



China's Great Power Diplomacy: Implications for the United States by James J. Przystup

During the 1990s, much of U.S. strategic thinking focused on China's emergence as a great power in East Asia – on the process of its becoming a great power. That thinking is now passé. Today, China is East Asia's great power.

That the recent six-party meeting on North Korea's nuclear challenge took place in Beijing is a reflection of China's great power status. But, beyond the Korean Peninsula, this reality is also reflected in China's increasingly active and effective diplomacy toward East Asia. While the United States has been engaged in Iraq, China has been engaged in a diplomatic tour d'force across the region, which bespeaks a growing confidence in its standing and influence. How this will affect historic U.S. interests in East Asia is a matter to which the Bush administration should begin to give careful consideration.

Clearly, China's long-standing efforts to move Pyongyang toward economic opening and dialogue with the South, its advocacy of a peaceful resolution of the current nuclear noncrisis, as well as its willingness to serve as an economic lifeline for North Korea – keeping it afloat and avoiding the South's worst fears of a North Korean implosion – have been gratefully received in Seoul. Also well received in Seoul is China's emergence as South Korea's largest trading partner.

After Pyongyang's admission of a clandestine nuclear weapons program last October, China played a major role in bringing North Korea and the United States back together in Beijing at the end of April for "talks" on Pyongyang's nuclear challenge. Following the breakdown of the April talks, Beijing picked up the diplomatic pieces and reassembled them into the present six-party format, providing South Korea, Japan, and Russia with seats at the table.

Peninsular diplomacy, in which all roads are leading to Beijing, may be opening the door to a new "go-to-guy" in East Asia. For over 50 years, since the end of World War II, this role has been played by the United States.

China's new leadership is also evidencing some signs of "new thinking" toward Japan. On May 31, in St. Petersburg, China's President Hu Jintao met with Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro. In doing so, Hu moved political relations out of the deep freeze to which China's previous leadership had consigned them following Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of Japan's war dead, including Class A war criminals, are enshrined. Unlike Jiang Zemin, whose history lectures patently irritated Japan's postwar generations, Hu focused on the future, avoiding the dreaded "Y" word in the meeting with Koizumi. The Japanese media noted its absence.

In August, Beijing invited Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda to China for ceremonies marking the 25th anniversary of the China-Japan Friendship Treaty. At the same time, China's Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing traveled to Tokyo. In September, Japan's defense minister visited China, resuming high-level defense contacts that have also been in the Yasukuni deep freeze. If all goes well, a Koizumi visit to China may be in the offing. Koizumi has long sought an official visit to China only to be stymied thus far by Chinese opposition to his Yasukuni visits.

Meanwhile, Japan's official trade statistics for 2002 underscore its deepening economic ties to China. Last year, for the first time, Japan's imports from China surpassed those from the United States as exports to China grew by a skyrocketing 39.3 percent. Even as the SARS epidemic raged in China, Japanese companies continued to place their long-term investment bets on the promise of China's low-cost labor.

In Southeast Asia, during the June ASEAN ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh, China announced that it will sign the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the founding document of ASEAN. Beijing's accession represents a major confidence-building step toward Southeast Asia. It follows China's 2001 proposal for a China-ASEAN free trade area and its active financial support for Thailand and Indonesia during the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis. Talk of a "strategic partnership" was in the air.

Meanwhile in South Asia, China welcomed India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to Beijing, and, on June 24, China and India signed a Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation. In the document, India acknowledged that Tibet is part of China and proscribed anti-Chinese activities by Tibetans from Indian soil. One week later, India announced the first ever India-China joint naval exercises, which will take place later this year.

If the United States is looking to develop a post-Cold War strategic relationship with India to counter Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia, the recent China-India agreements suggest that an alternative strategic calculus may exist in Beijing and New Delhi.

What does this all mean for the United States?

Of immediate consequence, as the administration goes about transforming the U.S. military presence in Asia to meet the demands of the war on terror, it will be important to recognize that, while the countries of the region are undoubtedly looking to the U.S. to balance, or at least leaven China's growing influence, they are unlikely to be interested in getting caught up in what Beijing may perceive as a subrosa containment strategy.

It is also important to recognize that, while U.S. and Chinese interests may now coincide on the war on terrorism,

on a peaceful resolution of the current nuclear question on the Korean Peninsula, and on stability in East Asia, they are not identical across the board. Over the long-term, Taiwan, a unified Korea, and the future of the U.S. alliance structure in Asia are issues on which accommodation will be difficult. And, on the fundamental issue of freedom, “the non-negotiable demand of human dignity,” in the words of the administration’s *National Security Strategy*, the U.S. and China have manifestly conflicting visions.

Clearly, the war on terrorism has presented China with opportunities to strengthen relations with the United States. This, in fact, is the prescription of the administration’s *National Security Strategy*, which calls for great power cooperation in the war against terrorism. Great power cooperation may indeed reshape the structure of international relations as well as the U.S.-China relationship. But there is also another view of China, one that existed in the administration prior to Sept. 11, that of the “rising power” defined in the Quadrennial Defense Review. Conceptually at least, with respect to China, two dominant frameworks contend.

From a U.S. policy perspective, it will be of significant import to understand the relationship and potential interaction of the two distinct Chinas. For example, will cooperation in the war on terrorism significantly restructure relations with the

United States to the point where China will no longer be perceived as a potential rival? Or, will cooperation in the war on terrorism prove to be a less than an enduring overlay superimposed on Asia’s strategic reality – China’s emergence as the region’s dominant power?

The bet here is that Asia’s realities will outlast the war on terrorism. After Afghanistan, after Iraq, after bringing democracy to the Middle East, when the United States refocuses on Asia, it will find a much different China in a much different region.

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