

Challenges for the United States in a Sino-American 21st Century

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The White House on 13 May 1999 announced the nomination of retired Admiral Joseph Prueher to serve as the next US Ambassador to China. In the aftermath of the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by NATO forces, the subsequent highly orchestrated student demonstrations outside of the US Embassy in Beijing, the strident denunciations of the United States in the Chinese media, and the cancellation by the Chinese leadership of all bilateral military-to-military activities, the choice of a senior American military officer as the new envoy might seem inappropriate. On the contrary, it is most cogent and apt. Jiang Zemin and the other Chinese leaders respect and admire ADM Prueher, who was the Commander-in-Chief of US forces in the Pacific during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996. As USCINCPAC, it was he who dispatched two US Navy carrier battle groups to the region in order to defuse the crisis. Equally important, ADM Prueher during his tenure as USCINCPAC also sought to build a "constructive strategic engagement" between the United States and China. To the Chinese, the Admiral's nomination as the Ambassador is a reflection of the seriousness of the United States in fostering good relations between the two nations.

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The late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was famous for his blunt pragmatism. According to one of his best-known sayings, "It does not matter whether a cat is black or white. So long as it catches mice, then it is a good cat." American policy-makers might well learn from this dictum. Regardless of their divergent political and ideological views, the Administration and Congress should plan now for how the United States will deal with a strong and resurgent China as at least a peer competitor in the next century. This planning must include specific objectives for a US force structure capable of supporting the National Command Authority in carrying out its policy goals vis-à-vis China.

What will this Sino-American century look like? The views of the two governments concerned may be helpful in this regard. President Clinton noted in a speech given in Beijing during his June 1998 state visit that "We want China to be successful, secure and open, working with us for a more peaceful and prosperous world."¹ Admiral Joseph Prueher, then the Commander-in-Chief of United States Forces in the Pacific, in November 1998 told a Chinese audience in Shanghai that "A secure and stable Asia is a goal that both China and the United States share." CINCPAC also highlighted the "constructive strategic partnership" reached between Presidents Clinton and Jiang Zemin during their recent summit talks.²

The official view from Beijing until recently also shared some of this optimism. According to the text of the 1998 White Paper on China's National Defence, "It is the aspiration of the Chinese government and people to lead a peaceful, stable and prosperous world into the new century." The Chinese White Paper further notes that China's security strategy has three major goals: "China's own stability and prosperity, peace and stability in its surrounding regions, and conducting dialogue and cooperation with all countries in the Asia-Pacific region."³ In the aftermath of the Cox Report ³/₄ and especially since Taiwan leader Lee Teng-hui declared in July 1999 that the Taipei and Beijing governments should have relations on a "state-to-state" basis³/₄ tensions between the governments of the United States and the People's Republic of China have increased dramatically.

One matter is abundantly clear. Lofty aspirations for bilateral relations between the US and the PRC cannot and will not override the interests of the Beijing regime in recovering the people and territory of Taiwan. Any efforts by Washington to ensure the security of Taiwan or self-determination by the people of Taiwan would be regarded by Beijing as unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Harry Harding of the George Washington University warns that "a unilateral declaration of Taiwanese independence would be regarded by Beijing as a casus belli, the deterrence of which in itself is seen as sufficient grounds for China's development of force projection capability."⁴ Would continued support of the Taipei government by the United States result in increasing friction with the Beijing regime? Might this lead to military confrontation?

The potential of armed conflict between the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the military forces of Western powers is starting to become a fixture in the public psyche. During the run-up to the Taiwan national elections in March 1996, Beijing tried to intimidate Taipei by having the PLA fire short-range ballistic missiles into the ocean not far from the two major Taiwan ports of Kaohsiung and Keelung. In response, President Clinton dispatched two US Navy carrier battle groups to the area in a show of force to China and in a clear signal that Washington would not stand idly by. This event was widely covered by news organizations worldwide. Not surprisingly, the tensions between China and the United States have engendered reflections in the entertainment media. For example, a significant plot device in the most recent James Bond film has two Chinese PLA fighter

aircraft allegedly attack and sink a British Royal Navy destroyer in international waters in the South China Sea.⁵

In point of fact, there is wording in at least one portion of the White Paper which virtually accuses the United States of practicing "hegemonism and power politics" in East Asia.⁶ As David Finkelstein and Michael McDevitt indicate, the Chinese White Paper and its American counterpart "The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia Pacific Region 1998" appeared within months of one another. Finkelstein and McDevitt find it unsettling that the Chinese seek to make points in their White Paper through attacking the major thrusts of the US East Asia Security Strategy.⁷

Several professional journals and books in the fields of military affairs and international security in recent years have discussed the form a future conflict between American and Chinese forces might take. In his award-winning essay "Sub Tzu & the Art of Submarine Warfare," Frank Borik postulates a war in the year 2006 between the United States and China over access to the sea lines of communication and natural resources of the South China Sea. Borik's thesis is that the Chinese strategy would be to use submarines, small surface combatants, and unconventional tactics to defeat the US Navy. Asymmetric warfare was to be the key.⁸ Michael Baum suggests another scenario for a Sino-American conflict over access to the South China Sea. In Baum's hypothetical conflict in the year 2011, the Chinese would use antisatellite weapons (ASATs) to neutralize US Global Positioning System (GPS) and other US satellites, as well as space-launched weapons to strike US and allied targets on the surface of the earth.⁹ Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro suggest that a Chinese military blockade of Taiwan and subsequent missile strikes in 2004 would lead to a war in which the United States became embroiled.¹⁰ Bernstein and Munro also state that the Chinese leadership is seeking to dominate all of Asia by gaining control of Taiwan, by expanding its military presence in the South China Sea, by forcing a withdrawal of US military forces from Asia, and by keeping Japan in a subordinate role strategically.¹¹

These scenarios may be helpful in visualizing possibilities for a militarily powerful and aggressive China in the first decade or two of the next century. But are these visions the only ones we can conjure? Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross declare emphatically that "China's strength on mainland Asia does not constitute a threat to regional stability." In point of fact, Nathan and Ross state that "China remains by far the weakest of the four great powers in Asia" in terms of its abilities to project power.¹² Bates Gill and Michael O'Hanlon assert "China is a rising power that could one day significantly challenge the United States and its allies in East Asia. But that day will not come anytime soon; it will be at least twenty years before China can pose such a threat."¹³

What should American policy be if China builds an aircraft carrier, permanently deploys combat aircraft in Chinese-held islands of the South China Sea, or

otherwise seeks to develop significant capabilities for power projection? Former National Security Council staff member Doug Paal suggests that while the US should "seek the integration of China into the region and the globe," we must be prepared to follow a policy of deterrence toward China if integration should fail.¹⁴ Ted Galen Carpenter advocates "encouraging other regional powers or groups of powers to counterbalance China."¹⁵ According to Ronald Montaperto and Hans Binnendijk of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, "Chinese interests would be better served through cooperation or accommodation rather than by attempting to exclude Washington altogether... Beijing believes that China should exert an influence which is superior to that of Japan and equal to that of the United States."¹⁶

It may be instructive to note that, while the United States, Russia, India, and even Thailand all have active aircraft carriers, no other nation whose navy operates in Asian waters has one³/₄ ³/₄ including China. That does not guarantee that the Chinese have necessarily lost the desire or the intention of building an aircraft carrier. The recent acquisition of the former Russian carriers Minsk and Varyag by two private Chinese companies may well be for the purposes of developing entertainment and resort ventures, but it would be wise to remember that China also purchased the former HMAS Melbourne in 1985. According to Bruce Gilley of the Far Eastern Economic Review, the Chinese carefully studied the design and layout of the Melbourne as they scrapped it, subsequently using "the flight deck pattern as a model to construct an airstrip at an air base."¹⁷

Over the last two decades, China's surprising economic growth has mostly been continental in nature, but there are indications that China wants to expand its economic growth seaward. Wayne Hugar points out that "China's growing dependence on maritime shipping increases its sense of strategic economic vulnerability." Hugar further states that this fact will encourage China to maintain at least some naval presence in international waters, which in turn will lead to opportunities for maritime security cooperation with other states who have an ongoing naval presence in Asian waters.¹⁸ Another commentator has observed that the Chinese Navy "will be a major concern of the US Navy for the foreseeable future."¹⁹ Or would Beijing then become even more concerned about US intentions if the Seventh Fleet were to increase its presence in East Asian waters?

John Gannon, Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, said in a recent speech "a nation is powerful to the degree that it is a valued friend or a feared foe. By this measure China has been a potential power for some time. Now, however, we are starting to see that potential realized."²⁰ In their outstanding study "Strategic

Trends in China," Binnendijk and Montaperto suggest several measures which the Administration should take now in order to shape the environment in which the United States will have to deal with China over the coming decades. Some of these steps include expanding military-to-military relations with China; identifying and developing countermeasures to the most likely Chinese capabilities for asymmetric warfare; making overtures to Beijing on arms control issues prior to deploying any theater missile defense (TMD) systems in East Asia; establishing mechanisms for managing regional conflict; continuing US freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in East Asian waters; and developing a range of bilateral confidence building measures.²¹

Based on the foregoing review of bilateral US-China security relations, and bearing in mind the three basic tenets of the Quadrennial Defense Review of 1997, a policy analyst can start to develop proposals which would "shape the international environment; respond to the full spectrum of crises; and prepare now for an uncertain future"²² as these relate to a Sino-American 21st Century. One can postulate a full range of potential Chinese peer competitors in the year 2015. These run from a China that is relatively benign to US interests to one which is working diligently to drive the US presence from Asia and the Pacific. The three scenarios presented below are at the extremes of what is possible. What actually will happen likely will be an amalgam of some aspects of all three.

Peace & Prosperity: Technocrats and entrepreneurs have joined forces to bring China into the second decade of the new century as the leading economic power in Asia. On a world scale of developed economies, that puts China just behind the United States and the European Community, but just ahead of Japan. The Chinese military is smaller, somewhat modernized, and professional; it is not regarded as particularly threatening by its neighbors. Gross domestic product is increasing at some 5 to 6% each year; inflationary pressure is low; per capita income is rising steadily. China enjoys no significant deficits or surpluses with her major trading partners. There is little or no public unrest.

Economic Collapse: Following the collapse of the new market-oriented economy, conservative oligarchs in the Communist Party leadership have backed away from reforms and re-embraced Marxism. On a world scale of developed economies, China now lags far behind most of industrialized Asia. The Chinese military is much larger, with a small amount of modern weaponry and equipment; it clearly poses a significant threat to its neighbors. Gross domestic product is stagnant; inflationary pressure is high; per capita income is decreasing as the population grows. China has significant deficits with her major trading partners. Public unrest is widespread.

Resurgent Nationalism: The economic boom of the last two decades has led to the rise of a neo-Confucian regime which seeks to restore the power and position of the former Chinese Empire. China is second only to the United States among the developed economies of the world. The Chinese military is larger, highly modernized, and very professional; it is regarded as particularly threatening by its neighbors. Gross domestic product is increasing at some 12 to 15% each year; inflationary pressure is very high; per capita income is rising, but very erratically and unevenly throughout the economy. China has significant surpluses with her major trading partners. Public unrest is not tolerated by the regime.

Clearly the existent Chinese force structures in each of these scenarios would be different. Working from a baseline of information on the current structure of the Chinese armed forces, one can project those that might exist in 2015. In the "Peace & Prosperity" model, there would be little incentive for Beijing to build a force structure capable of significant power projection or of putting down civil unrest. This force would be primarily for self-defense. In the "Economic Collapse" model, Beijing would not have the funds necessary to build a modern military force. However, the government would need a large body of combat forces to absorb some of the unemployment manpower resources as well as to serve as a backstop to the paramilitary police in maintaining public order. In the "Resurgent Nationalism" model, the Beijing regime would have ample capital and the clear intent of building the most modern force structure in Asia and the Pacific. This renewed People's Liberation Army would be capable of projecting significant power anywhere within 5000 nautical miles of the Chinese maritime frontiers, using aircraft carriers and 4th or 5th generation fighter aircraft.

The following chart presents those data in tabular form.²³

	1999 Force Structure	Peace & Prosperity	Economic Collapse	Resurgent Nationalism
Ground forces				
Soldiers	1,900,000	1,250,000	3,000,000	2,250,000
Tanks (MBT)	10,000	7,500	5,000	12,000
Artillery	14,500	9,000	7,500	10,000
Helicopters	450	600	300	1,000
Mechanized divisions	2	20	5	25

Infantry divisions	70	40	100	25
Tank divisions	11	8	5	15
Artillery divisions	5	10	15	10
Engineer divisions	15	10	20	10
Air forces (includes naval aviation)				
Airmen	470,000	350,000	550,000	700,000
Fighter aircraft	2,500	1,800	1,500	2,250
Attack aircraft	400	500	300	700
Transport aircraft (heavy & medium)	150	225	175	275
Airborne divisions	3	4	2	6
Naval forces				
Sailors	250,000	200,000	350,000	300,000
Ballistic missile submarine (SSBN)	1	3	2	6
Ballistic missile submarine (SSB)	1	0	0	0
Cruise missile submarine (SSG)	1	0	3	0
Attack submarines (SSN)	5	6	3	12
Attack submarines (SSK/SS)	54	35	45	30
Aircraft carriers	0	0	0	2
Destroyers	18	10	15	15
Frigates	35	25	30	30
Fast attack craft (PGG/PC)	250	250	300	200
Amphibious ships (LST/LSM)	60	45	50	45
Replenishment ships (AOR)	3	6	3	8
Command ships	0	0	0	3

Marine brigades	2	3	1	5
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If one assumes that US national security policy in the next century will continue to seek engagement with China or even a "constructive strategic partnership" with the Beijing government, then what should be the US military force structure commensurate with those lofty goals? In each of the three scenarios mentioned above, the United States faces a different challenge. The "Peace & Prosperity" model might well suit US policy needs the best; however, it appears to be the least likely to occur. The other two models serve to demonstrate the opposite extremes of what may happen in China over the next two decades.

The "Economic Collapse" model certainly suggests that the US armed forces could be required to conduct military operations other than war (MOOTW) on an unprecedented scale^{3/4} especially, noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) or humanitarian assistance operations. Should the Chinese political infrastructure collapse as well, it is even conceivable that the United States might be asked to participate in a United Nations or ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) peacekeeping operation on Chinese soil.

Perhaps the most worrisome of the three models is "Resurgent Nationalism." In this scenario the Chinese government not only has the will to regain its former imperial glory, but also the means to make a serious attempt. If the United States intends to continue as a major player in East Asia, then the US may have no choice but to build up its own air and naval forces in the region. As it is very unlikely that the rest of the world in 2015 would be free from war and poverty, this increase in US military strength could come from only two possible sources.

- The National Command Authority would have to increase defense spending substantially in order to augment the current and planned force structure.
- Military forces assigned to duties or deployments in other parts of the world would have to be reallocated for the East Asian contingency.

Both of these choices almost certainly would be unpalatable to large segments of Congress and the voting public. Either would be a "hard sell" for the White House.

In order to have enough lead time to procure and/or deploy the force structure necessary to meet any of these challenges, the Administration and the Congress must make some difficult choices in the next few years about the future of Sino-American relations. For example, if the decision is to buy one or more additional Theodore Roosevelt-class or successor nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in order to have a fleet sufficiently large to dedicate a carrier battle group (CVBG) to a China contingency, then funding must be determined no later than six years prior to operational deployment of that CVBG.²⁴ If the decision is to keep the number of carriers in the fleet stable at the current level, then the President and his advisors

will have to determine which current deployment can cease in order to provide a CVBG for the China contingency. That choice would likely involve negotiations with US allies and other friendly powers so as to reassure those who may have concerns about decreasing American naval presence in their part of the world. Similar considerations would be needed if the decision involved the production of large numbers of new or modified combat aircraft.

The domestic political part of this equation has more to do with economics than grand strategy. The President, the Cabinet, members of Congress, governors of the states, and state legislators are extremely interested in any and all plans for acquiring new military hardware, building new or enhancing existing military bases, or putting additional uniformed personnel on the Federal payroll. Simply put, these and similar issues are inextricably entwined with economic prosperity at the state and local level. In short, a presidential decision and congressional budget authorization to build a new carrier or fighter aircraft or main battle tank may well have a significant effect on large numbers of voters at the next election. Similarly, if the strategic policy requires base closures or the cancellation of a major defense acquisition program, then the effects on the voting public in that area can be devastating economically.

Equally important for the President is not to underestimate China as a political adversary on the world stage. As Jim Mann of the Los Angeles Times notes, "Over the past three decades, the Chinese have succeeded in playing off Richard Nixon against his Democratic opponents, Henry Kissinger against the State Department, James Schlesinger against Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski against Cyrus Vance, Alexander Haig against Richard Allen and Clinton's economic advisers against his foreign policy aides."²⁵ There are a number of other crucial issues in foreign affairs that must be addressed as Washington crafts its strategic policy toward the Beijing government. These involve the mounting US trade deficit with China; open access by American firms to the Chinese market; the issue of TMD in East Asia; China's accession to the World Trade Organization; and the views of Taiwan, Japan, Russia, and South Korea on a major change in Sino-American bilateral relations. Any new US strategic policy toward China will require the strong support of our allies in the region and at least the tacit approval of Moscow.

Therefore, the challenge to the Administration is to develop a strategic policy which receives strong backing from a majority of the American people; engenders positive support by the bipartisan congressional leadership; provides the doctrinal basis for a force structure capable of carrying out that policy; and does not adversely affect US commitments worldwide. A proposal for just such a policy is presented below.

1. "The United States will continue to engage China, seeking to foster cooperation in areas where the two nations' interests overlap and influence it to make a positive contribution to regional stability...."²⁶ Regular political consultations, military-to-military exchanges, and summit meetings between

the presidents of the two nations are important methods for enhancing transparency and raising the level of bilateral relations.

2. The mutual security treaty between the United States and Japan should be revised and renewed. American basing rights in the home islands will be reviewed once every four years. After 2008, the United States will no longer base an aircraft carrier in Japan, but will continue to maintain sizable ground, air, and marine forces in that nation.
3. In order to preserve and protect American interests in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States will build new and expanded facilities in the Commonwealth of Guam to base a new aircraft carrier battle group. Initial operations would begin from there in 2006, with regular patrols in the Western Pacific.
4. The United States strongly supports the right of political self-determination by the people of the world, including the residents of the island of Taiwan. The United States firmly believes in the right of every sovereign nation to freedom of navigation on the high seas, including the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.
5. Regular security consultations with the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the ASEAN Regional Forum will continue to be a major focus of US policy. The United States advocates multilateral efforts to secure peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States will work with all nations in the Asia-Pacific region who seek to lower trade barriers and eliminate taxes or tariffs.

This new security policy on China would require additional defense spending in the amount of some 8 to 10 billion dollars in capital investment and approximately one billion dollars per year in operations and maintenance costs. The investment would go to defray the construction and acquisition of a new aircraft carrier and its new base on Guam, to equip and outfit its organic air wing, and to organize and train the personnel to man the ships in the new carrier battle group. Under this proposal, the US Navy would be operating 12 active carriers and one reserve carrier. That is one active carrier more than the number required in the Quadrennial Defense Review.²⁷ The additional expenditure is warranted, because it would give the United States the capability to respond quickly to any contingency in East Asia. A side benefit would be the strengths of the new CVBG in providing the naval component of "an integrated in-depth theater air and missile defense that will exploit Service-unique capabilities to detect, identify, locate, track, and deny enemy attacks on our joint forces."²⁸

This proposal also eliminates a significant problem that arises from basing a carrier at Yokosuka in Japan. When USS Kitty Hawk is decommissioned around 2008, the only conventionally powered aircraft carrier left in the US Navy inventory may be USS John F Kennedy, now assigned to the Naval Reserve Fleet; her availability for full-time active duty at that point is open to question. Unless the Tokyo government

overturns a policy of many decades, no nuclear-powered US Navy ship is permitted basing rights in Japan.

Another benefit of this proposal is the capital investment that would be made on US soil. Guam is but a few days steaming from the China Seas, and it already maintains a significant US Air Force and US Navy presence. The additional construction and military support jobs which would be created would help both the Guamanian and US economies, rather than redounding to the benefit of Japan or another East Asian nation. Construction of the carrier itself almost certainly would be at Newport News Shipyard, thus providing a boost to the economy of Virginia. The additional carrier-based aircraft, surface combatants, and submarines required for the new carrier battle group would also provide new jobs in a number of other states.

Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent proponent of US naval power, once said, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." In much the same way, the new China strategy seeks to encourage the Chinese government to make the changes necessary to become a full member of the community of nations. But, just in case the Beijing leadership thinks of rattling the saber once more at Taiwan, or annexing those of the Spratly Islands not yet under Chinese control, the enhancements to our current force structure should give them ample reason to reconsider.

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