

LESSON 11

POST-COLD WAR CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: CHINA

“Today, the picture of US-China relations is mixed and formless. Political phrasemakers might complain about a ‘lack of vision,’ but that is just the jargon of political convenience. What we see is a murky mixture of dark and light. If, as Taoists since the time of Laozi have argued, that’s the natural order—dark and light are intertwined, and you cannot have one without the other—then fine: let’s just continue adjusting to the Taoist reality of US-China relations.... On the other hand, if dark has the ability to cloud and ultimately extinguish light, then we have a serious problem.”

—Robert A. Kapp

Lesson Introduction

There is little doubt that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is becoming a definite element in post-Cold War international politics, but there is much debate about what this fact entails and how the world should deal with an ascendant China. China’s rise and behavior are particularly bedeviling to the United States, but Beijing also poses substantial challenges to Asian and European nations as well as international regimes. Whether China will become a military threat to its neighbors, an adversary of the United States, a systematic challenge to the global order, or a cultural-ideological challenge to the West remains an open question. But China’s sheer size and growing power are already altering the contours of Asian security, international commerce, and the global balance of power.

Although the Cold War ended somewhere around 1989, the “new world order” envisioned by President George H. Bush did not arrive in quite the fashion he had hoped. To some observers, the United States has merely entered upon yet another interwar period, awaiting the inevitable rise of a “peer competitor” that will challenge the United States. How the United States confronts the task of creating a new grand strategy in the context of emerging geo-strategic imperatives in the decades ahead is a critical issue. Should the United States reject Wilsonian ideals and settle upon some form of neo-isolationism? In terms of the emergence of China as a potential superpower and hostile adversary, should the United States pursue Harry Truman’s strategy of containment or Richard Nixon’s strategy of engagement? Should a formal security structure akin to NATO be formed? What are the implications for military force structure and strategy?

In this lesson we examine U.S. strategy relative to China as a rising power. In the early 1990s the Chinese coined the phrase “one superpower and several great powers” to describe the international political structure in the post-Cold War world. The expression acknowledged the preponderance of the United States as a global hegemon but posited an emerging “great power” structure that would serve to offset American power. For its

part, the United States views China as a potential threat, and scholars and government officials continue to debate how U.S. strategy for dealing with China should be crafted.

Whether the United States has a strategy toward China will be up to your interpretation following completion of this lesson. For U.S. policymakers, the realist's view would hold the Chinese to be a natural adversary in relation to American geo-strategic interests. The liberal view would see China as a source of potential conflict, primarily owing to its different culture and political system. The policy and strategy to be chosen will have profound implications for the future of Sino-American relations.

Student Requirements by Educational Objective

Requirement 1

Objective 1. Explain the various factors affecting the rise of China as a regional and politically global power in terms of China's threat to its regional neighbors and the U.S. [JPME Area 3(a)]

Objective 2. Understand the conditions that have precipitated the rise to prominence of Asia—China, in particular.

Objective 3. List the major options of how U.S. strategy regarding China might take shape. [JPME Areas 3(a)(e)]

Objective 4. Discuss the nature of U.S. policy and strategy regarding China and alternative futures in that regard. [JPME Areas 3(e), 4(a)]

View:

- Air Command and Staff College lecture, "U.S. China Relations in the 21st Century, by Dr. David Lai, Air War College (31 minutes)

Read:

- Michael Chambers, "Rising China: A Threat to Its Neighbors?" Carolyn Pumphrey, ed., *The Rise of China in Asia: Security Implications* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, Jan 2002), Ch. 4, pages 65 to 91 (25 pages)
- Kenneth Lieberthal, "U.S. Policy Toward China," *Policy Brief*, The Brookings Institute, Number 72, March 2001, pp. 1 to 8 (8 pages)

The Rise of Asia and China

From the U.S. perspective, Asia's growing importance is primarily a consequence of the region's dramatic economic growth. Asia consumes over 30 percent of U.S. merchandise exports and accounts for over 40 percent of merchandise imports. A 1980 World Bank

study estimated that the People's Republic of China alone accounted for 3.6 percent of the world's gross domestic product. By 2010, China could account for over 15 percent. Thus, of the many reasons that U.S. policy-makers cite for "engagement" in Asia, economics is probably the most often cited. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, other strategic considerations were of equal and probably of greater concern, e.g., containing Soviet adventurism, but the principal concern today is avoiding any development that threatens the current balance of power in the region that might upset patterns of trade. Ironically, before the ascendancy of Europe in the sixteenth century, Asia was the center of power and wealth in the world, and China was preeminent from roughly 1000-1500. China's remarkable growth in power and wealth during that period was the result of a massive commercialization of Chinese society.

Since the end of World War II, both China and Japan have pursued military policies and spending that rival the percentage share of gross national product usually associated with Britain, France, and Germany. Although small relative to that of the U.S. (in total dollars as well as percentage of GNP—about 1 percent), Japan is still spending over \$50 billion annually. The Japanese have a world-class military and one that, in qualitative terms, outclasses anything else in the region. Assessing the capitalized investment of China in its armed forces is more problematic, but one thing is clear: China is the only other regional military power of any consequence. With nuclear weapons and a large conventional force structure, China rates as a major regional player. Unlike the United States, however, neither Japan nor China has full-spectrum armed forces capable of projecting military power outside the region. But then, neither state appears to have any extra-regional territorial ambitions at this time.

What makes all the above of concern to the United States is that Asia, in general, and China, especially, have very little experience in dealing with international security matters within the framework of the international system as understood in the West. There is no NATO in Asia, nor do Asian states have a history of consultation and peaceful accommodation. Although the legacy of European imperialism and colonialism in the region has been more benign than, say, the legacy in Africa or the Middle East, the fact remains that most of the states in the region are inexperienced in terms of confidence-building measures as well as in other ways. In the absence of any regional multilateral security regime like NATO or the OSCE, Asian states remain particularly susceptible to the effects of the security dilemma, which is discussed next.

The Security Dilemma

In the context of anarchy, security is the first priority of states in relation to other states. This is generally accomplished by the building of a military capability that deters any would-be aggressor. But, as a result of the security dilemma, an arms race can occur. For example, India acquired nuclear weapons in 1974 in order to deter China, after which Pakistan aggressively pursued nuclear weapons as a means to gain security against India. Since China is regarded as the rising power in Asia, the threat of Chinese aggression colors interstate relations in the region (territorial disputes with China are a continuing concern for Japan, Vietnam, India, the Philippines, Malaysia, and, of course, Taiwan).

Given U.S. economic and other interests in Asia, as well as the potential for China to emerge as the next superpower, the United States has a clear interest in influencing Chinese behavior. To that end, the RAND Corporation and others have recommended that the U.S. reinforce its alliances with Japan and South Korea and strengthen its ties to ASEAN states as a means of containing Chinese ambitions.

The Chinese, however, interpret the United States' actions as stoking the security dilemma as a means to maintain its position relative to China as well as sustain its hegemony in the region. The Chinese maintain that the U.S. support of Taiwan is intended to present China with a heightened sense of insecurity, thus forcing the Chinese government to increase its military spending. This notion, in turn, prompts the Taiwanese and other Asian states to do the same, which provokes more spending by China, thus creating a spiraling arms race that damages the Chinese economy and results in a stasis that limits Chinese growth and influence and may, in fact, precipitate the disintegration of the Chinese state, as occurred in the Soviet Union. Along the same lines, the Chinese argue that the United States encourages a similar sense of insecurity among other Asian states by exaggerating the Chinese threat in order to justify a continuing American military presence in the region. The Chinese have even claimed that American efforts to deploy a National Missile Defense system (and, to a lesser extent, a Theater Missile Defense system) are intended to erode China's nuclear deterrence posture, thus exacerbating the security dilemma in the region by forcing the Chinese to improve their nuclear capability. This action, in turn, would, of course, provoke India, and potentially Pakistan, to follow suit. According to this Machiavellian strategy, in this fashion the United States keeps China in check and keeps the other Asian states in line.

Arguably, there is more than a grain of truth in these Chinese assertions. The U.S. strategy of encouraging Asian states to participate in the liberal international economic order and agree to U.S. military protection was not the offspring of American altruism. In the aftermath of World War II and during the deepening Cold War, the U.S. object was to contain the Soviet Union and communist China. By providing security to those states that agreed to American superordination, the security dilemma between these states was reduced, thereby producing stability in the region and, at the same time, discouraging individual states from developing a military capability that could threaten the United States or its interests. An unexpected (and perhaps unintended) by-product of this strategy was that it permitted these states to concentrate on economic development as opposed to military spending and, as a further result, created the conditions that gave rise to Asia as an economic powerhouse. This does not mean that American grand strategy failed; in fact, just the opposite is true: Soviet and Chinese communist adventurism was contained in the region, and there is no evidence that those states that have prospered under the protection of American military power have any territorial ambitions toward one another. Ironically, the Chinese also benefited from this economic and security regime in that they too were able to restructure their economy.

U.S. Strategy Options Toward China

Nevertheless, the rise of the “Asian Tigers,” and China in particular, poses a challenge to American strategists. Moreover, the potential for Japan to reassert a dominant role in Asia is not unthinkable, and a unified Korea could pose additional challenges as well. Also, as previously stated, a rising China clearly requires the United States to reconsider its core national security interests in the region as well as its relationship with China itself.

U.S. foreign policy regarding China is generally couched in terms of two possibilities: engagement and containment. As a RAND Corporation study points out, engagement is more tactical than strategic in that it seeks to encourage China’s participation in the liberal international economic order as a means to shape Chinese behavior. However, the tacit strategic objective is to transform the Chinese political system and, in that sense, engagement may be regarded as a policy. Containment seeks to restrain a rising China in much the same way that the Soviet Union was *contained*. Often, these two strategies are referred to as positive and negative, optimistic and pessimistic, or offensive and defensive strategies, respectively. A third school, conditional engagement, or **Congagement**, advocates a broad strategy of engagement with limited use of containment tactics.

A containment strategy would take a hard-line approach, threatening military action where necessary and imposing economic sanctions and other non-military punishments as required, with the objective of preventing China from bullying its neighbors. The continuing prospect of American military action would deter Chinese military aggression, and economic sanctions would punish China for otherwise unacceptable behavior. The downside to containment is that China might become *revisionist*, with respect to ongoing economic and political liberalization. In short, containment would prompt an anti-Western and anti-American backlash that would aggravate nationalist sentiments, which would lead to even more aggressive behavior.

An engagement strategy would encourage China to participate in multilateral agreements and obtain membership in international organizations as a means of promoting Chinese respect for and adherence to international norms. It is an “optimistic” policy in that its advocates believe that economic prosperity tempers historical grievances and that China will become a stable and cooperative partner if treated as an equal. The downside to engagement is the potential for China to reap the benefits of the marketplace while violating international norms regarding human rights and interstate relations. More fundamentally, engagement is based on an assumption that is far from certain, that is, that positive contact will lead not only to behavior modification but social and political transformation as well. Congagement would combine the carrot of engagement and the stick of containment, but not necessarily in that order. For example, China might be allowed to join the World Trade Organization as a full member (the carrot) with the proviso that the Chinese government reduce human rights violations or else be punished by economic or other sanctions (the stick). Conversely, a *stick and carrot* approach would be to sanction China over human rights matters with the proviso that if and when China complies with the terms of the sanctions, trade barriers would be lifted and other incentives would follow.

The Taiwan Situation

The status of Taiwan remains a major policy difficulty for both states. While the United States officially regards Taiwan as part of China and opposes Taiwanese “independence,” the U.S. finds itself unable to abandon Taiwan and continues to offer military protection. China similarly regards Taiwan as integral to the Chinese state, officially claims to desire peaceful reunification as the goal, but routinely threatens military action to achieve reunification. Thus, while the U.S. and Chinese positions overlap in some ways, there remain considerable grounds for potential conflict. Interestingly, the problem of U.S. strategy regarding Taiwan has generally been characterized in terms of the deterrent value of *strategic ambiguity* versus *strategic clarity*. The former means that a military attack on Taiwan may be countered by U.S. military retaliation. The latter explicitly communicates that the U.S. will respond militarily to Chinese aggression. When President George W. Bush took office, the Asia Foundation recommended maintaining ambiguity as policy. A RAND-sponsored panel recommended that President Bush be clear on the matter. President Bush opted for the latter, a position derived from the view that firm statements have greater deterrent value. Advocates for the former continue to maintain the argument that, absent a specific crisis, detailing the circumstances under which the U.S. would respond militarily could actually embolden, not only the People’s Republic of China, but Taiwan as well. The question is, what is the value added of either ambiguity or clarity in a strategy of engagement, containment, or conengagement?

The Spratly Islands Issue

Regardless of the role of Taiwan in the strategic equation, the fact remains that the current balance of power in Asia appears to be deeply unsatisfactory to China. Part of that dissatisfaction stems from the prominent role played by Japan, but Chinese consternation mostly stems from what the Chinese perceive to be a U.S.-orchestrated effort to relegate China to a position of subordination. China’s immediate aim appears to be regional hegemony with a long-term goal of achieving major power status on a global scale. As Chinese political and military power grow concomitant with Chinese economic power, the question becomes whether this growth will necessarily lead to violent conflict with the United States. The answer is open to debate. Ironically, conflict may erupt not in the Taiwan straits but over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Although the Spratlys are a rich fishing ground, speculations about vast oil reserves there are of greater interest to those states that have competing claims, including China. Whether the United States would go to war over the Spratlys is questionable, but were China to seize the islands, the implications would be profound. Such a move would demonstrate capability as well as national will to act aggressively and unilaterally, and such a move would reconfigure the strategic landscape in Asia. In that regard, the United States might have no other choice but to respond. The United States has been able to defer questions about such matters because, up until this point, China has not been in a position to challenge American hegemony in the region. That state of affairs appears to be changing.

Requirement 2

Objective 5. Discuss what threat the Chinese military poses to the Asian region as compared to the United States. [JPME Areas 1(a), 3(a)(e)]

Irrespective of the policy adopted, China poses a significant military challenge for the United States. Within the framework of the “Four Modernizations” promulgated in 1973, economic development ranked number one, and an improved military capability was ranked number four. However, much of China’s current younger leadership is convinced that, in order for China to realize its full potential as an international power, military modernization should be moved to third or even second place in the scheme of priorities. At the same time, China’s military leaders have exchanged a relatively passive defensive military doctrine for one of *active defense*, including an ability to project military power. And China’s explosive economic growth has now provided the means to finance continued and expansive modernization initiatives and at an accelerated pace.

China has the largest armed forces in the world, with a little less than three million troops under arms. Moreover, as *Jane’s Defense Weekly* recently reported, China has made substantial advances in some areas of its ground and naval forces, including upgrades to tanks and armor, laser systems, and anti-submarine warfare. In fact, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is set to deploy a new main battle tank that, when fielded, will become the most powerful of its kind in the world, featuring a 152 mm main gun with an automatic loader that, when coupled with new advanced sight and optics systems, will enable the tank to fire on the move with enhanced first round hit capability. Nevertheless, although capable of overwhelming a regional adversary, the PLA is of little consequence in terms of being a direct threat to the United States. Moreover, the huge Chinese military requires vast resources that could otherwise be used for new weapons and better training. Were the Chinese to reduce the size of the PLA, the net result might be a qualitative improvement of some concern to U.S. interests on a broader scale. Its potential conventional capability notwithstanding, China poses a direct threat to the United States by virtue of its intercontinental nuclear capability. Although the *Dongfeng* (East Wind) DF-4 missile cannot reach the United States, the D-5 can reach most of the continental U.S. and the mobile DF-31 and more advanced DF-41, both under development, will be able to reach the whole of U.S. territory. China has also constructed at least one nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine with follow-on models expected to carry a sea-based version of the DF-31 missile.

Nevertheless, numbers do not tell the whole story. The PLA has several major weaknesses that influence its strategic utility. The army is mainly equipped with obsolete and aging weapons. For example, the army’s main battle tank is the Type 59 (Soviet T-54), which entered service in 1954. The air force, although huge, also fields mostly obsolete aircraft such as the *Shenyang* J-6, a Chinese copy of the Soviet Mig-19, first introduced into service in 1962 and that accounts for over half of the total force. The navy’s ships are mostly Chinese versions of Soviet designs from the 1950s. Tactical and strategic lift are virtually nonexistent. There are also major shortcomings in logistics,

command, control, and communications, as well as the general quality of personnel and leadership.

Thus, China is not a “peer competitor” in the military sense, but it is a regional military power, one with a nuclear capability and one with the potential to eventually catch up with the United States. China has embarked upon a dedicated modernization program and seeks to develop an indigenous defense industry. Although the likelihood that China can match U.S. military might by 2020 is improbable, China is an ancient culture with a long-horizon view of history. Moreover, China can easily become a multidimensional military threat in Asia as early as 2015 and, operating under a strategic nuclear umbrella, the PLA could pose a serious threat to China’s neighbors as early as 2010.

Lesson Summary

The uncertainties about China’s future capabilities and intentions, and the debate about alternate policy options, have spawned a lucrative cottage industry among analysts and pundits in academia, corporations, banks, governments, and the media, worldwide. This lesson has exposed you to some varying views exploring factors that will shape China’s enduring prominence within the Asian region and globally.

Clearly, China is poised to assert greater influence in regional and global affairs in the coming decades. For this reason, strategic thinking regarding the threat posed by China to U.S. grand strategic interests is needed. The challenge for American strategists, which, one day, may include many of you, is to determine what policy will be most effective in promoting U.S. interests vis-à-vis China as a rising power. In that regard, this lesson has offered an opportunity to use the analytical tools acquired in the Strategy and Policy Course in order to formulate and gain an understanding of a potential grand strategy that takes China into account. While reviewing the implications of U.S. grand strategy in the post-Cold-War world and, in addition to the difficult challenge facing *China strategists* today, the purpose of this lesson is to reinforce your appreciation of the difficulty of strategy formulation.

JPME Summary

AREA 1					AREA 2				AREA 3					AREA 4					AREA 5			
A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D
X									X				X	X								