, “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great-Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005), p. 21

³ Wang Jisi, “Wang Jisi Views Sino-US Relations,” *Beijing Zhongguo Dangzheng Ganbu Luntan* (January 5, 2005) mimeo, p. 4.

⁴ Liu Huaqiu, “Discussing Important Period of Strategic Opportunity,” *Beijing Renmin Ribao* (Internet Version-WWW) in Chinese 14 April 2003. FBIS CPP2003041400079.

strategic opportunity (most importantly, the post-9/11 adjustment in U.S. strategy) will not “work indefinitely, or for a long time.” China must therefore seize the chance to create a favorable “external environment for China after the ‘period of strategic opportunity.’”⁵

Drivers

For the time being, China’s leaders see themselves as pursuing essentially defensive or intermediate, enabling objectives. At the same time as they continue to accumulate wealth and power, they are working to minimize any threats that might arise in adjacent areas and to ensure that other neighboring countries are accepting of, or at least not actively resistant to, their nation’s increasing prominence. As they look to the future, however, China’s current leaders almost certainly envision a day when their country will emerge clearly as Asia’s leading power. There are a number of reasons for believing that their successors will share this goal and, assuming that they are able, will pursue it even more openly and directly:

- China is a rising power and, throughout history, rising powers have invariably sought to expand their influence and, to the extent possible, to control events around them. There is no reason to believe that China’s leaders will be any less ambitious and assertive than those of previous rising powers.
- China’s long pre-modern history as East Asia’s leading civilization and major power center may suggest a model for the future. As they seek to define the role their country should play in the world, Chinese strategists will likely look back to the period before the “century of humiliation” when China was Asia’s “Middle Kingdom.”
- China’s more recent history suggests that it will not willingly accept a subordinate role to any of the other Asian great powers. In the course of the past century China has clashed with Russia, India, and, above all, Japan. Today China’s leaders appear to regard these countries with a residue of suspicion and fear, combined with a growing sense of superiority. Japan and Russia were able to take advantage of China when it was weak, but now they are the ones in long-term decline. Chinese strategists have never been able to take India entirely seriously as a potential competitor and, despite its recent growth, they do not appear to believe that it can keep pace with their own remarkable accomplishments.
- Since the end of the Second World War, China has had little choice but to accept a dominant American presence in East Asia. But the United States is an interloper. It did not become a Pacific power until the latter part of the 19th century, when it acquired colonies and bases as far West as the Philippines. For the past 60 years the U.S. position has been anchored in a handful of countries with which it has alliances; Japan and South Korea, to the north, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand to the south. As Chinese commentators often point out, however, alliances and overseas bases are relics of another era. While they may live on for a while longer, they will eventually go the way of the nineteenth century’s “unequal treaties.” Once Asia reverts to a more normal condition, in which governments do not permit other powers to maintain bases and forces on their territory, America’s presence, and its influence will be markedly reduced.

⁵ Liu Jianfei, “The ‘Period of Strategic Opportunity’ and Sino-US Ties,” *Beijing Liaowang* in Chinese 20 January 2003. FBIS CPP20030207000061.

- If China continues to be ruled by a one party authoritarian regime, it will likely have a number of additional reasons for wanting to exert a dominant influence over its neighbors. Lacking the legitimacy that comes from freely given popular support, such regimes are, by their nature, fearful of internal challenges to their authority and control. They are prone to exaggerate the threats posed by dissident groups and to overstate the extent to which these are encouraged and supported by foreigners. A rising, authoritarian China will be more likely to use its power and influence to try to dissuade neighboring governments from offering aid and comfort to its domestic opponents, and may use force to crush them or deny them safe haven. A regime that lacks legitimacy will also be more inclined to use nationalism and the specter of external enemies to rally domestic support and deflect popular dissatisfaction. Such a government may try to use foreign policy victories (including everything from displays of deference by other governments to the defeat of foreign military forces) to bolster its standing at home.
- China's burgeoning need for resources (above all, oil and natural gas), and its fear of being vulnerable to supply disruptions give its strategic planners further reason to seek regional preponderance. Such concerns will have an impact, regardless of who sits in Beijing, but they will be especially salient if China's future rulers are lineal descendants of those in power today. Supply disruptions and the economic dislocations they can cause are worrisome to the governments of all importing countries, but they are especially troubling to those who have reason to believe they could cause major domestic unrest and even violent regime change. The fact that China's present rulers believe the United States is deeply hostile to them on ideological grounds makes the danger of an American naval blockade seem far more plausible than it will if their successors are the duly elected representatives of a liberal democracy.

The meaning of "preponderance"

Assuming that China's leaders aim, not only to expand their capabilities and influence, but to establish their country as East Asia's preponderant power, and putting aside for the moment the question of whether such a goal is achievable, what might such a condition actually look like? Other than having the highest CNP score of any of its neighbors, how might Chinese strategists define "preponderance" or "dominance"?

- One thing that preponderance would *not* entail is an extension of direct physical control over large swaths of Asian territory. A fully risen China will, of course, want to reincorporate Taiwan and to resolve outstanding disputes over borders and offshore resources on favorable terms, but it will probably not seek direct control of other areas (such as Russia's Far East regions) to which it might conceivably be able to lay claim on historical grounds.
- Preponderance would also not require the elimination or complete subjugation of other East Asian powers. But other states would have to accept their position of relative weakness in comparison to China, they would not seek to match its military might, and would preferably maintain friendly relations with it. In addition, regional powers would be expected to forego the formation of alliances meant to balance or contain China, either with one another or with potentially unfriendly, extra-regional powers.
- Within these broad parameters, China's preeminence would be manifest primarily in political terms. Its smaller, poorer neighbors in Central Asia and continental

Southeast Asia would grant it a high degree of deference and, to a considerable degree, would align their foreign and even their domestic policies to accord with Beijing's wishes. In various symbolic and substantive ways, other East Asian nations would acknowledge Beijing's "leadership" and would join in ostracizing and isolating those who sought to challenge it preeminence.

- Samuel Huntington writes that a dominant China would expect other East Asian countries to do "some or all" of the following:
 - "support Chinese territorial integrity, Chinese control of Tibet and Xinjiang, and the integration of . . . Taiwan into China;
 - acquiesce in Chinese sovereignty over the South China Sea . . .
 - generally support China in conflicts with the West . . .
 - adopt trade and investment policies compatible with Chinese interests . . .
 - be generally open to immigration from China;
 - prohibit or suppress anti-China and anti-Chinese movements within their societies;
 - respect the rights of Chinese within their societies . . .
 - [and] promote the use of Mandarin as a supplement to and eventually a replacement for English."⁶
- Chinese strategists likely believe that their country's emergence as the preponderant power in East Asia will require the substantial diminution, if not the outright elimination, of the American regional presence. Existing U.S. alliances will eventually have to be either dissolved outright or drained of any operational significance. Aside from forces based on Guam or other pieces of American-controlled territory, the U.S. would not have a significant, permanent military presence in the Western Pacific. Short of this, Chinese planners would prefer to see the American diplomatic and military "footprint" reduced as much as possible. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula would be an important step in the right direction and would concentrate most of America's remaining "eggs" in the Japanese "basket."

Spheres of influence?

The perceived implications for the United States of impending Chinese preponderance in Asia (and the corresponding American inclination to resist) will depend less on the extent of China's capabilities than on the character of its domestic regime.

- Albeit with some discomfort, the United States is far more likely to acquiesce in the rise to regional dominance of a democratic China than of one that continues to be ruled by an authoritarian regime. Like the British as they prepared to pull back from the Western Hemisphere at the start of the twentieth century, Americans could console themselves that a democratic China shared their values and so was unlikely fundamentally to challenge their interests. One hundred years ago, British strategists welcomed the opportunity to focus their resources on other regions and came eventually to see American power as an asset. In several decades time U.S. strategists could conceivably reach similar conclusions about a democratic China.
- On the other hand, in keeping with their long-standing traditions and ideological preferences, Americans are likely to believe that a non-democratic regional hegemon

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 230-1.

cannot be trusted. They may suspect that it intends to use its growing strength to restrict American economic access, block and perhaps reverse the spread of democracy in Asia, coerce remaining U.S. allies, and perhaps seek to aggregate local resources in order to mount a challenge to U.S. power in other regions.

- For its part, fearful of ideological subversion, as well as geopolitical containment, an authoritarian China is more likely to try to push the U.S. out of Asia. The “dynamics of mutual alarm” between a rising, non-democratic China and a long-dominant democratic United States will likely drive an intensifying strategic competition between the two Pacific powers.

Some Chinese analysts have begun to speak openly of a spheres of influence deal in which the U.S. would be permitted to retain some portion of its present position in the Western Pacific while acquiescing in Chinese dominance on the Asian mainland and along its eastern approaches. According to one writer, under such an arrangement the United States would have to accept China’s:

“competitive edge over American military power in the maritime territories close to China (with the maritime territory to the eastern coast of Taiwan as the boundary line) . . . Concurrently, the United States will maintain its leadership position, its overall military edge around the world and in the western Pacific, and its diplomatic/political influence in other major regions. In other words, this means that there will be a division of power between China and the United States, such that the United States will ultimately be unable to reject the peaceful ascension of China to global superpower.”⁷

Among the objections to such an arrangement are the fact that it would presumably require the U.S. to accept China’s absorption of Taiwan and to withdraw from the Korean peninsula. A continued American edge in the “western Pacific” might also not necessarily include a presence in Japan. In any event, maintaining such an edge would be a good deal more difficult if Chinese forces were based on Taiwan. On the other hand, from a Chinese perspective, a continued U.S. regional presence could well mean the continuing threat of interdiction of sea lines of communication. A stable spheres of influence arrangement seems unlikely, absent the underlying trust that could come from an eventual convergence in values and domestic political institutions.

Implications

China may want preponderance in Asia, but that does not mean it will necessarily be able to attain it. Assuming that it can overcome its own internal weaknesses, China’s rising power will likely stimulate increased balancing behavior on the part of many of its neighbors, as well as the United States.

Balancing is likely, but it is not automatic, nor are attempts at balancing destined to be successful. Some analysts (including Huntington) have suggested that East Asian states may actually be more prone to bandwagoning than balancing. Even if this is not the case, if China can

⁷ Shi Yinhong, "Two Likely Scenarios in Sino-US Relations Amid a Trend of 'Shift in Power Positions'" *Hong Kong Zhongguo Pinglun* in Chinese 01 Sep 06 - 30 Sep 06 No 105, pp 19-22. CPP20061006715019

lull its potential rivals into complacency by downplaying its own strength and understating its ambitions, if it can divide its potential rivals, while gradually eroding the underpinnings of America's regional position, it may be able to ease its way closer to a position of preponderance.

The challenge for American strategists in the years ahead will be to continuously reassess and rebalance their current mixed policy of seeking to engage China economically and diplomatically, while at the same time working to maintain a favorable balance of power in Asia, even as China grows stronger. While continuing to emphasize engagement, dialogue and cooperation with China, the United States must also:

- Do nothing to discourage the balancing tendencies of other Asian powers, in part by making clear its own intention to resist any Chinese effort to attain regional dominance;
- Shore up the foundations of its own regional position, starting with the strained US-ROK alliance;
- Encourage existing tendencies toward the formation of a largely informal, multi-layered network of strategic communication and cooperation among various combinations of Asian states: Japan and Australia, Japan and India, India and Vietnam, the U.S., Japan and South Korea, etc.;
- Develop and maintain forces capable of countering and, if necessary, defeating China's growing anti-access capabilities;
- Continue to seek more effective ways to encourage the eventual liberalization of China's domestic political system.