



## NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

### Rise of China

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No discussion of American geo-strategy is complete without considering China's rise to global political and economic importance. Nevertheless, this frequently discussed phenomenon remains terribly undefined. Where is China rising from, and what is it rising to? In what sense is a rising China significant—in terms of population, **gross domestic product (GDP)**, military might, or political influence? Furthermore, is such rise to be understood in relative terms or in absolutes? China's increasing power is not necessarily a detriment to American interests; an adept American strategy might attempt to make China into an American ally. But nothing is yet determined; actions and reactions by the Great Powers, and especially the United States, will dominate in telling China's and the world's future.

**gross domestic product (GDP)**—*the sum of the market values of all products produced within a nation in a given year*

### Chinese Perspectives on International Relations

#### *Introduction*

The Chinese sense their improving fortunes as acutely as any outsider, but they do not see it as a rise so much as a restoration; the last few centuries have been a low point in China's thousands of years of history. The uniqueness of China's history helps to explain Chinese perspectives on international relations. Of the three great classical civilizations in India, China, and Rome, only the Chinese remained a coherent socio-political whole throughout the centuries and into the modern world. Over the past 2000 years, the Mediterranean area has been divided up between East and West, Christian and Muslim; India has experienced similar divisions. But, much more than their counterparts, the Chinese remained generally unified, maintaining status as the most powerful nation in its neighborhood. In the West, history records the decline and fall of competing empires, each with a distinct culture and a unique identity. Chinese history records the succession of Chinese dynasties: they rose and fell, but they were all Chinese.

The Chinese call themselves “zhong-guo,” which translates literally as “middle country”—and they use that term with good reason. Whereas the European historical experience includes many states and peoples, the Chinese experience focuses on one continuous whole — China — surrounded by lesser groups that enter and exit their history.

China's history is not one of interaction. To be sure, the Chinese have always had foreign trade and colonies and have exported their culture abroad, but the exchanges have always been limited and, whenever possible, one-way. The implications of what we'll term the “zhong-

guo” mentality, the middle-kingdom perspective, are not always evident. Modern China is not **isolationist**. International trade is the backbone of its economy, and Beijing is a crucially important geo-political player. But, it should be noted, the Chinese export far more than they import, and a main focus of their political strategy is to reduce other states’ influence on internal Chinese matters. China’s future is by no means determined by its past, but its unique history shapes its understanding of and approach to today’s international system.

### *Modern History*

Asia’s power relative to that of the West reached its lowest point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. European technology and institutions were undeniably better than their Eastern counterparts, and the West reaped the benefits of its advances through wholly unequal trade relationships with Asian regimes, especially China. The Opium Wars during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were a humiliating defeat for the dying Qing Empire at the hands of European imperialists. From then until World War II, China suffered through a humiliating period during which its **sovereignty** was restricted, and its middle kingdom mentality was challenged by Western powers and Japan

During this time, the Great Powers sought to carve up China into spheres of influence, and for a while, it appeared as if they would succeed in dismembering the once-great empire. Interestingly, the United States became the most outspoken defender of Chinese sovereignty. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, US Secretary of State John Hay articulated the “Open Door Policy,” whose emphasis on freedom of trade served as a reaffirmation of liberal internationalist ideals in the face of a region increasingly dominated by imperial **mercantilism**. To be sure, Hay’s motivations were not all so ideologically pure. As the nation with the weakest reach in the Far East, America had no chance of obtaining its own sphere of influence, and, therefore, had the most to gain from the Open Door. Nevertheless, for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sino-American interests aligned closely, and relations were cordial.

The First World War began a great global shift in power. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had been greatly imbalanced in political and economic power, for Europeans controlled a disproportionate share of economic production and military might, exported the era’s dominant culture, and ruled a good portion of the world. By 1918, Asia had begun to learn from and emulate European advances and used them to reduce Western influence in Asia. The first Asian state to become a modern power was Japan, and China was the object of its aggression. From 1931 to 1945, Japan controlled eastern China with a ruthlessness that the Europeans never came close to matching. The 1937 Rape of Nanjing, in which Japanese soldiers pillaged the city and killed thousands of its inhabitants, is an event that has been seared into China’s national memory.

**isolationist**—an ideological national stance in which a nation attempts to be self-sufficient and minimize contact and interactions with foreign nations

**sovereignty**—a nation’s right to rule over its own territory and people

**mercantilism**—a national economic strategy popular in the 17th and 18th centuries in which nations strove to obtain precious metals and resources in order to have a stronger economy

Even today, over two generations after the war, **Sino-Japanese** relations are soured by the experience. With the end of World War II in 1945, China was freed from foreign rule, but was no better off than the rest of the third world that gained independence in the postwar years and struggled to establish a stable post-war government.

There was one key difference that separated China from most other newly-independent countries: its history. The Chinese people, having known millennia of greatness, were hardly content with their backwater status, and they blamed their poverty on imperialism. After a brief flirtation with a Sino-Soviet alliance, Beijing soon realized that Moscow was simply an imperialist in **Marxist** garb. Throughout the Cold War, China remained skeptical of the international system that it believed had delivered it such horrible wrongs in the past. A so-called “victim mentality” guided Chinese foreign policy development throughout much of the Cold War. Beijing remained strongly opposed to both of the Superpowers and to any international organizations that might legitimize the reduction of a state’s sovereignty.

As the memory of the war faded with time, Asians began to recover from its wounds. During the 1970s, Beijing watched states like South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore adopt market economies and engage the world. They were, in turn, rewarded with prosperity and admission into the international community. In the 1980s, China began to open its markets to foreign investors and has since become an economic powerhouse. China’s rise has been caused in large part by its spectacular economic growth.

## Modern Policy

Today, China has all but abandoned the victim mentality, although some of its relics yet linger. For the most part, Beijing has become a fully participating member of the international community. China’s economic growth has in some ways undone the pain of imperialism and catapulted the Middle Kingdom to the center of the world stage. Today, many Chinese strategists speak of an increasingly prominent “da-guo”—Great Power—mentality. In other words, China now looks to reclaim its rightful place as a power in East Asia.

A distinct contradiction exists between the Middle Kingdom mentality and the multiplicity that is a fact of today’s international system. Indeed, the United States is in many ways the Middle Kingdom of the modern world, a participant in every significant geopolitical dialogue. China certainly has a global reach, especially in trade — its businessmen are increasingly common in Africa and South America — but its political goals are generally confined to East Asia, and it makes no attempt to export any type of ideology. Chinese political thinking provides no ideological basis for world domination. Today, at least, China

**Sino-Japanese**—refers to relations between China and Japan

**Marxist**—refers to the socialist ideas of Karl Marx, which laid the foundation for communism

seeks to concentrate its political influence in East Asia, with the ultimate goal of creating an Asian, not necessarily global, power structure centered in Beijing.

### *East Asian Geopolitics*

The strategic effects of China's rise are twofold. First, China is beginning to articulate a positive vision for East Asia, rather than simply opposing the visions of the US and former USSR. Second, other states in East Asia are reacting to China's growing strength in ways that could potentially destabilize the region. Japan, Vietnam, and Taiwan are three states that greatly fear Chinese power, and tend to see their relationships with China as a **zero-sum game**. If China wins, they lose. This has sparked increased talk of revising Japan's no-war constitution and led some strategists to suggest that Japan and Taiwan could eventually resort to nuclear threats and/or action. From the American perspective, China's growing military might is a threat, but the potential destabilization of the whole region would have much more dire consequences.

**zero-sum game**—  
*situation in which the gains for one party result in equivalent losses for the other*

## **Problems and Possibilities for Chinese Strategy**

### *India*

Beijing and New Delhi are frequently cited as rising powers, but neither has clearly articulated its geopolitical goals. Long divided by a history of animosity, the two countries' diplomatic relations have recently improved, frustrating some US conservatives who had hoped that India would be a primary player in a new anti-China alliance. India and China have few overlapping interests, either in common or in opposition, so their relationship will remain undefined for the near future. China and Pakistan have long been close, complicating relations with India, but Pakistan's post-9/11 moves toward the US may have made Beijing's special relationship with Pakistan a thing of the past. This is a significant factor in improving Indian-Chinese relations.

### *South Korea*

In any other region, South Korea would be an important political player in its own right, but surrounded by China and Japan, and in a close alliance with the United States, South Korea can never seem to find its own voice. Recently, though, it has begun to articulate worries about Japanese militarism and aggressive US policy towards North Korea, seeming, whether purposefully or not, to seek a diplomatic entente with China. Still, South Korean forces on South Korean soil are under American command, a situation that the US says could change as soon as the end of 2008, but the South Koreans want to postpone until 2012. Occasional street protests notwithstanding, South Korea desires to re-

main well within the US sphere, despite divisions over the Korean question.

### *Central Asia*

The Chinese have historically had interests in Central Asia; today, they look to tap the area's significant natural energy reserves. Since 9/11, American influence in Central Asia has grown in an attempt to meet the military demands of the War on Terror, while Russia has always considered Central Asia a rightful part of its empire. It appears that the three powers will continue to dispute **hegemony** over the region until a balance is achieved.

**hegemony**—*great economic and political influence in a region*

### *Russia*

Sino-Russian relations are as complex as ever. Policymakers inside the Kremlin intensely fear China's burgeoning power. Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War, relations have been warm, possibly fueled by a joint mistrust of American ambitions. Whether this warmth will remain if (probably, when) China further asserts itself in East and Central Asia remains to be seen.

### *Japan*

Despite maintaining the world's second largest economy and wielding immense economic power, Tokyo's foreign policy is relatively passive, moderated by American security guarantees. Yet, fearing the rise of China and nuclear North Korea, some believe that Japan may be on the verge of dropping its benign internationalism; discussion of amending the no-war constitution and nuclearization is beginning to spread in mainstream political culture. Potentially resurgent Japanese militarism is on the mind of every Asian strategist; in March 2007, Japan signed a defense cooperation agreement with Australia, its first security agreement with any state other than the United States since World War II.

## **Conclusion: The American Response**

In many ways, China and America should be natural allies. Our broad geopolitical interests, including an aversion to Russian imperialism, Japanese militarism, and destabilization in East Asia, generally align. And the enormous trade between the countries makes cooperation very profitable. Yet, many stumbling blocks in our relationship prevent it from being wholly cooperative. The Chinese bristle at perceived American arrogance in judging China on democracy and human rights; they worry our diplomacy is too combative; and our history of animosity continues to divide us.

Some American strategists speak of building coalitions against China by allying with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and India. Others assert that such an approach is counterproductive and **naïve**: counterproductive, because such a strategy would simply ensure that China becomes an opponent; naïve, because it neglects the opportunities inherent in China's rise. But, if China is not today's evil empire, it will neither be a close ally, at least not until some level of democratization occurs. And American policymakers should not expect democratic change to come soon. China's rise is not a phenomenon to be welcomed or opposed as much as a changing condition that must be faced. The key, as ever, is balance: American strategy must be firm, but not harsh; flexible, but not permissive. Striking that balance will be a persistent challenge for American policymakers.

**naïve**—*ignorant of reality*

### **Bibliography**

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