



**Troubling Signs in East Asia** by J. Stapleton Roy

Stability in East Asia rests in large part on relations among China, Japan, and the United States. If these relations are managed well, there is no danger in East Asia that cannot be effectively addressed. If they are managed badly, chances of destructive collision will be greatly enhanced.

The United States, China, and Japan have the most powerful and dynamic economies in the world. This gives them the capability to support powerful military establishments. Cooperation among them has made an enormous contribution to the success of the East Asian economic miracle. Now, the danger signals are all too evident. The issue, then, becomes whether national leaderships can demonstrate the vision and skill necessary to minimize the dangers and strengthen chances that East Asia can remain an open, stable, and prosperous region. Trends during this decade suggest that improvements are needed in this area.

**Implications of China's rise**

China's rise poses a number of fundamental issues for the United States in particular and for the global system in general. These include the question of how to manage the growing resource needs and environmental impact of a rapidly developing China within a global community. Another is how to deal with the economic consequences of China's rise, which is affecting employment and trade patterns across the globe. A third is how to respond to the increases in military capabilities that will be an inevitable aspect of a China that commands the resources of a much larger economy.

As China has become stronger and more prosperous, the nature of the debate about China in the U.S. has changed. The issue is no longer whether China will succeed or fail in implementing its policies of reform and openness. Now the debate is over whether a rising China is a threat to the U.S. both economically and militarily, just as Chinese strategic thinkers worry over the implications for China of a world dominated by a sole superpower.

The underlying issues raise legitimate questions that deserve serious consideration. East Asians know well that rapid increases in power can produce inflated ambitions that lead to conflict rather than cooperation. The countries of East Asia have learned these lessons through bitter experience.

For the U.S., the challenge posed by China is of a different order. China's growing strength and influence make it the one country in the world that has the potential to challenge U.S. supremacy. In the words of the Pentagon's latest *Quadrennial Defense Review*: "Of the major powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that

could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies."

Whether China becomes a threat, however, will depend on a number of linked considerations. The first is how China uses its growing power and influence. Chinese leaders have articulated a strategy of peaceful development that explicitly links the preservation of a peaceful international environment to China's modernization objectives. The unanswered question is whether an increasingly powerful China will continue to demonstrate restraint in defining its objectives and in using its growing capabilities.

The second is how other countries react to a rising China. This second consideration is important because for China to accomplish a peaceful and nondestabilizing rise does not depend simply on the intentions and behavior patterns of the rising power. If the United States or other major powers such as Japan feel threatened by China's rise, their reactions could precipitate conflict as easily as the conduct of the merging country. As a result, much will depend on the U.S. and Japan in addition to China.

A third consideration is whether the United States defines a strategic doctrine that can accommodate the emergence of a stronger and more influential China. If the United States sets its goal as preserving unchallengeable supremacy, there will be several inevitable consequences. First, none of the world's other power centers will support the central objective of U.S. national security strategy. Since successful foreign policies are based on finding common interests with other countries, defining U.S. goals from the narrow standpoint of U.S. interests will find few if any supporters in other countries.

In addition, if the U.S. goal is perpetual supremacy, China's rise, or the rise of any other major country, will become threatening at some point. Sooner or later, regardless of Chinese behavior, the United States would have to adopt a policy of containment toward China. Depending on whether other countries share U.S. concerns, this could have a divisive impact in Asia and elsewhere.

If, on the other hand, the United States defines its goal as ensuring the prosperity and security of the American people, then we are likely to see a different set of consequences. First, this would signal U.S. acceptance of the concept of a world in which other countries have an equal right to pursue the well-being and security of their people through means other than force and conquest. In this case, the United States need not feel threatened by a stronger and more prosperous China that behaves responsibly. The goal of U.S. China policy, then, would be to maximize prospects for a good U.S.-China relationship and responsible Chinese behavior.

At the moment, the U.S. record in this regard is mixed. On the one hand, the United States is calling for China to be a

responsible stakeholder in the international system and declaring that it welcomes the rise of a peaceful and prosperous China. On the other hand, the U.S. Defense Department sees evidence that China's military expansion is already altering regional military balances and that long-term trends in China's military modernization programs have the potential to pose credible threats to modern militaries operating in the region.

### **Conflicting threat perceptions**

The above factors illustrate that these issues clearly need more attention. At the moment China, the United States, and Japan are embarked on courses that will exacerbate regional tensions unless they are reversed. As China has gained in global stature, it understandably wishes to wield greater influence over events in East Asia and the western Pacific, to enhance its ability to defend its interests, and to gain greater assurance that formidable U.S. military capabilities cannot be used against China at acceptable cost. This was stated succinctly in a recent article in an official Chinese military journal, which argued that China should develop a military "commensurate with its international status."

However understandable such attitudes may be from the Chinese perspective, in U.S. eyes this amounts to an intention to weaken U.S. military predominance in the western Pacific. As summarized in the U.S. Defense Department's just-released annual *Report on PRC Military Power*, China's rising defense budget and military modernization program constitute an emerging threat to the global and regional naval and nuclear balance. The winds from Tokyo suggest that Japan is reacting in a similar fashion. It is an unhealthy situation when actions which individual countries consider natural and prudent are viewed by other countries as provocative and dangerous. And yet this is the direction in which events seem to be moving.

Especially dangerous in this context are the growing nationalist frictions between China and Japan. Until recently, the natural rivalry between Beijing and Tokyo had been partly contained by their economic complementarities. Even now, the enormous economic interests between the two countries still constitute a stabilizing factor, but the recent trend has been steadily downward.

It is worth remembering that Japan is already a formidable military power in its own right. As detailed in a recent article by the former director general of the Japan Defense Agency, Japan's navy is more than a match for China's and is technologically more advanced. And Japan has the edge over China in modern fighter aircraft and in airborne warning and control systems.

Unless Sino-Japanese frictions are contained, China's rise could be as destabilizing in this century as Japan's rise was in the last. Because of the close U.S. security relationship with Japan, the reversal of the positive trends in Sino-Japanese relations over the last 30 years has tended to force the United States and Japan closer together. Over time this could contribute to polarization of the situation in Northeast Asia and give U.S.-Japan security ties an anti-Chinese character. It could produce a situation where South Korea moves closer to China, while the United States and Japan move closer to each

other. This would have the potential to compromise Washington's ability to sustain positive cooperation with Beijing on a host of important international issues, including the North Korean nuclear issue and the threat of proliferation. As a result, neither the U.S. nor other regional countries can afford to be a passive bystander if frictions between China and Japan are in danger of further worsening.

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