China: Making the Case for Realistic Engagement

by Michael E. Marti

Chinese aspirations to become a great power in the 21st century have numerous regional implications. Beijing claims to seek a peaceful international climate so as to concentrate on domestic development. Yet under the rubric of a New Security Concept (NSC), China also is pursuing a long-term strategy to alter radically regional power relationships that have contributed to prosperity and relative stability in East Asia over the past 50 years.

The New Security Concept echoes well-established Chinese principles of peaceful coexistence first articulated by Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference in 1955: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, nonaggression, noninterference in the internal affairs of other states, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Other Chinese statements stress the themes of mutually beneficial economic cooperation; elimination of inequalities and discriminatory trade relations; and the promotion of security through dialogue and cooperation, rather than by forming alliances against specific threats. Behind these generalizations, however, China has a two-fold goal: first, to allay the fears of its Asian neighbors, who are suspicious not only of China’s claims in the South China Sea and other territories but also its efforts to build a military force unequaled (with the exception of the United States) in Asia; and, second, to challenge the rationale behind the U.S. alliances and military presence in Asia, which China characterizes as holdovers from the Cold War.

China’s Strategy

According to official Chinese pronouncements, peace and development increasingly characterize the world; the major trends are toward multipolarity and economic globalization; and the general international security situation is improving. In its 2000 Defense White Paper, the Chinese government asserts that it “is devoting itself to its modernization drive, [and the country] needs and cherishes dearly an environment of long-term international peace, especially a favorable peripheral environment.” China characterizes its efforts to build the most powerful military force in the region as “pursuing a national defense policy that is defensive in nature, and its national defense construction (resources and funds) is in a subordinate position to and in service of economic construction.”

The white paper also portrays another side to the existing order:

The world is far from peaceful. . . . No fundamental change has been made in the old, unfair and irrational international political and economic order. Hegemonism and power politics still exist. . . . Certain big powers are pursuing “neo-interventionism,” “neo-gunboat policy,” and neo-economic colonialism, which are seriously damaging the sovereignty, independence, and developmental interests of many countries, and threatening world peace and security. . . . Only by developing a new security concept and establishing a fair and reasonable new international order can world peace and security be fundamentally guaranteed.

Such statements are significant because they reflect the lack of trust that the Chinese still hold toward the outside world. With the demise of the Soviet threat on its northern border and the diminished likelihood of nuclear war between the superpowers, China is free to spend more on economic growth and
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less on defense. However, China also entertains visions of becoming the predominant power in Asia and thereby one of the poles in a multipolar world. To accomplish this goal, it must reorder the existing power structure in Asia to diminish the influence of the United States while avoiding arms races with neighbors.

China’s ambitions must be understood from the perspective of its historical development. From 1840 to 1949, China was divided into spheres of influence and was effectively controlled by Western powers and Japan. The Communist revolution in 1949 finally ousted the foreigners and ended the period of colonialism. The use of the terms neo-gunboat policy, neo-economic colonialism, and hegemonism in the white paper is designed to recall images of foreign domination and humiliation and to link historic ill will to the current Chinese sense of frustration with the West in general and the United States in particular.

Against this background, China has never accepted the contemporary geopolitical system in the region, which is characterized by American bilateral military alliances and forward-based troop deployments, or Western, mainly American, preeminence in global economic decisionmaking. Hence NSC, which is both a new post-Cold War concept and an Eastern creation by virtue of its basis in the Bandung Principles, is China’s attempt to establish a regional alternative to Western dominance. This effort resonates with Chinese intellectual arguments of earlier periods that sought salvation from foreign domination, including arguments for the doctrine of Marxism as an alternative to Western-style capitalism.

China’s ambition to become a prosperous and powerful nation also includes reconquering what it calls “lost territories.” While NSC advocates peaceful coexistence, China has ongoing territorial disputes with India, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Russia, Taiwan, and Vietnam. It went to war with India in 1962 and with Vietnam in 1979, and it clashed with Vietnam in 1988 and the Philippines in 1995 over the South Sea Islands. While some of these claims have a weak historical basis, they nonetheless figure prominently in Chinese identity.

China professes not to seek hegemony in Asia; however, its determination to reclaim lost territories and become a preeminent power in the region can be accomplished only at the expense of the status quo. What are the implications for the nations of Asia that must deal with the growing economic and military power of their giant neighbor?

The Russian Connection

A cash-strapped Russia has been selling arms to China to its potential detriment, especially in light of China’s claims to territories lost through “unequal treaty” agreements made over the years with both tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Russia also is aware that China seeks to edge it out of the Far East by developing a competing economy there, most likely in conjunction with Japan. However, Russia has chosen to ally with China in the near term in an attempt to stave off any precipitous Chinese move to force it out of Asia before it has recovered its military, economic, and political prowess. Thus, to stay engaged as a regional player, Russia has signed China’s five-nation border agreement initiative with its former Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Also, Western media reported that President Vladimir Putin has agreed to Beijing’s anti-American position on national missile defense (NMD) and theater missile defense (TMD), despite his earlier statements that a limited system would be acceptable in Europe.

Russia also has sought to shore up its other relations around the region. It has begun talks with Outer Mongolia on mutual cooperation to reestablish political and economic ties. Putin has persisted in his courtship of Pyongyang, despite occasional setbacks. He also has sought to reaffirm ties to India through arms sales and support for its position against Pakistan, which relies on China for political and military support.

The Sino-Russian relationship can be characterized as a marriage of convenience. China wants to end Russian influence in the region as much as it wants to end American influence, but it needs the military hardware and technology that only Russia is prepared to provide. Russia needs time to sort out its domestic situation and to reclaim its superpower status, and this affects Chinese goals in the short term.

Japanese Concerns

For Japan, critical interests involve access to the Chinese market and a significant role in exploiting the Russian Far East, either in partnership with China and Russia, or alone. Japan accepts that China’s long-term goal is to gain power in the region and that Beijing will attempt to use its economic potential as the prize for ending Tokyo’s security alliance with Washington.

Japan continues to solidify and strengthen its ties to the United States to counter Chinese designs but is wary that America may tire of the cost of maintaining its protective military umbrella. Therefore, Japan has been developing its own military capability. If its military power eventually matches its economic power, Japan may pursue an independent role in regional and global affairs. Through NSC, China hopes to allay Japan’s fears, thereby forestalling its rearmament.

The Two Koreas

Since its communist takeover, North Korea has relied heavily upon China and Russia for economic and military support. South Korea, however, has begun to make accommodations with China, despite its history of conflict with that nation and its ties to the West—especially to the United States. Like other countries with developed economies, South Korea would like access to China’s market, but it also wants Beijing’s assistance in improving relations with the North. Under Kim Dae Jung’s “Sunshine Policy,” the South seeks to open relations—including economic trade and development—

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with the North as part of its long-term goal of reconciliation and reunification.

China needs the sort of investment capital, technology, and markets that South Korea has to offer, but the prospect of a unified Korea holds even greater benefit. With economic and political ties to China, a unified Korea could be drawn into a yuan-dominated regional market to counter Japan’s economic and potential military influence. Even more important, however, the rationale for United Nations and American troops in Korea would be gone, furthering China’s goals of becoming a regional hegemon and pushing the United States out of Asia.

South Asian Players

In South Asia, India is developing a regional nuclear force de frappe, shoring up relations with Russia and trying to mend fences with the United States, because it believes China is the real threat to its security. Areas along the Sino-Indian border, where the two countries fought a war in 1962, are still in dispute. In the Indian Ocean, China is establishing a presence in Burma that could be a staging base to challenge Indian dominance of the region. In Pakistan, Beijing is facilitating the dispute over Kashmir with continuing supplies of military technology and supplies to Islamabad.

By Beijing’s calculation, India increasingly will be a force in Eurasia. China’s alliance with Pakistan gives it not only a buffer against India but also the perception of having leverage over such issues as Tibet, the Dalai Lama, border claims, and nuclear and missile development. To China, Pakistan is a convenient and cooperative check on Indian activity.

Central Asia

The newly independent states of the former Soviet Union bordering on China are, of necessity, making accommodations with both Russia and China. Landlocked, squeezed between two powerful neighbors, and sitting on significant oil and gas resources, these Central Asian states hope to balance one power with the other. They also must deal with the threat of Islamic radicalism from within and across their borders. Russia and China will act forcefully to prevent separatist or Islamic radicalism from threatening the stability or economic potential of the region. Mongolia will have to look again to Russia to fend off historic Chinese territorial claims and yet somehow avoid being reintegrated into the Russian sphere. Western help probably will be necessary for Mongolia to maintain its independence.

American Response

The Clinton administration policy of engagement accepted China as a major player in Asia and on the world scene; therefore, Chinese cooperation was needed on issues such as weapons proliferation, international crime, and the environment. American leaders engaged Chinese leaders in a dialogue, hoping to find some common ground. However, that dialogue was largely a one-way conversation, with China dictating the subject and terms. In pursuing the Chinese market, the United States failed to exact any meaningful concessions from China on such issues as weapons proliferation, human rights, and access to open markets. China continued to destabilize the Middle East and South Asia by supplying nuclear and missile technology and systems to states of those regions. It also erected artificial barriers to market access by American businesses, especially in the areas of telecommunications, insurance, and financial services. Despite U.S. and Western protests, China continued to persecute dissidents and religious groups, such as Catholics and Falun Gong.

The Bush administration is committed to a tougher stance on China, which means that the policy of engagement must be redefined. First, China must be made to realize that there would be consequences for its failure to cooperate on issues that are important to the United States. For instance, America offers a major source of the foreign investment, technology, and markets that the Chinese economy needs, giving it considerable leverage over China. The creative use of regulatory and health and labor standards could seriously affect Chinese imports to the United States. Likewise, laws could curtail investment capital. In addition, transfer of dual-use technology, aircraft, computers, semiconductors, and other similar items could be banned.

China remains vulnerable to internal pressures that could be exacerbated by outside influences. The United States could provide a forum for political and religious dissidents, and it could give financial and moral support to oppressed minority groups, such as the Tibetans and Uighurs, to enable them to establish governments in exile. It also could continue to supply Taiwan with state-of-the-art defensive weapons and encourage Japan to build a military commensurate with its economy. Stronger policies in these areas may make China realize
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and expand this network to include India, Mongo-
Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand,
the United States as the major power in the Western Pa-
cific and Asia and should adopt proactive
policies to meet the challenge by shoring up
the American geopolitical position in the re-
gion. America has used a system of bilateral
alliances to achieve its dominance in the
Pacific, which has ensured regional stability
since the end of World War II. Washington
should maintain its preference for bilateralism.
The Clinton administration worked to
multilateralize regional security, an effort that
was driven by the Western view that American largesse and military might could influence
Asian nations to form a collective security
community in East Asia similar to NATO. Such
a community eventually would include China,
and, it was hoped, mutual cooperation in such
efforts as disaster relief, humanitarian assis-
tance, and confidence-building measures
would develop into a regional community of
shared interests that would promote stability
and economic development. However, Asian
countries have shown little desire to form a
collective security bloc, and their historical
development weighs strongly against it. ARF,
which is the best current example of collective
action, has been stunningly ineffective in
preventing conflict or resolving territorial
issues. The United States was ignoring history
and reality in its attempt to draw the culturally
diverse states of Asia into a collective security
arrangement. The effort only served China’s
long-term goal of weakening and undermining
American influence by creating the impression
that Washington was watering down its com-
mitment preliminary to withdrawal.
The United States must

- recognize and reaffirm that only strong
  bilateral relationships and ongoing meaningful
  interaction with its allies will convince Asia that a
  U.S. presence is long-term and an alternative to
  Chinese dominance
- strengthen bilateral alliances with Australia,
  Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand,
  and expand this network to include India, Mongo-
  lia, Singapore, and Vietnam
- lead economic development in the region by
  providing domestic incentives for investment and
  promoting free trade
- guarantee regional resolutions to territorial
  disputes and the unimpeded flow of commerce
  throughout the Pacific and Indian Oceans
- support South Korea’s Sunshine Policy to
  engage the North, and link all progress on reunifi-
  cation to its continued local presence to support
  peace, stability, and economic development, the
  absence of which could force the Koreas into
  China’s greater yuan arena and undermine a key
  component of the U.S. geostategic position in Asia.
China’s national security strategy is on a
collision course with U.S. goals and interests in
the region. Beijing has joined Moscow in a
tactical alliance against Washington to rally
international opposition against American missile
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The United States must put its China policies on a new foundation. China must no
longer be the focus of an Asian policy in pur-
suit of markets that are yet to materialize,
notwithstanding its admission to the World
Trade Organization. Indeed, fostering trade and
development with the other nations of the
region could prove more productive. China’s
importance in the region cannot be denied.
Isolation of China would be an ill-advised,
unrealistic alternative to past failed policies.
Engagement should continue, but it must be
based on a realistic appraisal of the costs and
benefits to America’s national interest.