



## Strategic Trends in China

by Hans Binnendijk and Ronald Montaperto

*The following is the Executive Summary and Recommendations from Strategic Trends in China, a recent study produced by the U.S. National Defense University.*

Reduced rates of economic growth are likely to be a fact of life in China for the next few years, and slow growth could produce an increase in already high levels of social discontent which could result in political instability. For the next few years, the leadership will attempt to implement the structural reforms necessary to provide a sound framework for sustained future growth while minimizing political unrest. The odds favoring success were judged to be only about even. *This suggests a need to reconsider assumptions about China's economic prospects and to identify indicators of declining political stability.*

The proposed extension of village elections to higher administrative levels, the medical parole of two key dissidents, and the surfacing of a new debate on democratic political reform all illustrate China's incremental progress on human rights. They also suggest a possible new flexibility and a desire to reduce the adverse impact of human rights issues on bilateral relations. Moreover, the practical effect of Beijing's agreeing to participate in the U.N. Convention on Human Rights will be to make international norms a benchmark for judging China's progress in this area. *This provides an opportunity for the United States to refocus discussion of human rights questions away from the bilateral arena. The Congress might also consider ending the annual requirement for MFN renewal.*

Strategically, Beijing has secured most of its land borders and is focused on its maritime interests. Chinese strategists appear to identify three major strategic challenges, all of which relate to a highly developed Chinese sense of nationalism: the need to support the national effort to achieve eventual reunification with Taiwan; the need to extend China's regional influence; and in the longer term, the need to protect littoral and maritime interests. Beijing will seek to increase its strategic depth by first trying to deny a possible enemy access to areas adjacent to China's borders and later it may seek to develop the capability to control these areas in time of conflict. Beijing will wish to achieve victory at some distance from its borders. This does not necessarily signal any aggressive intent by Beijing, but it could be perceived in this way. *It would, therefore, be useful for Washington to broaden and deepen its military engagement with China. Discussions between the navies of the two nations should receive special emphasis.*

China is committed to developing modern conventional military capabilities. This effort will be influenced by the lessons of the Gulf War and by the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). In the wake of *Desert Storm*, the Chinese

made a commitment to developing the kinds of capabilities that enabled the coalition forces to achieve their overwhelming victory. The influence of RMA advocates is strong and growing. However, Chinese thinking emphasizes Information Warfare. There is little evidence of major attention paid to other dimensions of the RMA such as networking remote sensors and smart weapons and reducing central reliance on mass and maneuver. By 2015, China might deploy a force that could begin to mirror some of the U.S. military capabilities of the early 1990s and simultaneously be capable of challenging, in limited ways, the information systems of any adversary. In any conflict with the United States, China would have to rely on asymmetric capabilities. *It is necessary for the United States to identify the most likely Chinese asymmetric capabilities and their targets and prepare to defeat or neutralize them.*

Beijing is modernizing its strategic nuclear forces and may be considering changes in its nuclear strategy and doctrine. The Chinese have said that deployment in the region of U.S. theater missile defenses would cause them to expand their offensive systems, although much would depend on the character of the theater missile defense (TMD) systems and how and by whom they were controlled. *It would, therefore, be useful to consider new approaches to Beijing on arms control before deployment or transfer of theater missile defense systems to Japan, the Republic of Korea, or Taiwan.*

In the short-term, the most likely source of conflict between China and the United States would seem to lie in actions designed to change the status quo in Asia. Such actions could be taken by third parties such as Taiwan, either of the two Koreas, or those nations involved in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. *This highlights the need for the United States and China to establish bilateral and/or regional conflict management mechanisms.*

There is a new dynamic in relations across the Taiwan Strait. Taipei has come to view itself as a sovereign government equal to Beijing, while many in China believe that Taiwan authorities are preparing for independence. If Taipei declares independence, a military conflict into which the United States might be drawn would probably ensue. *A reassessment of U.S. strategies for Taiwan that considers changes in the U.S.-China-Taiwan equation could be useful in preventing such an outcome. A special envoy for China-Taiwan relations should also be considered.*

The greatest risk to stability on the Korean peninsula has shifted from North Korean military strength to its economic weakness. While the United States and China currently have common interests with regard to North Korea, this could quickly change if the Pyongyang regime begins to collapse. Closer interaction between Washington and Beijing could both reduce the possibility of military conflict and help to limit the

negative consequences of a North Korean collapse. *Discussion by U.S. and Chinese planners of alternative Korean scenarios would be a useful starting point.*

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea are not likely to produce a serious conflict engaging U.S. forces. Freedom of navigation will remain the principal United States interest and that freedom is unlikely to be challenged. *The United States Navy should continue to exercise that right by regular transits through all parts of the South China Sea.*

The Chinese are reassessing the impact of U.S. regional alliances on their longer term interest. In response to the April 1996 reaffirmation of the U.S./Japan Alliance, Beijing unambiguously denigrated U.S. regional alliances as outdated relics of the Cold War and advocated creating a different security architecture based on “Strategic Partnerships,” multilateral confidence-building measures, and even multilateral security regimes. Although its rhetoric has moderated significantly, it cannot be argued that Beijing now believes that a continued U.S. regional military presence is consonant with its future interests. The alliances and the issue of the U.S. regional military presence will continue to complicate bilateral ties. *A bilateral dialogue focused on the respective long-range interests of the United States and China might be a useful point of departure for a larger multilateral process designed to facilitate the integration of China into a regional security architecture.*

At present the Sino-Russian “Strategic Partnership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” does not threaten United States interests. The tie is tactical, not strategic. The two sides are drawn together because both appear to believe that establishing a framework for stable relations will free each to concentrate on more pressing issues: Russia has economic problems and is concerned about further NATO expansion; China also has domestic concerns and is intensely focused on Taiwan. However, the ties could complicate Washington’s relations with both nations and threaten U.S. interests if diplomacy is mismanaged. *In order to prevent the formation of an anti-American alliance, the United States should provide Beijing and Moscow with incentives to make choices that enhance their ties with the West and Japan.*

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