The Problem of a Rising Power: Sino-American Relations in the 21st Century

Michael J. Mazarr

This essay examines the prospects for Sino-American relations over the next decade and beyond, and finds that they are poor. While there are some reasons to expect cooperation, a host of powerful factors—including conflicting interests, the tensions generated by a rising power, nationalism, and culture—are driving the Sino-American relationship toward greater hostility. Avoiding crises and even war will be a difficult challenge in the years to come. The essay concludes by proposing a US strategy toward China which maximizes the potential for cooperation while taking seriously the risks of Sino-American tension.
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Twenty-five hundred years ago, the first true theorist of international relations—the Greek historian Thucydides—wrote about the problems created by the rise of a new great power. In his time, the new power was Athens; the growth of its economic and military strength posed a direct threat to Sparta, the leading city-state of the day. Thucydides wrote that “The real cause [of the Peloponnesian War] I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta], made war inevitable.”

We can see the same trends underway in the Asia-Pacific region today. The existing power is the United States, whose economic and military might dominated the region for forty years. And the rising power is China: economically dynamic, militarily vast and increasingly sophisticated, and with a clear sense of national mission and a desire for regional influence, if not hegemony. Integrating a resurgent China into regional and global balances of power in a peaceful and stable fashion poses the single greatest challenge to the Asia-Pacific region over the next decade.

As a result, there will be no more important bilateral relationship in Asia in the next decade than that between the United States and

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China. The character of this relationship may be the factor which
determines whether Asia experiences peace or war, cooperation or
competition, continued growth or stagnation. Sino-American
relations will carry profound implications for world politics as a
whole—whether it returns to a hostile balance-of-power arrangement\(^2\)
or moves in the direction of a peaceful and stable concert of powers.\(^3\)
These outcomes, both on a regional and a global level, will in turn
have important consequences for the Korean peninsula.

This essay takes a rather pessimistic view of the prospects for
Sino-American relations. Those relations are likely to continue
decreasing, or at least persist in an uneasy period of mutual hostility
and suspicion, until there is fundamental regime change in China. As
China expert David Shambaugh said in an interview, “We are dealing
with a very uncooperative regime which can’t stand the United States
and everything it stands for. This is a systemic struggle—not just one
over visas, dissidents and arms sales. The stronger and more
assertively nationalist China becomes, the sharper the tensions will
become.”\(^4\) The picture is not completely bad; the desire for
cooperation persists in both Beijing and Washington, and it may
overcome the reasons for pessimism outlined below. Nonetheless,
those same reasons suggest that we can expect continued and growing
tensions between the United States and China in the next decade.

**A Period of Turmoil**

The year 1995 saw a number of major upheavals in Sino-American
relations, ranging from economic to political to military issues. In
part this was a product of political developments in both countries.
The ongoing succession of leadership from Deng Xiaoping created a
climate in which no Chinese leader wanted to appear weak in the face

\(^2\) As predicted, for example, by Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International

2 (Spring 1992), pp. 64–82.

\(^4\) Cited in Steven Mufson, “Sino-US Relations 'Pushed Into a Danger Zone.'”
of US provocations. At the same time, the mid-term US congressional elections of 1994 brought into office an extraordinarily conservative and confrontational Congress willing to ruffle presidential feathers on, among other foreign policy issues, US policy toward Taiwan and China.

A heightened level of Sino-American hostility may therefore have been inevitable, but its suddenness and intensity surprised even many long-time China watchers. It began in earnest in June 1995, with two parallel developments. On the sixth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, China cracked down on dissidents within the country and arrested Harry Wu, an American citizen visiting China to call attention to Beijing’s human rights abuses. Later, under heavy pressure from the US Congress, the Clinton administration approved the unofficial visit of Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to his alma mater, Cornell University.

The combination of these two events sparked a sustained confrontation. China recalled its ambassador from Washington, and stalled on approving the new US ambassador to Beijing, to protest the administration’s decision on President Lee. Chinese official sources said that the Lee visit had “pushed these [Sino-American] relations into a danger zone” and insisted that “the basis of bilateral relations has been shaken. This is no trivial matter.” Western China experts concurred: former US government Asia hand Charles Freeman warned that “the current state of the relationship is the worst it’s been since normalization”; RAND Corporation sinologist Michael Swaine was even more blunt: “We’re in serious trouble,” he said, “and it’s likely to get much worse.”

Some of the new tension in the relationship stemmed from what appeared to be an intense and growing Chinese sensitivity to an alleged US policy of containing or undermining China’s power. On August 23, Beijing’s official New China News Agency made these charges explicitly. “Anti-China forces” and “US hegemonists” were conspiring, the editorial contended, to keep China “permanently poor


and backward." The agency cited a number of US newspapers which had run essays critical of Chinese policy, and claimed that these articles were "more than a manifestation of the individual prejudice of the writers," but were "a reflection of the gloomy mentality of the anti-China forces in the United States." The editorial concluded by warning of "Cold War II" if these attitudes did not change.\footnote{Cited in Keith B. Richburg. "China Bitterly Attacks Critics in US." \textit{Washington Post}, August 24, 1995, p. A29.}

Toward the end of the summer, tensions appeared to ease somewhat. China tried and sentenced Harry Wu to a long prison term, but expelled him rather than force him to serve it. As a result of that decision, US First Lady Hillary Clinton decided to attend the United Nations' Women's Conference in China that September, a decision seen as a symbol of warming ties. US Undersecretary of State Peter Tarnoff visited Beijing and spoke about Washington's desire to get the relationship back to a friendly level. In return, Beijing announced that it would return its ambassador to Washington and promised speedy approval for the new US envoy, former Tennessee Senator Jim Sasser.\footnote{Kathy Chen, "Sino-US Relations Back to Square One." \textit{Wall Street Journal}, September 1, 1995, p. A4.}

This improving atmosphere was broken to some extent during the UN Women's Conference, during which Chinese authorities engaged in behavior that can only be described as ludicrous. Just before the conference, Beijing publicized its execution of 16 violent criminals, aiming to send a message of seriousness and order. This may have slipped by unnoticed. But then Chinese authorities began an education campaign to train its Beijing cabbies as spies during the conference, demanding that they report on the conversations of women riders.\footnote{Reuters report cited in the \textit{Korea Times}, August 25, 1995, p. 11.} It was not clear how the cabbies were supposed to understand the dozens of languages spoken by conference participants. During the conference itself, Beijing took every opportunity to ensure that Chinese women and citizens generally would be unable to hear its deliberations. They moved the main conference sessions to a small town far outside Beijing. When...
controversial speakers (such as Hillary Clinton) were scheduled. Local authorities attempted to block participants from entering conference halls—which led to the astounding image of US Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, barely five feet tall, muscling her way through stunned Chinese police to hear the First Lady speak.

Nonetheless, despite the resurgence of controversy during the women’s conference, Sino-American relations have for the time being returned to relative calm. Another symbol of an improving Sino-American atmosphere was Beijing’s recent announcement that it was not pursuing a planned sale of nuclear reactors to Iran, and the subsequent predictions that a summit meeting would soon take place between President Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin. But the period of turmoil in 1995 raised an important question for the future: Was this outburst of hostility between the two countries temporary, attendant to factors such as the leadership change in Beijing? Or was it a sign of a more permanent competition in the making?

**Reasons for Pessimism**

International relations scholars who subscribe to the realist or neorealist camps would have little trouble offering rapid and decisive answers to these questions. The United States and China are destined for competition and hostility, realists would say, either because of fundamental human nature or because of the anarchic structure of international politics. In the realist framework, suspicion, tension, and even war among the great powers are nearly inevitable in the long run, and so it would be for Sino-American relations.

But let us lay aside the broad assumptions and conclusions of

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realism, and look to the specifics of the Sino-American case. Assuming a theoretical vacuum—that nation-states, even great powers, are not inherently inclined toward either peace or war, cooperation or competition—what can be said about the likely course of Sino-American relations over the next decade?

The more we look at the details of Chinese and US policies and interests, in fact, the more worrisome the picture becomes. There are many reasons to expect a nasty relationship in the years ahead, which I lay out below. In brief, the Cold War created a false bond between two systems, the Chinese and the American, which naturally tend toward hostility. The advent of Deng Xiaoping created the false sense that Chinese nationalism had been conquered. The friendly, almost fawning approach to China taken by Richard Nixon and his successors in the White House gave the false impression that the United States would forever subsume concerns about human rights, regional expansion, and trade policy for the sake of warm Sino-American ties.

When we look closely at the relationship between the United States and China, we find major disagreements on virtually every policy issue, in addition to clashing perceptions about larger cultural and moral value systems. Even aside from the generic predictions of realism, then, there is good reason to expect a deterioration in Sino-American relations until the nature of the Chinese government has changed.

Conflicting Interests

The first and most fundamental reason is that the national interests of the United States and China are not always in accord. In fact, they conflict quite directly in a number of strategic locales. This does not mean a clash of interests absolutely necessary to national survival; certainly, the Sino-American competition is not a zero-sum game. Interests that are vital to one side—as, for example, the one-China policy is to Beijing—do not collide with equally vital interests on the other side (the United States has no vital national interest in Taiwan's independence). Nonetheless, enough important interests on both sides are in conflict to guarantee continued tension.
The most outstanding example of this fact, and increasingly the symbol of Sino-American competition, is Taiwan. While the United States has for decades embraced Beijing’s one-China policy, events within Taiwan are bringing that policy under more serious pressure. Increasingly, Taiwan represents a democratic, generally free-market, responsible member of the international community. Subjugating the wishes of its people to Beijing’s demand for unification on its terms, less bothersome when Taipei was headed by aging, undemocratic expatriates from the mainland, may be increasingly anathema to the United States.

A growing American unhappiness with its tilt toward Beijing takes on especially provocative implications given the fact that a compromise solution between Taiwan and China may not be possible. Two respected China experts have referred to the need for “a realistic modus vivendi on Taiwan that would at once respect Chinese sovereignty, uphold a one-China policy, and recognize Taiwan’s growing role in the world.” The sad fact of the matter, however, is that no such solution exists. There is no way to ensure that Taiwan is absorbed into China and that it becomes more independent at the same time.

The respected China scholar Nancy Bernkopf Tucker has examined these various trends and found reasons for concern. “No issue in US-China relations,” she recognizes, “has had the devastating impact or unrelenting tenacity of the Taiwan question.” The importance of the issue is bound to grow, because “Trends... appear to favor independence far more than reunification,” including the fact that Taiwan “will accelerate its bid for international recognition and influence.” Tucker concludes that “American policymakers, who have not yet absorbed the implications of Taiwan’s transformation, face unprecedented choices.” They must “not simply wrestle with the perilous alternatives of reunification and independence, but also with a rapidly shifting middle ground that may make Washington’s one-China policy harder to uphold.”

The trend toward a US questioning of its traditional one-China

policy is already underway, inaugurated by the Clinton administration’s Taiwan Policy Review of 1994. While the review produced little real change in US policy, it validated, in an official sense, the notion that changing circumstances in Taiwan demand a reconsideration of US policy. The new Republican Congress, sympathetic to the ideals of democratic Taiwan, will continue forcing US policy in that direction, as it did with the Lee Teng-hui visit in 1995. And as the events of 1995 clearly demonstrated, any shift by Washington away from that policy will provoke outrage in Beijing.

While Taiwan may become the most fundamental area of discord between the United States and China, a more immediate issue—and one which could undermine Sino-American relations long before the Taiwan question is answered—relates to the South China Sea. China has passed a number of decrees claiming the entire area, a critical sea lane of communication and possibly rich in oil and natural gas, as its territorial waters. And while Beijing has recently signaled a willingness to work out a multilateral agreement on activities in the South China Sea, this may be only a stalling tactic while it pursues a policy of divide and rule, picking off the other claimants one at a time. Such tactics were apparent in Beijing’s recent occupation of the Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef, a bold act of power politics which Manila could only watch and condemn.

The reason the South China Sea looms as a more imminent flash point than Taiwan is the reality of two intersecting trends: China’s exploding energy demands, occasioned by its rapid economic growth; and the decline of its domestic supplies of oil. The possible scope of China’s immense thirst for oil is captured in a telling statistic: “If the Chinese were to drive as many per capita passenger miles as Americans currently do each year, it would take only five years to use

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14 For a description of this review see Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord, “Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.” September 27, 1994.

up all the earth’s known energy reserves.” Of course, the Chinese will not be driving that much any time soon; but they will be driving more all the time, and the pressure they exert on world energy supplies will grow as a result. Such an accelerating demand for energy will only magnify the importance of the alleged massive oil deposits thought to be located in the South China Sea.

In a military sense, China’s power projection capabilities remain limited. For the time being, it poses a small threat of a full-scale invasion of Taiwan or a seizure of the entire South China Sea. But the Chinese military is rapidly acquiring new power projection instruments. And it has many options for exerting pressure on Taiwan and the South China Sea other than direct invasion or occupation: a naval blockade, sustained air attacks, harassing attacks by submarines, and the like. In short, China already possesses the ability to strangle economic intercourse around Taiwan and throughout the South China Sea, and this ability will only grow with time.

A third and final area of conflicting US and Chinese interests centers around China’s military sales and assistance to other nations. In its alleged sales of M-11 missiles to Pakistan and of military equipment and civilian nuclear technology to radical Middle Eastern states, Beijing directly undermines US goals of nonproliferation and Middle East security. China’s interests are obvious: profit; expanded political and military ties with important regional states like Iran; and, as a side benefit, damage to US interests.

For the time being, this dispute is an important, but not overriding, irritant. China appears, for example, to have dropped its nuclear reactor sale to Iran—though if this is, as many suspect, merely a result of Iran not having enough cash or preferring Russian reactors, then it may not represent a real change in Beijing’s policy. But


nonproliferation could become an explosive issue at any time through one specific mechanism: a devastating attack on US military forces, or a regional crisis or war, sparked by the Chinese sales.

It is almost difficult to imagine the consequences for Sino-American relations if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons in the next five years with the critical, and verified, assistance of Chinese technology—and then used them, or threatened their use, against US allied forces or the United States itself. Popular outrage in the United States would be intense. In a lesser contingency, one could imagine a crisis or war in South Asia provoked by, or waged with, Chinese missiles sold to Pakistan. In this case, elite opinion in the United States would be the one to express outrage, with perhaps equally dire consequences for Sino-American relations.

Clearly, then, on Taiwan, the South China Sea, and nonproliferation, Washington and Beijing have a rich menu of arguments from which to choose over the coming decade. In each case, the interests of the two sides are at least partially opposed. And while compromises exist on each issue that would respect US and Chinese vital interests, the mere existence of a rational solution does not always guarantee that crisis—or war—can be avoided. As easy as it is to imagine ways in which Washington and Beijing could finesse the Taiwan issue, for example, it is just as easy to imagine a chain of misperception, failed communication, and an accident that could lead to war in the Taiwan Strait.

**Lack of a Strategic Rationale for Cooperation**

In brief, the Cold War is over. The strategic challenge that energized Sino-American cooperation in the first place—the Soviet Union—has ceased to exist. In his marvelous study of *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger puts the rationale for Nixon’s approach to China in the 1970s this way:

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18 James D. Fearon, in “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414, questions such explanations because states always appear to have less costly alternatives to actual conflict. Despite that fact, they continue to go to war.
... the Nixon Administration managed to create a major incentive for Soviet moderation by achieving a dramatic opening to China. . . . Once the Soviet Union could no longer count on permanent hostility between the world’s most powerful and most populous nations—even more so if the two were actually perceived as having started to cooperate—the scope for Soviet intransigence would narrow and perhaps evaporate. Soviet leaders would have to hedge their bets because a threatening posture might intensify Sino-American cooperation.

Thus, “In the conditions of the late 1960s, improved Sino-American relations became a key to the Nixon administration’s Soviet strategy.” 19 Such thinking is obviously a relic of a very different age; as Arthur Waldron has put it, “the Cold War has ended, and with it the external imperative for Sino-American rapprochement.” 20

Today, no major threat to the community of nations justifies Sino-American cooperation as the Soviet threat did during the Cold War. Indeed, the great power whose enormous influence most calls for balancing today is China itself—an increasingly dominant regional actor whose growing power may encourage odd geopolitical partnerships, much as the Soviet threat sparked an unlikely quasi-alliance between the United States and China. It is not impossible to envision stronger ties and economic and perhaps even military cooperation between Japan and India, the United States and Vietnam, or a united Korea and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in response to China’s growing power and assertiveness.

Even if we think in the triangular terms of the Cold War—the United States, Russia, and China—there are strong reasons to believe that a US government of the twenty-first century would, if forced to choose, pick a democratic, non-imperialist Russia as a geostrategic partner. Russia is at least arguably a Western nation, and its culture is closer to American culture than that of China. Provided that Russia remains a democracy, the natural tension between a democracy and a dictatorship, so apparent in Sino-American ties (and to be discussed below), would be absent from Russian-American relations; and

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provided Moscow manifests no renewed interest in colonizing its neighbors. US and Russian interests are much more in broad accord than those of the United States and China.

The strategic rationale for a warm Sino-American relationship has therefore disappeared. In its place has arisen a disorganized collection of secondary interests promoting cooperation for mutual economic benefits (though even these are skewed, as we shall see); a general interest in the peaceful evolution of Asia; reasonably complementary interests in Russia, Korea, and Japan; and a handful of others. Much of the future of Sino-American relations will depend on the critical balance between these factors favoring cooperation and the contrary factors pushing the two nations toward hostility. Again, not all the dynamics in the relationship are hostile, but it may well be that the most powerful ones are.

**Tensions Generated by a Rising Power**

As noted at the outset of the essay, theorists of international relations have recognized for thousands of years the profoundly destabilizing nature of the rise of a major new world power. Geopolitical balances of power are tricky enough to maintain in any case: adding a confident and energetic new player to the mix almost guarantees transitional instabilities. This is especially true when the new power is at least slightly expansionist, as China clearly is.

Robert Gilpin has discussed the underlying dynamics of crisis in a shifting balance of power. In such a transition, "the costs to the traditionally dominant state"—or states, we might say in a multipolar era—"of maintaining the international system increase.... By the same token, the costs to the rising state of changing the system decrease." 21 One can see this phenomenon clearly at work in Sino-American relations, for example, in the South China Sea.

In a period of declining defense spending and troop reductions in Asia, the relative cost of deterrence for the United States in the area

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is growing. At the same time, given China’s expanding military, huge trade surpluses, and increasingly accepted regional dominance, the cost of changing the status quo is declining.

The obvious result is that, in the South China Sea, Beijing has sought to change the status quo. It has expanded its military presence there, issued more forceful claims to sovereignty of the entire area, and launched more energetic forays into territory claimed by others. As Gerald Segal writes, from China’s point of view, “using its new power to ‘right the wrongs of history’ is only natural.” As a result, in the South China Sea, “China will be ruthless in taking what it claims to be rightfully its own. Only the limits of China’s military capability and its calculation of political opportunity appear to temper this strategy.” China, Segal concludes, “is apparently set on a policy of force in the South China Sea.”

As this process advances, Gilpin explains, “the perception that a fundamental historical change is taking place and the gnawing fear of one or more of the great powers that time is somehow beginning to work against it” leads to proposals for settling matters “through preemptive war while the advantage is still on one’s side.” This sort of naked power-politics thinking is unlikely in the United States today: Washington is not going to launch a preemptive war against China. But it is not difficult to imagine an American administration that would launch a preemptive containment of China, which would then inaugurate a series of disputes and crises that could lead to war.

Indeed, Gilpin emphasizes the role of a not-fully-rational cycle of fear and misperception at the core of the process by which rising powers generate conflict. As this process of mutual fear accelerates, he argues, “the course of events begins to escape human control . . . . Up to a point, rationality does appear to apply: statesmen do explicitly or implicitly make rational calculations and then attempt to set the course of the ship of state accordingly. But it is equally true that events, especially those associated with the passions of war, can easily escape from human control.” Gilpin concludes that “men

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seldom determine or even anticipate the consequences of hegemonic war." 24

Arthur Waldron has drawn a relevant—and disturbing—parallel between today’s China and Wilhelmine Germany, emphasizing the role of historic figures in managing the rise of new powers. The rising German nation was a powerful state and a new arrival in the European balance of power. Like China today, it featured an authoritarian government pitted against a dynamic society, and again like Beijing, it wanted its place in the sun. For three decades, the emergence of this new power was skillfully managed by Bismarck in a war that largely reassured neighbors and avoided all-out war. But after Bismarck’s departure, the various interest groups in Germany competed in setting the country’s direction, which culminated in the series of crises that brought on World War I.

Waldron admits the parallel is not perfect. Nonetheless, as he says, “it is undeniable that such Bismarcks as China has produced—Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping among them—have left or are about to leave the scene.” 25

All of this suggests that the problem—and it is a problem, from a systemic point of view—of China’s rising power is intimately connected with the growing debate about self-fulfilling prophecies in US China policy. “To treat China and Russia as adversaries,” argues Joseph Nye in a snappy summary of the current wisdom, “would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.” 26 In the case of China, Beijing would think—as they increasingly appear to do—that Washington sees China as a threat. As a result, Beijing would begin to see Washington as a threat. US officials would notice the hostile new tone in Chinese rhetoric and policy (as they have) and take actions to respond; and on and on through a cycle of misperception and hostility to the inevitability of crises and confrontations and the possibility of war.


The tensions generated by China’s rising power thus place enormous importance on the continuous task of managing perceptions in Beijing and Washington: keeping channels of communication open, pursuing confidence-building measures, and otherwise attempting to avoid a spiral of self-fulfilling hostility. At the same time, the more trying aspects of Sino-American relations outlined in this essay—the conflicting interests, cultural differences, growing Chinese nationalism, trade disputes, and the like—make such a task of perception management enormously difficult.

Robert Gilpin points out that “the great turning points in world history have been provided by these hegemonic struggles among political rivals” which result from transitions of power. “These periodic conflicts have reordered the international system and propelled history in new and uncharted directions.”27 Such a reordering of history is currently underway in Asia; whether it brings war or peace is yet to be seen. China, concludes Denny Roy, “is a dissatisfied power,” still trying to “recover territory and prestige lost to the West.” China’s leadership, as is common for a rising power, “perceives the international environment as primarily hostile, and their own place within it insecure.”28 Given China’s rapid emergence, Aaron Friedberg has written, “If the historical correlation between extraordinarily rapid internal growth and external expansion holds, the implications for Asian stability will be troubling indeed.”29

Natural Discord between Dictatorships and Democracies

Sino-American relations will also suffer from a basic fact of life in international politics: democracies and dictatorships generally do not get along well.

The well-known empirical evidence suggesting that democracies


and dictatorships fight wars fairly often, but that democracies rarely go to war with one another,"

gives a hint as to the systemic dynamics involved. The values, mode of operations, official personality, and many other aspects of democracies simply do not accord with those of undemocratic nations.

Relations between the two are inevitably prickly and tense: each symbolizes the very values that pose a threat to the other. From the standpoint of the dictatorship, for example, John Chettle draws an implication from the destabilizing nature of contact with a democratic state: “One can lay down a general rule: Any despot inclined to maintain his position should avoid contact with the United States at all costs.”

The major focus of this systemic antagonism is, of course, the question of human rights, which even after the most-favored-nation debate remains at the heart of the Sino-American relationship. Many human rights activists, in the United States and throughout the world, are horrified by the nature of the regime in China and work to attach conditions to the US relationship with China in service of freedom. In the context of MFN, these interest groups lost a pitched battle with business leaders and geostrategists still impressed with the need for close Sino-American ties. But human rights will continue to crop up in official talks between Beijing and Washington, adding an additional note of competition and hostility to the relationship.

The important and continuing role of human rights became apparent in two recent episodes, involving Harry Wu and the UN Women’s Conference. China’s arrest of the democracy activist Wu for a time placed Sino-American relations in a deep freeze and, had it not been reversed, may well have prevented First Lady Hillary Clinton from attending the women’s conference. Once that conference began, moreover, Chinese authorities repeatedly took steps to limit the freedom of its delegates; the insults to conference participants mentioned above represented the behavior of a third-rate petty dictatorship, not a country that aspires to world leadership.


Natural tensions over issues of human rights therefore exist in any bilateral relationship involving a dictatorship and a democracy, a time bomb in the relationship which could explode at any moment. Indeed, this bomb has a specific fuse, an issue on which Sino-American arguments about rights are likely to grow in the years ahead: the retrocession to Chinese control of Hong Kong in 1997.

Every indication suggests that Beijing will clamp down very hard on the nascent democracy movement in Hong Kong. It has already signaled its displeasure toward the democratic parties in Hong Kong’s recent elections by: vilifying Chris Patten, Hong Kong’s last British governor and a sometime leader of the democracy movement; pumping in millions of dollars to pro-Beijing parties in Hong Kong elections; and forcing out of the Chinese market businesses deemed too sympathetic to anti-Beijing forces. Companies “whose loyalty was in doubt were crushed: commercial pressures in part forced outspoken democracy-supporter Jimmy Lai, the owner and founder of a successful chain of clothing stores, to sell his holdings.”

These sorts of heavy-handed tactics will only expand as 1997 approaches. Having firmly rejected true democratic opposition movements in China, Beijing can hardly tolerate them in Hong Kong.

A tough line from Beijing in 1997 is especially likely because the retrocession may well occur just at the apex of the transition of power in Beijing. Former National Security Council Asia chief Douglas Paal notes that, by mid-1997, China will reach a major point of discontinuity. As the British hand over political control of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic, China’s domestic politics will shift from the “three musketeers” common front of the near term to a zero-sum political game. The stakes will be extremely high and the outcome unpredictable at this stage, as each potential successor seeks to trip up his rivals and assert his authority.

Indeed, Paal predicts a major “political crisis” in China during 1997–98, when the country’s “institutional defects and shortcomings


will become manifest." Such a context is hardly one to inspire
tolerance of street protests by flag-waving Hong Kong democracy
activists.

Such protests—readily apparent during the Tiananmen Square
massacre, when an estimated 1.5 million of Hong Kong’s six million
residents took to the streets—only become Legislative Council
(Legco) produced a stunning repudiation of pro-Beijing candidates.
The Democratic Party, whose leader, Martin C. M. Lee, has been
described by Beijing as a “subversive,” won most of the 20
popularly-elected seats, and allies captured many of the other 40,
chosen by professional groups or electoral committees. In sum, pro-
democracy legislators appear to make up about 28 seats in the 60-
member body, and will frequently be joined by a handful of
moderates to form a majority on many issues. The party most closely
aligned with Beijing won only 6 seats, and its three senior party
officers each went down to sound defeat.

The *Washington Post* report on the issue said that, as a result,
“China and Hong Kong today seemed set for a prolonged period of
confrontation.” China has promised to dismantle the legislature and
replace it with a rubber-stamp assembly whose delegates would be
hand-picked by Beijing. The results of September, suggesting that
China cannot win a fair contest of public opinion in Hong Kong, will
only increase Beijing’s determination to wipe out the legislature. As
*The Economist* editorialized, “this vote hands China a ready-made
dissident movement in its new possession.” Pro-Beijing forces
within Hong Kong who had been rejected at the polls might also be
tempted to take a tougher line.

An escalating crisis between China and Hong Kong; implicit and
explicit Chinese threats of retaliation against democracy protesters;
a Chinese occupation of Hong Kong led by a huge military procession

34 Ibid., p. 34.
36 Ibid.
and followed by waves of secret police who fan out and arrest democracy activists—a more damaging scenario for Sino-American relations could hardly be imagined. Such a result now seems inevitable, however, and for one simple reason: the values at the core of the two governments are diametrically opposed.

**Cultural Differences**

Samuel Huntington, in his famous essay “The Clash of Civilizations?” argues that, in the “new phase” of world politics, “the fundamental source of conflict . . . will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.” The fault lines between civilizations, Huntington goes on, “will be the battle lines of the future.” And perhaps the most important civilizational fault line lies between the United States and China: Huntington defines the single most hostile cultural threat to the United States: a “Confucian-Islamic connection” led by China and Iran which “has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power.”

Huntington’s analysis has sparked an enormous debate, with a variety of critics challenging the idea that cultural differences will be the dominant source of conflict in the future. Yet few would deny the common-sensical proposition that cultural values and norms often serve as an important source of misunderstanding, tension, and even war. As Huntington demonstrates, cultural differences invest general disputes over national interests with emotional questions of identity and national worth. If they are not the driving engine of world politics, they are at least one of several engines; and their effect is not benign.

In the Sino-American relationship, cultural differences manifest themselves in a number of the practical policy issues discussed elsewhere in this essay. They lead, for example, to a profoundly different view of the notion of freedom. This debate has drawn in commentators from a host of Asian dictatorships and quasi-

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dictatorships; in geopolitical terms, however, it centers on the Sino-American axis.

Cultural differences are also at work in the evolving dialogue between the United States and China over trade, to be examined below. Like Japan, China may represent another “culture of capitalism” which poses a persistent and explosive trade policy problem for US administrations. Klaus Schwab and Claude Smadja have pointed out that trade becomes an even more hostile issue when a cultural element is added. For example, there have been some disquieting attempts lately by Europeans... to enlist the United States in a kind of holy alliance against the East Asian countries, which the Europeans accuse of playing by different rules and flouting Western-established ‘universal values’. . . . There is now a distinct risk that trade frictions will fuel cultural ones, thereby creating a dangerous spiral of tension and confrontation that would be to no one’s benefit. 39

There is little doubt, therefore, that culture causes Chinese and American officials and publics to see certain issues differently. And history strongly suggests that such divergent viewpoints can lead to misunderstanding, misperception, and crisis.

**Chinese Nationalism**

The effect of culture in the Sino-American relationship is slowly being joined by, and intermixed with, the increasingly potent force of Chinese nationalism. Within China, it increasingly appears that, as Audrey and Patrick Cronin have contended, “With Marxism-Leninism steadily being eroded... Chinese nationalism may take its place...” 40 A host of factors, from a growing economy to a tradition of hegemony in East Asia, are encouraging China to assert its claims more forcefully. This reemergent nationalism in a country of over one billion people could have dangerous consequences for the region.

Some forty years ago, Hans Morgenthau offered a theory of

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nationalism that summarized much of the thinking of his day and which remains relevant in ours. Essentially, Morgenthau contended that nationalism flourished during periods of instability. The “emotional intensity of the identification of the individual with his nation,” he wrote in 1948,

stands in inverse proportion to the stability of the particular society as reflected in the sense of security of its members. The greater the stability of society and the sense of security of its members, the smaller are the chances for collective emotions to seek an outlet in aggressive nationalism, and vice versa.

The enormous changes and upheavals in Europe during the nineteenth century contributed to the flowering of nationalism during that period, Morgenthau argued. “As Western society became ever more unstable, the sense of insecurity deepened and the emotional attachment to the nation as the symbolic substitute for the individual became ever stronger.” This relationship “between social disintegration, personal insecurity, and the ferocity of modern nationalistic power” came to full fruition in Germany before World War II.41

One could argue that China will be undergoing a similar period of radical economic and social transformation in the decade ahead. Already, reforms have transformed the nature of the Chinese economy, exposed a very traditional culture to the information age, generated vast new opportunities for millions of Chinese entrepreneurs, and created tens of millions of homeless vagrants wandering from city to city in search of work. Alfred North Whitehead wrote that, “The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur.”42 To the extent that China’s real “great leap forward” wrecks certain parts of its society even as it renews others, it will create fertile soil for resurgent nationalism.

New York Times Tokyo bureau chief Nicholas Kristof thus points out that “The risk of conflict arises in part because of stirrings of

41 Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, pp. 120–21.

42 Quoted in National Interest, No. 41 (Fall 1995), p. 18.
Chinese nationalism. Nobody believes in Communism anymore, so the Communist Party is trying to use nationalism as the new glue.”

Kristof suggests that the tactic may be working: “In five years of living and traveling in China,” he notes, “I met innumerable ordinary people who didn’t give two yuan for Communism but who argued passionately that China needed to reclaim its territories.” Robert Scalapino agrees that “In China, the declining appeal of ideology has led to assertive nationalism”; and he points to the crucial question: “Will it be a benign nationalism, compatible with the oft-proclaimed five principles of peaceful coexistence, or a more militant nationalism?”

In the context of China’s growing nationalism, the passing of Deng Xiaoping—who has clearly exerted a moderating influence on Chinese hegemony in the region—may inaugurate a more assertive period in Chinese policy. Douglas Paal worries that, much like Bismarck during the rise of modern Germany, Deng crafted the state and contained the threat to his neighbors as its power grew. And like Bismarck, Deng’s passing may mark a turning point if his successors prove unwilling or unable to moderate their natural tendency to seek great influence in the region.

In practical terms, this growing nationalism is most evident on questions of sovereignty—Taiwan and the South China Sea. The reactions Nicholas Kristof elicited from average Chinese support the validity of a worrisome trend: growing nationalist sentiment and the Communist regime’s specific territorial goals in the region mixed together into a potent and dangerous tendency toward military expansion. This is the most obvious implication of Chinese nationalism, but there are others which are broader, more diffuse, but in the long run perhaps equally important. Rising nationalism will inject more powerful considerations of pride and prestige into


45 Paal, “Political Risks and Investment Opportunities,” p. 31.
China's dealings with the United States. Along with culture, nationalism will serve as a filter for Chinese perceptions which renders compromise and mutual understanding more difficult in the years ahead.

The political scientist Stephen Van Evera has examined the ways in which nationalism can lead to war, and his comments are relevant to the Chinese case. As he recognizes, "the effects of nationalism are highly varied: some types of nationalism are far more dangerous than other types, all types of nationalism are more dangerous under some conditions than under others, and nationalism can even dampen the risk of war under some conditions." Of which type, then, is Chinese nationalism?

Van Evera's analysis suggests that it might be highly dangerous. He outlines, for example, four primary attributes of those nationalisms which serve as an immediate cause of war: nationalism by stateless groups seeking states; nationalism directed at the recovery of national diasporas abroad; nationalism with hegemonic goals; and nationalism which oppresses minorities within their states. Chinese nationalism poses problems on three of these four counts: it is overtly directed at recovering diasporas in Hong Kong and Taiwan; it has openly hegemonic goals in the South China Sea; and it is oppressive of minorities in Tibet and soon Hong Kong, as well as broader democracy activists, throughout China.

Van Evera also stresses the impact of chauvinist myth-making on the threat posed by nationalism. "The effects of nationalism depend heavily on the beliefs of nationalism movements," he writes; "self-justifying historical myths" can be especially dangerous, transforming nationalism "from a purely self-liberating enterprise into a hegemonistic enterprise." As the regime in Beijing increases its reliance on nationalist myths, it will clearly fall into this worrisome group.


In particular, Van Evera notes four specific factors that determine the extent of nationalist myth-making: the legitimacy of the regime (ones with weak legitimacy are more prone to use nationalist myths); the "scope of the demands posed by the state on its citizenry; the domestic economic situation; and the existence or absence of "evaluative institutions" like a free media and academic community." On each of these four issues, Van Evera's analysis points to a dangerous China—an illegitimate dictatorship with no true evaluative institutions which makes heavy demands of its citizens and which is undergoing a profound economic transformation. All of this points to a situation in which the regime in Beijing will see increasing need to use nationalist myths to preserve its rule; and the result will be a situation which history suggests will be prone to confrontation and violence.

Here we see an example of how these various reasons for pessimism in Sino-American relations intersect and work together so that their whole is greater than the sum of their parts. In this case the factors working together are dictatorial rule and nationalism: each magnifies the need for and violent trends in the other, with the result that the two together are more threatening that either would be alone. Many of the factors outlined here, such as culture and trade and conflicting interests and the tensions generated by a rising power, work together in similar ways to produce a critical mass of hostility in the Sino-American relationship.

49 Ibid., pp. 30–32.

50 On this last point, a few observers have begun to predict a coming economic crash as China’s growth reaches the limits allowed by its infrastructure and intrusive state role. See Paul Krugman, “The Myth of Asia’s Miracle,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 73, No. 6 (November–December 1994), pp. 62–78, esp. pp. 75–76; and, even more dramatically, Richard Hornik, “Bursting China’s Bubble,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 73, No. 3 (May–June 1994), pp. 28–42.

51 Denny Roy connects nationalism and dictatorial rule as a joint cause of aggression in “Hegemon on the Horizon,” p. 160.
Trade Policy Debates

Finally, Sino-American tension is likely on an issue that remains too often neglected in surveys of the relationship: trade policy. Simply put, China remains an unapologetically mercantilist nation, many of whose trade practices run directly counter to the letter and spirit of the new World Trade Organization (WTO). Beijing sustains a massive trade surplus with the United States and, as they have done in the US-Japan relationship, trade debates will add an additional note of hostility to Sino-American ties.

Gregory Mastel of the Economic Strategy Institute has surveyed China’s trade practices in some detail. Chinese policy involves substantial and persistent use of such tactics as the piracy of intellectual property, hosts of traditional protectionist measures from tariffs to discriminatory import regulations, the use of products standards and testing requirements to slow imports, severe barriers to free exchange between Chinese and foreign currencies, and tight control of the activities of service industries. China also has a long history of dumping (selling products below production costs to gain control of foreign markets) and subsidizing industries against competition. In sum, Mastel concludes that “No other country, including Japan and India, practices the same persistent and sweeping governmental protectionism as is practiced in China today.”

For Sino-American relations, as Mastel contends, “Clearly the great danger...is that China will be allowed to amass large, ever-growing structural trade surpluses with the United States and other countries.” This concern now carries a specific price tag: a $23 billion US trade deficit with China in 1993 and nearly $30 billion in 1994. This is not only a US problem—the European Union has a large deficit as well—but the United States will almost certainly take the lead in pushing Beijing in the direction of freer trade.

So far, as Mastel has written, US efforts “to establish a mutually


beneficial trade relationship with China are failing.” The implications of this failure are profound. The American people may not be concerned about human rights in China, the South China Sea, or even Taiwan, but they well understand a threat to their jobs and economic well-being. Mastel concludes that, “In terms of long-run US interests, the potential impact of current trade disputes dwarfs the disputes over the Spratly Islands, Taiwan, and even human rights.”


The likely story of relations between the United States and China in the coming years is therefore not a good one. As the preceding analysis has suggested, there are a host of reasons for pessimism. The sum of their implications has been stated by the political scientist Aaron Friedberg: in the long run, “It is Asia that seems far more likely [than Europe] to be the cockpit of great power conflict.”

These trends obviously carry important implications for the Korean peninsula, both for the short and the long term. In the short term, increasing Sino-American hostility will complicate the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. Beijing may become even less cooperative than it was during the final round of diplomacy before the Agreed Framework.

To the extent that North Korea believes it has regained a close ally in China, Pyongyang may be tempted to take a tougher line in negotiations. In particular, the hope of economic aid from China may give hard-liners in Pyongyang a powerful argument why the North does not need investment from the capitalist world—a need which most experts agree underlies the North’s cooperation on the nuclear question.

In the longer term, if Korea approaches unification in the context of a growing strategic competition between the United States and China, Korea could become a focus of Sino-American tension. Beijing has no particular reason to fear a unified Korea, but it does


have reason to be concerned about, and to oppose, a unified Korea that is allied with the United States. China may therefore find a strategic rationale for propping up North Korea to prevent Pyongyang’s complete collapse and absorption by the South. A replay of events not unlike those in 1948-50 is not out of the question.

Given this risk of tension and conflict in Korea, and the specific threat Sino-American hostility poses to peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, what strategy is the United States likely to employ toward China? What approach is most appropriate to respond to a rising power with interests and cultural values very different from those of the United States?

**To Contain or Engage?**

Many surveys of US China policy narrow the choices to one of two basic strategies: containment or engagement. If Washington detects a substantial threat in Beijing’s policies and goals, which the preceding analysis suggests that it will, some argue that Washington should opt for containment, stating explicitly the scope of the Chinese threat and seeking to surround China with US allies. Others respond that containment is a perfect recipe for a self-fulfilling prophecy, and offer as an alternative drawing China into a deep and restrictive web of regional institutions and agreements.

In fact, the distinction between the two strategies is not as stark as that. A brief review of two recent essays, one proposing containment, one engagement, indicates the possibility of a fertile middle ground.

At first glance, the essays of Gideon Rachman on the one hand, and Audrey Kurth Cronin and Patrick Cronin on the other, could not seem more opposed. Rachman begins his provocative essay by arguing that, if containment means ringing China with nuclear weapons, as the West did the Soviet Union, it is certainly undesirable. If it means acknowledging openly that China is a destabilizing force in Asia and that other powers in the Pacific need to coordinate their responses to growing Chinese power, then containment is what is needed.56

The Cronins reply forcefully that “containment would be the wrong policy, at the wrong time, against the wrong country.” The
United States, they say, “needs a new framework built on a policy of realistic engagement with China.”\(^{57}\) Containment versus engagement; a clearer contrast could hardly be imagined.

And yet, on closer examination, the two articles have much in common. Rachman agrees that, “It is right to try to engage China. Conflict with China is not inevitable.” He admits that, “Any containment policy aimed at China would obviously be much more low-key than the various strategies of containment aimed at the Soviet Union,” and suggests that “Trade and investment remain the most useful sort of engagement.”\(^{58}\)

The Cronins, meanwhile, concede that China’s intentions “remain frustratingly opaque.” They note that “China is involved in more territorial disputes than any other power in the world”; that “Chinese officials have at times unilaterally declared the entire South China Sea to be Chinese territorial waters”; and that the Chinese “harbor a historical and cultural heritage of disdain for multilateral approaches.” Indeed, they conclude that “there is a significant potential in the long run for China to be a major military threat to the region and the world,” and caution that “it would be unwise to focus only on the prospects for cooperation with China.”\(^{59}\)

Both essays appear to agree that, at least in the short run, engagement, particularly economic engagement, has substantial benefits. Both agree that China will likely throw its weight around, and that a stronger US response may be necessary at that time, whether it goes by the name of containment or some other term. Neither would rapidly or publicly embrace containment, but at the same time, neither would rule it out as perhaps necessary in the future. Thus even these two essays point to a possible compromise that would use engagement as long as it was worthwhile, at the same time recognizing the possible need for containment at a later time—


\(^{58}\) Rachman, “Containing China,” p. 137.

and preparing such an option in case it proves necessary, despite best efforts at a cooperative relationship.

**The Value of Engagement**

Such a strategy is all the more recommended because it would be wrong to sacrifice the utility of engagement, a critical element of any US strategy to achieve its true long-run interest in China: a more democratic system.

While democracy in China would not be a panacea for the various threats outlined above, it would certainly help to reduce their impact, as Russia’s transition to democracy has done in US-Russian relations. For many observers, a fundamental US interest in its relationship with China, in addition to the more immediate ones outlined above (such as deterring Chinese aggression and promoting an open Chinese market), is encouraging the evolution of democracy. Such changes may be slowly underway with China’s growing regionalism, with the increasingly assertive voices in China’s parliament,60 and in the rise of thousands of nongovernmental community and activist groups throughout China.61 And if the United States indeed decides to encourage and help expand these trends, then economic and cultural engagement of China must retain a leading role in US policy.

John Chettle has studied the history of US policy toward closed societies. He concludes that there existed the “complex impact on closed societies of a powerful, appealing, seductive, and subversive society which carried within it, what was, for an autocracy, a virus as virulent as any Ebola.” Chettle writes, “By helping to erode the core belief that sustained each society, the United States contributed decisively to the overthrow of both regimes.” And the “same process of erosion,” he believes, “is now far advanced in China.”62

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Chettle points in particular to the role of American business and student exchanges in this process. "Business was, and is, a profoundly subversive force. It is highly rational, which despotisms are not and cannot afford to be. It is focused on the consumers’ needs and wishes, which despotisms never are. It comes laden with dangerous tools: intelligence, information, computers, telephones, faxes, xerox machines." At the same time, "around eighty thousand Chinese students and scholars, the cream of the Chinese intelligentsia and future leadership, are at any one time in American universities. These relationships... bring to isolated and historically xenophobic societies a consciousness of their own backwardness, not only technological but political." 63

And yet Chettle recognizes that the answer is not simply to throw open the doors of economic and political intercourse and leave it at that. In fact he finds much of the force for change in US policy in the dynamic interplay between elements within the United States promoting engagement and those promoting isolation. Aware of its need for constructive ties with the United States, and attempting to appeal to those favoring engagement, the dictatorship undertakes reforms that, combined with the insidious effect of US engagement and investment, spark its downfall. In this good cop/bad cop strategy, the “influence of the good cop was essential in bringing about constructive change.... But the presence of the bad cop—sometimes in power, sometimes hovering in the background—made the blandishments of the good cop more appealing.” In the end, he concludes, “apartheid [in South Africa] was brought down neither by sanctions nor by constructive engagement. The two were constructive allies. It was their coexistence that was so seductive. Similarly, peaceful coexistence combined with high defense budgets, we now realize, was the recipe for the peaceful extinction of the Soviet Union.” 64

The process Chettle describes seems very much underway in China today. An autocracy, desperate for US (and broader Western)
economic ties and political recognition, advances reform and avoids vicious crackdowns in order to preserve its relationships with the outside world. But those very relationships import not just capital and factories, but subversive factors—ideas, and the means and confidence to discuss and spread them. Once it comes to life, this activist spirit finds in the reforms which the autocrat has allowed the vehicle to advance its claims; and the result, after many years of continual effect, is the collapse of the autocracy.

Meddling in the internal affairs of the world’s most populous state, however, is a risky business. Even if an approach aimed at encouraging democracy in China were to succeed, it would inevitably generate an unstable transition period during which Chinese behavior might become less predictable and less centrally controlled. A number of analysts have recently pointed to the danger of a collapse of central authority in China. Arthur Waldron has discussed the importance of such an event for US policy. China’s opening to the West, Waldron notes, has “unleashed a dialectical process in China, and this process has begun to undermine the foundations on which the initial [Sino-American] diplomatic relationship rested.” China has never fully established the rule of law, and when the current hierarchy of men falls apart, “China’s political futures comes essentially up for grabs.” The result could be a more nationalistic, dictatorial China, or a decentralized warlordism.65 In any case, even if engagement has any hope of producing a democratic, peaceful China, it will almost certainly not do so in a single step; and the intermediate steps on the road are likely to be painful.

Coercive Engagement Now; Be Ready for Containment Later

Thus even a strategy based on engagement must seriously consider the dangers of the coming years, and must include elements beyond the rhetoric of cooperation. Chettle’s “peaceful coexistence combined with high defense budgets” sounds very much like a middle ground between containment and engagement, and indeed it

points us in the direction of a promising compromise. Denny Roy similarly mentions “a third possible strategy” for the major powers: to “continue their participation in China’s economic development, encouraging positive behavior when feasible... and organizing an anti-China coalition only if and when threatening behavior occurs.” Absent an ideal solution, he concludes, “continuing to abet China’s growth, while hoping defensive balancing will not be necessary, is the least problematic option for the outside world.”

Thus we arrive at the likely, and recommended, strategy for the United States toward China: attempting to preserve reasonably amicable ties in the short run, even while standing up for US and allies’ values and interests; promoting continued economic and cultural engagement as the most likely avenues toward change in the Chinese regime; and keeping the powder dry by maintaining alliance relationships in East Asia and preserving a military capable of responding to Chinese aggression should it occur.

It is important to stress that, following Chettle, such a strategy would employ, not merely engagement, but coercive engagement. The elements of engagement would be tailored to promote US interests and encourage the rise of democracy in China, albeit slowly and not according to any arbitrary deadlines. And along the way, US officials must not be afraid to endanger the engaged relationship by standing up for their interests. Such consistent defense of US interests is, in any case, the only policy that will make engagement politically acceptable within the United States.

**Conclusion**

This essay has argued that there are reasons—powerful and important reasons—to expect a deterioration in Sino-American relations in coming years. A host of powerful and fundamental factors, from culture and nationalism to economics, are driving the two nations toward a series of confrontations. This analysis suggests, as Richard Betts has properly observed, that “The West will need more than a bit of good luck to avoid clashing with China politically.

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This is true according to either set of assumptions about international relations, realist or liberal."67

Yet neither Betts nor any other shrewd observer of international politics would conclude, and this essay does not contend, that a full-fledged Sino-American Cold War (or, even worse, a hot one) is inevitable. In the long run, it may well be that the evolution of China toward a more decentralized (but not unstable), democratic system will help address the sources of hostility with the United States. Even in the short term, there are factors which restrain Sino-American competition—most powerfully, the recognition in both capitals (and especially in Beijing) of the consequences if the relationship turns sour. The clear trend toward warming ties in the wake of the Harry Wu and Lee Teng-hui disputes in 1995 points to the strong desire on both sides to overcome the factors discussed above and preserve amicable ties. China’s September 1995 decision to cancel its nuclear reactor agreement with Iran was another hopeful sign in this regard.

In the broader sense, therefore, the trends are not all bad. In fact, “What is unfolding in Asia, is a race between the accelerating dynamics of multipolarity, which could increase the chances of conflict, and the growth of mitigating factors that should tend to dampen them and to improve the prospects for a continuing peace.”68 The strategy proposed here recognizes these parallel trends. It attempts to build on the positive ones while recognizing that the negative ones can spark major new crises in the years ahead. Only time will tell which element of this dual strategy proves most appropriate for Sino-American relations in the twenty-first century.
