

Sino-American Relations in the Coming Century

An ascendant China poses the greatest threat to American power in the coming century. Given the challenge posed by Beijing, our political establishment's failure to present an honest accounting of the aims and motivations of American policy towards the Middle Kingdom is inexcusable. The decision-making elite believe the American public is incapable of understanding the difficult choices required of a globe spanning empire, and they have opted to present our foreign policy as a storybook tale in which an idealized America confronts a never ending series of villains, each more Hitler-like than the last. Though such a narrative may assist in manufacturing consent for a turkey shoot war against a Middle Eastern dictator, it only hinders our efforts to grapple with the issue at hand. The actions required to ensure our security in the coming years challenge key tenets of the American mythology, and public support for such unsettling acts requires a clear exposition of the facts upon which our policy is based. Consider:

A democratic China would pose a significant threat to American hegemony.

The combination of a strong democratic tradition and a powerful economy unshackled by the restrictive social safety net common in Europe has made America the undisputed first among nations. But the staggering scale of American success has also fueled resentment and loathing among the rest of the world, and even our closest allies are jealous of our riches. A democratic China would be a powerful competitor with much to offer nations tired of genuflecting before the American hyperpower. Europe, with its longstanding interest in all things oriental, would find common ground with a free China, and Russia, in particular, would discover an able political and economic partner. The Third World, long a bastion of anti-American sentiment, would certainly give this new state a sympathetic hearing, and might even regard it as a model to be emulated. Most alarmingly, the emergence of democracy in China could provide a basis for reconstructing the strained relationship between Beijing and Tokyo. The Japanese-American alliance is the backbone of American policy in the Pacific, and Japan's willingness to serve as a staging area for American force projection in the region is dependent upon a continued perception of China as a military threat to the island. In the worst case, a thawing of relations might inspire Tokyo to rethink its allegiances: China's markets potentially dwarf even those of America, and the one thing China lacks—capital—is as plentiful in Japan as it is in the United States, suggesting that a Japanese-Chinese partnership might be just as sensible, from Tokyo's perspective, as an alliance with the U.S. Given the political, economic, and military importance of the Tokyo-Washington axis, any outcome that draws Japan out of this relationship is disastrous for America.

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In addition to undermining America's standing with its allies, the rise of a democratic China would dilute our influence in the international community. China's influence in organizations like the United Nations has been limited because of its authoritarian system, but a democratic China would pos-

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sess the power and prestige due the world's most populous nation, and would be better able to interfere with American policy efforts. More than just America's influence in international bodies is at risk: the benefits that accrue from America's ability to exert 'soft force' in the formulation of international policy and regulation are enormous. For example, the United States is able to use its political and economic might to ensure that commerce is conducted within the framework most advantageous to American firms: from shipping container standardization to intellectual property protection, all areas of

endeavor that touch upon trade have been tilted in favor of American business. A free China, one able to vigorously pursue its own interests without being penalized for an authoritarian state, could seriously impair America's ability to exercise its power in this manner.

A democratic China would possess greater flexibility in pursuing its strategic interests

An authoritarian elite seeks, above all else, to preserve its rule; the pursuit of long-term strategic advantage is hindered by the need to avoid policies that might weaken the regime. Democratic rulers, on the other hand, are free to pursue risky policies that offer the possibility of strategic advantage, with the cost of failure being 'only' their elected positions. Take, for instance, the case of NAFTA. Bill Clinton, recognizing the desirability of integrating the nations of North America into a US dominated trading bloc, secured passage of the agreement over the objections of his own party and a sizable portion of the American public. In a less democratic system, any leader who so forcefully alienated his power base would have been violently removed from power.

Policymakers in China are further constrained by the collapse of any claim to legitimacy by the party apart from its ability to deliver continued economic growth. The ruthless suppression of the popular uprising in 1989 has left the leadership with no philosophical or moral basis for rule other than its experience managing the Chinese economy. Chinese history suggests that it will be at least a generation before the party is willing to allow the reemergence of any sort of civil society approximating the one witnessed in the months leading up to Tiananmen, and this means that the party's energies will be focused inwardly for some time to come. So long as the party's attention is fixated upon economic matters and suppressing dissent, there is little danger of adventurism beyond China's borders.

A democratic China is more likely to pursue aggressive and disruptive policies

The leadership of a democratic nation draws its guidance from domestic public opinion, and this often has the effect of pushing democratic leaders into adopting policies that are more extreme than anything an authoritarian

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regime would dare propose. The communist party, regardless of its other flaws, formulates policy through a rational evaluation of the needs of the party, the state, and the nation. A democratic China, guided by an immature electorate resentful of several centuries of perceived slights, would be capable of acts far more excessive and injurious to American interests than anything the party mandarins might conceive. Public opinion in a newly democratized China, one with a press not yet mindful of its role and responsibilities, would be susceptible to all manner of upset and agitation—a discomfiting situation, given China's nuclear arsenal.

Nicaragua is a ready example of this phenomenon. For years, Nicaragua was ruled by a mildly authoritarian regime that maintained stable relations with the other nations of Central America. After Nicaragua's transition to a democratic system, however, its leadership, acting in response to popular pressure from all sides of the political spectrum, began a determined effort to destabilize the region. It was only at great expense and through the coordinated action of the United States and Nicaragua's neighbors that this rogue regime was brought to heel. Given the costs involved in containing a democracy of Nicaragua's size, one can only imagine how much more difficult it would be to restrain the impulses of a newly free China.

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A democratic China would pose a threat to the United States on the battlefields of tomorrow

The stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction and the increasingly lethal nature of conventional military technologies make it highly unlikely that Great Powers will ever again engage in direct conflict. The enormous destructive power wielded by these nations ensures that any confrontation will cause catastrophic economic losses to all parties involved, in addition to any other consequences. There is no danger that the Chinese will invade the American homeland; of far greater concern is the possibility that the Chinese economy will bury the American private sector beneath its enormous productive output. Any future Sino-American conflict will be fought in the supermarket aisles and auto showrooms, but so long as China remains undemocratic, the logic of the New Economy guarantees that the United States will remain the dominant economic power.

The twenty-four hour business cycle of the New Economy is made possible by advanced communication technologies that allow the deployment of increasingly complex arrangements of capital and labor in pursuit of the Next Big Thing. These tools also flatten hierarchies, empower individuals, and subvert all systems of control, and for these reasons authoritarian regimes must carefully regulate their use, or see their own rule undermined. China's rulers were close observers of the Soviet experience, and paid careful attention to Gorbachev's Perestroika efforts. Because of this, they have a clear understanding of the role the fax machine, photocopier,

and personal computer played in the collapse of Soviet communism, and they do not intend to allow such a thing to happen in China. In order to reap the benefits of these technologies, the party will be forced to dedicate an ever increasing share of its resources to managing and directing the use of these new tools, with all of the productivity dampening effects that this intervention entails.

China is already a favored destination for multinational firms seeking to relocate

Success in the New Economy is dependent upon other factors, as well. China's reputation as a copycat manufacturer is justly deserved, a product of a political climate in which innovation must necessarily be regarded as a threat to party rule. High-speed connectivity and massively parallel supercomputers create value

only when wielded by motivated, risk-taking individuals. Entrepreneurship blossoms in the presence of liberty, and in its absence there is no danger of a new Silicon Valley arising in China. A democratic China, one where new technologies are adopted without pause to consider their effects upon existing social arrangements and individual initiative is rewarded, would be a powerful economic competitor. Because of its enormous consumer market, low labor costs, and a cultural tradition of obedience, China is already a favored destination for multinational firms seeking to relocate their production facilities. A democratic government committed to protecting property rights and ensuring transparency in financial and legal matters would make China even more attractive to private enterprise. A democratic China would offer all the freedom and profit making opportunities of a new frontier, but one made safe by democratic institutions.

An open secret

For these reasons, a democratic China is not compatible with the long-term strategic interest of the United States. This conclusion is no secret to American policymakers, and for some time now they have operated within a policy framework that recognizes the undesirability of a democratic China and the corresponding imperative to strengthen the rule of the Chinese communist party. This interest in bolstering the communist regime explains many otherwise bewildering events of recent years. For instance, the Clinton administration's eagerness to facilitate the transfer of dual-use technologies to China becomes understandable, as these transfers enhanced the military and economic power of the communist party. In a further stroke of brilliance, the Clinton administration used the occasion to demonstrate its commitment to free enterprise by engineering these transfers through private firms, rather than the usual quasi-public intelligence agency affiliated entities; the enthusiasm with which these firms later rewarded the Democratic National Committee indicates that the private sector strongly approves of this sort of public/private partnership. Given the success of these initial ventures, there can be no doubt that Raytheon and other firms will continue to pursue useful initiatives of this sort without further prompting or guidance from the American government.

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The private activities of some of America's most respected individuals are also explained by the link between Chinese development and American national security. For years, Henry Kissinger, Caspar Weinberger, and others—men long identified with anti-communism and opposition to tyranny in all forms—have actively promoted trade relations with the communist state. Lacking a clear understanding of our foreign policy aims, many Americans concluded that Kissinger and his associates had traded away their integrity for hefty consulting fees, seats on corporate boards, and private jets. But the facts prove that these men are not scoundrels, but patriots of the highest order. Though all exited public service years ago, they continue to advance America's strategic interests through their private dealings, and for this they deserve our gratitude, not the slanderous attacks to which they have been subjected.

Given the mutually advantageous nature of the status quo, one can safely predict that the Taiwan impasse will continue for years to come

Of course, the possibility of economic slow-down is not the only threat to party rule. China's leaders must take care to avoid policies that align nationalist sentiment with anti-party activism, and no issue is more problematic in this regard than that of Taiwan. On several occasions the party leadership has concocted a crisis with the renegade province in order to distract public attention away from policy failures. Though short-term political advantage may be gained from such a strategy, it has the dangerous side effect of further enflaming nationalist sentiment against the island. If emotions grow too strong, the party may find itself with no choice but to attempt to forcibly subjugate the island, or risk a popular uprising in support of a leadership promising quick reunification.

If forcible reunification is attempted, both victory and defeat may be equally unpalatable. Defeat would bring the collapse of the regime as nationalist fury propelled angry Chinese citizens into the streets; victory, on the other hand, would introduce significant instability into the Chinese political system as Taiwan's young but vibrant democratic tradition infected mainland institutions, and a comparatively wealthy Taiwanese public, already accustomed to democracy, carried its message to the rest of China. The danger that an attempt at forcible reunification poses to China's political stability explains America's otherwise inexplicable willingness to guarantee the island's security, as the American commitment to Taiwan allows the Chinese leadership to explain any delay in reunification as a consequence of American meddling.¹ Given the mutually advantageous nature of the status quo, one can safely predict that the Taiwan impasse will continue for

¹ It should be noted that recent Taiwanese history offers yet another example of the danger that a democratic transition poses to international stability. Since any attempt by the mainland to reclaim Taiwan would reduce the island to a burning pile of rubble, the fact that American efforts to maintain the status quo are frequently subverted by the Taiwanese themselves is cause for dark humor. Taiwan's push for recognition as an independent state only provokes mainland nationalists, forcing the communist party into adopting an increasingly aggressive stance toward the island. Such counterproductive, provocative actions lend credence to the theory that an authoritarian Taiwanese regime was, from the perspective of American policy makers, preferable.

years to come, with military contractors on both sides of the Straits profiting from preparations for a war that neither side intends to fight.

Looking forward

It is clear that the strategic challenge posed by a democratic China is so great that America's interests are best served by a foreign policy that seeks to perpetuate the rule of the Chinese communist party. And current American policy reveals that our leaders reached this same conclusion long ago, as no other framework explains the conduct of recent administrations. A question remains, though, as to how long this policy can be sustained. After all, history shows that America is incapable of long-term coexistence with communist states...doesn't it?

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Before drawing any conclusions from the Cold War experience, it is important to distinguish

Chinese communism from the European ideology with which it shares its name. Soviet communism was a foreign ideology transplanted to Russia by rootless cosmopolitan intellectuals. It had no basis in the experience of the Russian people, millions of whom died in the struggle against it. In fact, it was the alien nature of this ideology that prompted the United States to oppose Soviet communism. American opposition to the Soviet Union arose out of a moral obligation; it followed from a belief that the Russians, like all other people, had the right to follow an historical path of their own choosing, not one dictated by a cadre of rabble-rousers and professional revolutionaries.

In contrast, Chinese communism began as a popular movement among China's rural population, and its beliefs resemble those of every other regime that has ruled China in the past millennium. Though Mao and the other theoreticians of Chinese communism sought to provide it with a philosophical basis, at its most basic level it is simply a modern variation of the traditional Chinese worldview, emphasizing the importance of community and the need for self-sacrifice.² The native roots of Chinese communism are confirmed by the absence of any significant opposition to it during the first few decades of its rule—compare this with the widespread anti-Soviet obstructionism that plagued the Soviet Union from its birth. Because it is nothing more than a natural evolution of Chinese thinking, there is no moral imperative for the United States to oppose communist rule in China.³

This is welcome news for anyone with an interest in the long-term health of the Sino-American relationship, particularly those entities desiring to pursue cross border trade opportunities. In fact, this recognition that Chinese

² Once the distinction between Soviet and Chinese communism is made, it becomes clear that the war between the nationalists and the Maoists was not a philosophical dispute; rather, it was a struggle over succession, with the victor winning the right to wield the whip over the Chinese peasants.

³ This was Nixon's real genius: he recognized long before anyone else in the foreign policy establishment that Soviet and Chinese communism were two entirely different beasts.

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communism isn't a moral abomination, but is instead an expression of the Chinese temperament, allows for the possibility of a relationship deeper than mere peaceful co-existence. Admittedly, Great Powers will always have conflicting interests, but it is worth noting that the elites of both nations share many of the same values. For instance:

They share a common understanding of the relationship between state and citizen, as evidenced in their respective commitments to capital punishment;

They both recognize the danger posed to civil society by regressive, anti-historical entities like labor unions;

And both nations boast a history of hereditary rule. Dynastic China gave way to the family-dominated politics of the contemporary era, where the relatives of party leaders occupy the commanding heights of the economy. This is easily paralleled with conditions in the United States, where a tiny minority has consistently wielded the vast bulk of economic and political power.

The list is easily extended, and the number and nature of the similarities suggests that America's close ties to Europe may be nothing more than an historical accident. Certainly, the United States appears to have far more in common with China under communist party rule than it does with the EU-dominated Continent. Though shared principles are not enough to sustain a partnership, they do provide a tantalizing basis on which to daydream. Imagine, if you will, the possibilities: A booming China, firmly under the rule of the communist party, contributing the labor of its citizens; Japan, flush with the savings of the most thrifty people on Earth, providing the financing; and the United States, the broadest, deepest market in the world, providing an unquenchable demand for the latest consumer goods. Such an alliance—call it the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere—could last a thousand years.

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