



CHINA AND THE WEST IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

By Warren I. Cohen

Warren I. Cohen is Distinguished University Professor of History at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, a senior scholar with the Asia Program at the Wilson Center, author of numerous books, and editor of the Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations. This essay is based on his keynote address at the FPRI Wachman Center's March 1-2, 2008 history institute on China's Encounter with the West, held at and co-sponsored by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Asia Program. See www.fpri.org for videocasts and texts of lectures. Core history institute support is provided by The Annenberg Foundation; additional support for specific programs is provided by W.W. Keen Butcher, Bruce H. Hooper, John M. Templeton, Jr., the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The next history weekends are America in the Civil War Era, May 17-18, 2008 (Kenosha, WI); What Students Need to Know About America's Wars, Part I: 1622-1919, July 26-27, 2008 (Wheaton, IL); and Teaching the History of Innovation, October 18-19, 2008 (Kansas City, MO).

I want to talk about rising China and the United States. To start with a couple obvious points about the rise of Chinese power in the twenty-first century, the most obvious is that we are talking about a resurrection rather than a new or unique phenomenon. Chinese diplomats, political leaders, and for a long time intellectuals have spoken a great deal about the century of humiliation, the years in which their country was plagued by European, Japanese, and American imperialists, from the Opium War through World War II. The Chinese are very proud of their ancient heritage, but they are much less likely to tell you about the humiliations they inflicted on their neighbors over thousands of years of building a Chinese empire. Their historians have not forgotten the centuries in which China was the world's greatest power. But these memories are a little awkward when juxtaposed with their preferred role as history's victims, which they so often use to justify irresponsible behavior in contemporary affairs.

The second obvious point is that in creating their empire, the Chinese were no less arrogant and ruthless than the

Europeans, Japanese, or the Americans in the creation of theirs. Like all the world's empires, the Chinese empire was based on conquest and the subjugation of militarily inferior people, whom the Chinese portrayed as subhuman to justify their own conquest. The moral of the story is that there is no reason, cultural or genetic, to expect China as a great power to act any less ruthlessly than have other great powers over the millennia.

CHINA'S ANTICIPATED FUTURE

With the tremendous growth of China's economy over the last quarter century, it is expected that its GNP will surpass that of the U.S. by mid-century. Great economic strength translates into great influence and growing military power. What does this mean for the U.S.? The national goals of the PRC are obvious. China intends to become a great power, to expand its wealth and influence, and to achieve preeminence in East Asia at the expense of the now dominant U.S. China's leaders and foreign policy elites are constantly debating how to get from here to there. Most projections by U.S. and Chinese analysts alike are based on the assumption that China's ascent will stay on track—it will just keep getting better and better, stronger and stronger, richer and richer as time goes on.

But we want to consider the possibility that that is not how it is going to work. We have heard about the massive dissatisfaction in the countryside. In 2006, the last year for which I have seen figures, there were more than 80,000 protest demonstrations in rural China involving hundreds of thousands, probably millions of people. There has been a rising curve on that all through the last decade at least. There were probably well over 100,000 such protest demonstrations in China last year. The government promises to deal with the grievances of the Chinese people, but it does not. The promises it makes, the actions it says it is going to take, are underfunded and generally peripheral to the central issue, which is the inability of farmers to hold onto land. Local officials easily make deals with developers where farmers wind up getting less than 10 percent of the value of the land that they have lost, if they are lucky. The central government seems powerless to stop this kind of corruption.

The journalists who ferret out these stories and try to expose them are more likely to be the ones that are punished than are the perpetrators of the crimes.

Along the same lines, rural youth in China are not getting much of an education. Thirty to forty percent of them drop out in the equivalent of our middle school or junior high school. We could say categorically that there is less equality in China today than there is in the U.S. or Russia.

China's environmental problems are growing very severe. The water table in north China is dropping precipitously. There is air and water pollution everywhere, lack of drinking water. Every week one reads horror stories in the newspapers of tainted food, water, and medicine. We read mostly about the ones that affect us, but the Chinese people are the ones who are suffering the most from these problems. We have all heard concerns about the air quality problem with the Olympics approaching, and the justifiable fear many athletes have of what they will encounter there. (The Americans were planning to bring along their own food, but for political reasons backed off and will now eat with the other athletes--they'll bring along some of their own food.)

There is also a demographic problem in China, an aging population. The problem has grown so great that the Chinese government is now reconsidering its one-child policy and thinking about permitting families to have more than one child. That is going to be problematic, because there's a distinct shortage of women in China. The one-child policy has led to many female fetuses being aborted and infanticide, so in parts of north China, Korean wives are being brought in, and North Korean women are funded to come across and be used for procreation purposes.

China is also facing rising labor costs. Foreign-owned factories are beginning to move out of China, particularly out of the Pearl River Delta area where things have gotten so expensive. They're moving to Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, where they can find still cheaper labor than in China.

Some at Harvard think that the government will collapse before mid-century. The U.S. government is interested in that possibility. The CIA is collecting scenarios on how China might collapse and what will happen if it does. I would say the odds are that the government will prevail, but with declining legitimacy, because of the corruption it seems powerless to stop and the inequality about which it seems uninterested in doing anything. The government will continue to have the dominant role in the economy. Powerful vested interests in the government are in control of the state-owned enterprises and not eager to relinquish the power and money that gives them. The critics tend to be powerless. Journalists who try to deal with these stories do not fare well.

The Chinese government of course has a monopoly on force, and it has demonstrated its willingness to use that force as necessary to deal with protests and protestors. Thus far, the government has done a good job of controlling the flow of information. Some information gets through, some people find out about things, they try to get it around, but there are a large number of people working on controlling the internet and doing a good job of it.

In the cities, especially the coast cities, there is a very nice trade-off. The regime offers national pride to all, and it also offers material benefits and social freedom beyond comprehension 15 or 20 years ago. My Chinese friends used to meet me in the late 1970s and early 1980s on bicycles; they now all have their own cars. They are stuck in traffic, but they all have their own cars. They lived in tenements, apartments on campuses and the institutes they were attached to, now they have private homes. A couple of them even have villas. In exchange, of course, they have to accept the continued rule of the CCP. That is the deal. So we should not hold our breath waiting for the middle class to demand a greater voice in government. There are things the middle class wants, and they are getting pushier, but challenging the CCP is not likely. (Of course, if you had asked me 20 years ago whether the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, I would have laughed, so things can change rapidly.)

U.S. RELATIONS

One issue concerning many Western analysts is the "China threat." But China will not in our lifetimes have a military capability of challenging the U.S. It is very likely to close the gap some, but it likely will remain far behind in naval and air power. Nonetheless, the enormous buildup of Chinese submarine forces is worrisome. This constitutes a potential threat to American interests in the Pacific. I was just at a meeting with analysts from a pair of Shanghai think tanks, one of whom contended that the naval modernization the PRC was carrying out was necessary to enable the Chinese navy to cooperate with the U.S. navy, protecting sea lanes, dealing with pirates, etc. I find that contention hollow; the naval buildup is clearly targeted at the U.S. in case of a conflict between the U.S. and China over Taiwan. In any event, war is not in the PRC's interests.

In the mid 1990s, Chinese leaders, especially Jiang Zemin, concluded that stable relations with the U.S. should be their highest priority. They concluded that they needed the American market and U.S. technology in order to maintain the growth rate essential for their domestic stability. So they would keep up good relations with the Americans. They also needed some sort of understanding, *modus vivendi*, on Taiwan, to keep that situation from getting out of hand. That strategy looked very good for a very short period of time. Then it was sorely tested in Spring 1999. From about 1996 until then, they had been going along quite content and pleased with how their policy was working. But in Spring 1999, first, President Clinton mishandled Chinese efforts to enter the WTO, and this played into the hands of those Chinese who were arguing for a less accommodating approach to the U.S. Then the U.S. used NATO to attack Serbia during the crisis over ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. The Chinese perceived this as a precedent for U.S. interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. If they're going to do that there, they wondered, might they someday think of intervening on behalf of Tibet, or on behalf of the Uighers in Xinjiang? So this was not something the Chinese were pleased about.

Then worst of all was NATO's accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Many Chinese will never believe that was an accident, that we didn't in fact target it. In fact, some of my Chinese students from the mid-

80s who went on to become government officials believe it was staged by the CIA in order to increase its budget, claiming the need to hire someone who could read maps.

In any event, Jiang Zemin's policies came under severe attack. The U.S. embassy was under siege and the consul general's place in Chengdu was burned down. From Spring on in 1999 there was a very intense and to some extent public debate within China over its foreign policy. The argument was made that Jiang was wrong, that forces hostile to China had gained control of American policy. This was argued back and forth for some considerable time. In the end, Jiang prevailed. When the next crisis occurred, his policy survived again. This was when tensions were renewed in April 2001, when a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese interceptor. The Chinese pilot was killed, the American plane landed on Hainan Island.

President Bush made the mistake of trying to bully the Chinese into releasing the plane immediately, and the Chinese did not take kindly to that. But what was fascinating was Jiang's willingness to ignore popular anger among the Chinese people and to accept something less than the apology he had initially demanded. It was striking the way he had moved toward the U.S., especially because Bush had come into office insisting that Clinton was wrong, that China was not a strategic partner but a strategic competitor. Then as soon as he was inaugurated as president he initiated phone calls to all the world's leaders and deliberately excluded Jiang. Nonetheless, Jiang decided to play along with the U.S. The crisis was quickly defused and relations improved rapidly. Then came 9/11, and the improvement in relations between the U.S. and China accelerated. The Chinese were happy to join the war on terror, particularly when the Americans were going to include Uighurs in Xinjiang among the terrorists to which it was opposed. The Chinese had been trying to crush such separatist movements in China, treating the movements' people very badly, and the U.S. had been a little more sympathetic to the movements. But one of the prices we pay for Chinese support in our war on terror was to accept the Chinese definition of what constituted a terrorist, at least in their territory.

The long and short of this is that any number of American and Chinese analysts will tell you that current U.S.-China relations are the best they have been in years. China's recent defense white papers have been less stridently anti-American. The younger generation of China's national security elite is much more confident about the future than the people we dealt with in the 1980s. Indeed, in my recent meeting with Chinese think tanks one leader spoke deliberately about "new thinking" among the Chinese national security elite, a phrase selected to recall in our minds Gorbachev's reforms and the new thinkers who led to the changes in the Soviet Union. So the younger people talk even less about being history's victims. They seem to be beginning to comprehend the responsibilities that go with great power.

The current U.S. strategy appears to be an effort to diffuse international concerns about the increase in Chinese economic and military power, especially among China's neighbors in Southeast Asia. China wants to appear to be a responsible stakeholder in the international community,

something we asked them to become. There are some indications that China is willing these days to abide by international norms. The critical point for them is that they want to be convinced that these are really international norms and not American ideas of how Chinese should behave so that they can serve American interests.

In recent years the Chinese have been responsive to American pressures on nonproliferation issues, for example. Most obviously we have seen this with North Korea, but apparently with Iran as well, although there is no question that the Chinese will balance their concerns about nonproliferation or proliferation in this case with their strong interests in working with Iran. Therefore they are not going to push as hard as we would happily do. But the other side of that is that their responsiveness to American pressure is decreasing as Chinese leaders perceive the U.S. to be in decline. Why should they listen to the U.S. under current circumstances? The Chinese are absolutely delighted by Pew polls that indicate that most of the world views China more favorably than it views the U.S.

Nonetheless, the emphasis within China continues to be on peaceful internal development. So again, war between the U.S. and China is highly unlikely. But people don't always do what is in their best interests, and there are two flashpoints that could lead to disaster: Taiwan and Japan.

TAIWAN

Beijing insists that Taiwan is a province of China and that it will unquestionably attack if Taiwan declares independence. Just why this matters so much to them is hard to know. Why bother getting so fussed up about the thing? Even if Taiwan declared independence, the U.S. certainly would not recognize it. Probably no country of consequence would. But China is not about to relax about it. Taiwan has been ruled for the last eight years by a party and president that is at least nominally committed to independence, which has made the Chinese government very uncomfortable.

The U.S. has supported Taiwan for nearly sixty years. We are currently required by law by the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself--not to come to Taiwan's aid, but to provide Taiwan with what it requires to defend itself. When Taiwan was threatened during the Cold War, the U.S. always came to the rescue. When there was a crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1996, President Clinton sent two carrier battle groups to the area to demonstrate to the Chinese that we meant business. And President Bush came into office planning to be closer to Taiwan. His Defense Department was maneuvering with Taiwan in ways that nobody had dreamt of doing for a very long time. But by 2004, the Bush administration had been embarrassed by Taiwan's leader and things were changing a little bit. So the U.S. response to a crisis in Taiwan seemed to be a little less certain. We talked of our policy as being one of strategic ambiguity. We do not want either side to know exactly what we would do when, for fear that if we assured Taiwan we would come to their rescue under any circumstance, they would provoke an attack. Likewise, if we assured the Chinese we would not come to Taiwan's rescue under certain circumstances, then the Chinese might be encouraged to attack Taiwan. So strategic ambiguity works very well for us. But we would probably, depending on

circumstances, feel that we had to intervene to protect Taiwan if the Chinese were to attack.

The good news on the Taiwan situation is that the likely winner of the March 23 presidential election in Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou, is determined to ease tensions between Taiwan and the PRC. Chinese who work on the Taiwan question seem eager to work with the new administration, although there is considerable concern about the intention of the U.S. to sell advanced F-16 interceptors. What concerns me are differences among Chinese leaders about how to respond to the more favorable political situation in Taiwan. China's PLA sees tension in the Taiwan Strait as a cash cow. It lets them justify their demands for increases in their budget for purchases of advanced military technology.

Also making the situation dicey is that if there is a political crisis of any sort within China, it could lead to provocative action against Taiwan as a means of demonstrating that whoever is making the decision is not subject to charges of appeasement toward the U.S. or Taiwan. Someone in that situation would appeal to nationalism, and the U.S. would be in a very tough spot.

JAPAN

On the Japanese side, a year or two ago, the situation seemed a lot more tense than it does now. At present, tensions between China and Japan seem to be easing a little. There are plans for Hu Jintao to visit Japan in May, and one hopes he will not make Jiang's mistake of calling the Japanese to account on various things, because that does not go over very well. But historical issues remain going back to Japan's World War II atrocities in China—prominently, the rape of Nanjing. Many Japanese scholars and journalists now call that event a gross exaggeration, claiming that it could never have happened. They have done mathematical models showing that each Japanese soldier would have had to rape 20 women a day for this to have happened. This does not go over very well. So history becomes a very important issue between the countries.

Japan and China also compete for energy resources in the East China Sea and have territorial disputes over some islands there and status issues. There has never before been a time when both Japan and China were strong simultaneously. The Japanese military is beginning to gain some leeway in the Japanese political context, playing a larger role in world affairs. And there is the possibility of shots being fired between Japanese ships and Chinese ships and planes. What would the U.S. do in such a situation? Last year I attended a workshop with government and think tank specialists on these issues and the conclusion almost unanimously was that the U.S. would have no choice but to support its Japanese ally. If China and Japan started shooting, we would get drawn in on Japan's side.

So there are some flashpoints, there is some danger, there is some uncertainty, and these are conditions over which the U.S. has very little control.

EAST ASIA

China will and is already challenging U.S. dominance in East Asia. It's too early to tell the direction of Lee Myung-bak, the new president of South Korea, which was sliding rapidly out of the U.S. orbit. In any event, China remains the key player on the Korean peninsula. After all the years in which the U.S. was the dominant force, it is now the Chinese who basically call the shots there.

What is China's optimal goal in this situation? It is for the U.S. to retreat from East Asia, to allow China to seize control of Taiwan and intimidate Japan. But that's not in the cards right now. So for the time being, China will settle for less. It wants America to exert more pressure on Taiwan, to make it behave, and on Japan, for it to make concessions to China. But Beijing's current emphasis remains China's peaceful rise. I would suggest that that is almost certainly tactical. If the history of great powers is any indicator, if China's historic behavior is any indicator, a more powerful China will become more aggressive and a less benign presence in Asia.

CONCLUSION

A number of superb analysts, including Avery Goldstein, are more optimistic. They argue persuasively that it will continue to be in China's interests to pursue the same cooperative policy that has worked to date. Assuming that China does hold together through the twenty-first century and that it continues its impressive economic growth, what will China be like? It will not become a democratic country. China's government will not come to respect basic human rights, certainly not freedoms of speech, religion, and the press. We will see the perpetuation of an authoritarian state, an alternative model to Western democracy. China is now and will remain for the foreseeable future a magnet for the most unsavory regimes everywhere. China today aids Burma, Iran, Sudan, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe. These countries are all increasingly dependent on China's support, either politically or economically.

China is likely to continue to gain economic and military strength. It is not likely either to liberalize its political system or to pose a military threat to the U.S. in the foreseeable future. It very likely will oppose the liberal international system the U.S. has sponsored since 1945. And it will encourage wherever it can opposition to American leadership in the world. My friend Wang Jisi, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University and frequently an advisor to Hu Jintao and other Chinese leaders, always makes the point that the U.S. and China are not friends. There remain more profound differences between them than between any other two major powers in the world. But nor are they adversaries. There will continue to be tensions over events in Taiwan, differences over human rights, and the abuse thereof in places like Burma and Sudan as well as in China itself, but that's the world in which we live.