

# **Soft Deterrence, Passive Resistance: American Lenses, Chinese Lessons**

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# Soft Deterrence, Passive Resistance: American Lenses, Chinese Lessons

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- ...Attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the highest achievement; subjugating the enemy without having to fight is the true pinnacle of excellence.
- ...The highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans, the next is to attack its alliances, the next is to attack its army, and the lowest is to attack its fortifications.
- ...Those who excel in warfare first render themselves unconquerable so that they can wait for the right moment to conquer the enemy.
- ...Those who will be victorious first seek to establish the conditions for their victory and then enter into battle, while those who will be defeated first seek battle and then fight for victory.
- ...Those who excel in warfare compel others to respond to them and are not compelled to respond to others.
- ...If the enemy must prepare to defend many positions, then its forces facing us will be few.
- ...Do not count on the enemy not attacking, but depend on one's own efforts to develop an unassailable defense.
- ...A ruler must not mobilize his troops out of anger, and a general must not fight a battle due to frustration.

*Sun Tzu's Art of War*

It seems trite yet still important to remark that people and, by extension, states are strategic. They are strategic in the sense that they seek to anticipate others' reactions to their actions and try to make *ex ante* adjustment of their actions based on this anticipation. Naturally, such anticipatory adjustment requires an ability to grasp others' motivations and calculations. In regard to the present topic of managing hegemony—whether such efforts be intended to promote, sustain, modify, or defeat this state of affairs— an important part of this understanding revolves around views pertaining to the acquisition and application of power in international relations.

Classic Chinese strategic writers remind their readers about the imperative of developing sound knowledge about oneself and about one's counterpart(s) as a prerequisite for successful military campaign and diplomatic conduct. Many of their themes resonate with hard-core realist injunctions.<sup>1</sup> They also, however, express some ideas that tend to be, if not entirely unique or distinct, under-represented in standard discourse among U.S. international relations scholars. These ideas offer suggestive contrasts to several main currents in how Americans typically think about managing challenges to would-be hegemons.

One such current can be described as an acceleration model of power which assumes that, if unrestrained, the strong will become stronger as its gains on successive encounters and create a winning momentum. This expectation of cumulative advantage naturally emphasizes positive serial dependency whereby success in power expansion begets further success. Not surprisingly, this view has its corollaries in beliefs about waves of democratization, falling dominoes of rogue states, and bandwagoning to join a

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston 1995.

hegemon. It has its flip side in injunctions against appeasement because current concessions can engender future demands for further concessions. The shadow of the future therefore increases the salience of any current dispute, and calls attention to the potential harm to one's reputation caused by appeasement or even inaction. As just implied, this acceleration model of power points to the accumulation over time of both the material and psychological wherewithal for managing hegemony.

Compared to this view, less attention seems to have gone to a self-limiting or even a self-exhausting model of power, according to which foreign exertions will encounter inevitable limits and declining marginal utility. One can find instances of this secondary current in the relevant literature, such as in references to imperial overstretch, loss-of-power gradient due to physical distance and water barriers, and a natural tendency for states to balance against any aspiring or extant hegemon.<sup>2</sup> These and similar views point to the effects of systemic negative feedback that tend to dash hegemonic ambitions. These views tend to relax the urgency of active resistance and organized blocking coalitions, and question the inevitability or durability of hegemonic rule.

An avowed emphasis on curbing, checking, and restraining some deleterious impulse characterizes another main current in the extant U.S. discourse on international relations. Despite their other differences, neorealists and neoliberals alike enjoin officials to institute policies intended to constrain actors from defecting from cooperation, whether such restraints are to be exercised through the threat of physical coercion, the socialization of common norms, or the introduction binding commitments to collective action. These proposed policies are featured prominently in the supposed tool kit of

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<sup>2</sup> Layne 1993; Kennedy 1987; Mearsheimer 2001.

those who want to manage a hegemon, although they are surely available also to the hegemon for managing others.

By their very nature, restraints are supposed to work against some assumed predisposition, such as cheating, shirking, hiding, or, in the case of a hegemon, wanton abuse of power. Restraints, therefore, go “against the grain.” Conversely, policies that seek to promote or exacerbate extant tendencies are less demanding and more likely to succeed. Accordingly, efforts to contain or undermine hegemony can be rewarding when taken in the form of abetting the hegemon’s ambitions, encouraging it to over-commit its resources, and fostering its sense of false confidence. In other words, attempts to resist a hegemon and to modify its behavior can involve engagement, entanglement, and entrapment rather than overt and active confrontation. Declared support for a hegemon’s cause does not necessarily rule out challenge to its rule, as this support may be calculated to invite the latter’s over-extension or be designed to advance alternative agendas that may not be shared by the hegemon. Attempts to exploit and take advantage of a hegemon’s hubris tend to be generally overlooked as part of the policy repertoire of the less powerful. This general oversight does not dismiss those parts of the extant scholarship, such as with respect to free-riding in the provision of collective defense and deliberate misinformation to facilitate strategic surprise, that emphasize this theme.<sup>3</sup>

Yet a third main tendency in prevailing U.S. discourse is to code the outcomes of interstate contests in terms of win, loss, and draw.<sup>4</sup> This scoring system does not quite

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<sup>3</sup> Olson and Zeckhauser 1966; Whaley 1973.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Stam 1996. My reference to Stam’s excellent analysis is intended to point to a standard coding practice in quantitative research of war based on a large number of cases. It is not intended as a criticism of this work; Stam’s analysis pursues analytic concerns different from those articulated in this paper. Parenthetically, the large-N quantitative research just alluded to tends to assume that its analytic units of

get at how the eventual terms of settling these contests have differed from the initial expectations of the hegemon and the challenger. The point is whether the challenger was able to gain better terms than it would have been able to obtain in the absence of its challenge and, concomitantly, whether the hegemon was forced to accept less favorable terms than it had originally expected.<sup>5</sup> Even if the hegemon was eventually able to have its way, a challenger's resistance would have paid off if this effort had raised the hegemon's costs, deflated its ego, and delayed the planned completion of the hegemon's mission. This modification would be consequential to the extent that the hegemon would be discouraged from initiating future encounters, and to the extent that third parties would be emboldened through learning and imitation to engage in similar actions to constrain and deter the hegemon. Therefore, the success or failure of resistance efforts cannot be evaluated by just the immediate outcome of a bilateral episode, but must take into account the effects of the current encounter on future decisions by the direct contestants as well as the onlookers. In this light, resistance to hegemonic bids becomes less a matter of trying to out-muscle the superpower than nonverbal communication intended to alter the latter's and significant others' incentives and calculations about warranted and unwarranted costs, goals, and time horizon for achieving goals. Naturally, the pertinent assets or liabilities being promised or threatened extend beyond tangible items such as dollars, body bags, and territory. They include intangibles such as elite legitimacy, regime popularity, and a national reputation for resolve, sacrifice, and effort

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interstate wars or militarized disputes are independent observations for statistical examination. This assumption naturally overlooks audience effects of the kind mentioned in the text, and also goes against the acceleration model of power which expects serial dependency. For an example of scholarship that recognizes explicitly that prior history affects subsequent deterrence encounters, see Fearon 2002, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Fearon 1995.

mobilization. The hegemon and its detractor(s) should both recognize and anticipate that important domestic and foreign stake-holders would try to influence their respective ledger of assets and liabilities.

As with other actors, Chinese statecraft is multi-dimensional and involves opposing injunctions or bimodal reasoning (e.g., to be bold *and* cautious, to bluff strength *and* to feign weakness, to be patient *and* to be opportunistic). As a matter of comparison with standard U.S. strategic thinking, however, it is less prone to assume that a hegemon's or would-be hegemon's power will follow a linear progression, and is more inclined to take a dialectic or cyclical view of the waning and waxing of national power. Moreover, it tends to attribute a hegemon's own internal conditions rather than external pressure as the principal source for constraining and modifying its behavior and as the main cause for its eventual decline. Finally, challenges to hegemonic designs are viewed less as a contest of raw power and more as an attempt aimed at influencing the target's incentives and calculations. The highest achievement in statecraft is not to prevail in a physical struggle of strength but rather to subjugate an adversary without having to resort to arms. Intangibles in the form of strategy, morale, leadership, persistence, and timing and location would trump tangibles such as weaponry and money. These ideas contrast with the typical U.S. emphasis on internal or external "balancing"— that is, on arms buildup or alliance formation— as the principal means of containing or blocking a foreign rival. They point to ways of "going around" and delaying U.S. goals in a deeper sense. Moreover, and significantly, they underscore an important distinction between the current preferences of American officials and basic U.S. national interests. Current official preferences are not taken to be necessarily equivalent to enduring national

interests. Two implications follow from this distinction. First, a strategy to indulge and even abet current U.S. preferences can be justified as a way to circumvent and even defeat the realization of longer-term U.S. interests. Second, this conception recognizes possible domestic cleavages in the United States in defining its national interests, a conception that in turn points to how internal divisions and contentions within the hegemon can be exploited to modify and even reverse its behavior.

### **Policy Cycles and the Principle of Conservation**

In the past two decades or so, a new generation of Chinese analysts and policy commentators has emerged.<sup>6</sup> They are more familiar with U.S. analytic lexicon and policy discourse than their predecessors. Many have received advanced degrees from American institutions, and make it their business to stay informed about the prevailing policy currents and intellectual fashions in Washington. What would China's America watchers have noticed?

They would have noticed that Asians do not have a monopoly on bimodal proclivity and cyclical reasoning. Although current discussions in U.S. policy circles and elite media have characterized a unipolar world, often assuming current and future American dominance as a given, it was not so long ago that the talk of town was the inevitability of U.S. relative decline. Pronouncements about the perils of imperial over-extension and blowback, and the flaws of a hard-power conception of national influence have been followed in short order by a declared intention to expand the NATO alliance, develop missile defense, institute regime change abroad, and secure physical control of foreign energy sources. Triumphant celebration of a supposed universal acceptance of

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<sup>6</sup> Shambaugh 1991.



liberal secular values has co-existed with a foreboding for civilizational clashes and even a siege mentality after 9/11. Theories of complex interdependence have been accompanied by unabashed assertions of unilateralism and the primacy of coercive instruments. Isolationism and interventionism have been simultaneous features of the Janus-face of U.S. diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

What is a Chinese observer to make of these zig-zags and seeming contradictions? Unsettled debates, contested visions, and policy cycling present themselves as plausible leading explanations. Gulliver would then be seen to have a conflicted self-image and a divided mind about proper and fruitful ways to conduct foreign relations. Recurrent mood swings characterize popular sentiments and elite outlook. Office holders with different, even competing, agendas alternate in succession. Intellectual fads and fashions come and go. Phases of tough talk and militant action invoke a sense of *deja vu* rather than panic as they have been previously followed by retrenchment and reconciliation.

The limits of assertion and the virtues of abstention would then command some appeal for dealing with the hegemon. Active resistance may not be useful or even necessary because of the likely prospect that the hegemon would be self-restrained rather than being constrained by others. Psychological and political forces internal to the United States generate countervailing influences when the policy pendulum swings too far in one or the other direction. Powerful domestic groups with competing interests and

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<sup>7</sup> Readers are surely aware of exemplary works expounding the themes just alluded to. These works represent scholarship that would be required reading in any graduate, and even some undergraduate, class on U.S. foreign policy and international relations. Selective examples include Calleo 1988; Fukuyama 1992; Holsti and Rosenau 1984; Huntington 1999, 1996, 1988; Johnson 2000; Kennedy 1987; Keohane 1984; Keohane and Nye 1977; Krauthammer 1991; Nye 1990; Oye *et al* 1979; and Rosecrance 1986, 1976.

visions will self-mobilize to moderate the policy agenda of incumbent officials.

Institutions of shared power require tedious consensus building and entail the politics of log-rolling. Electoral cycles and unstable mass preferences introduce additional checks to sustaining policy continuity whatever its ideological orientation. Regression toward the mean cautions against knee-jerk responses to the latest twist or turn in Washington's policy pronouncement and conduct. Constancy, if not inaction and passivity as enjoined by the Taoist dictum, presents itself as a course of conservation. Vacillation and self-exhaustion by the hegemon promise constraint possibly even in the absence of severe external pressure, which will in any case be less important than the hegemon's internal conditions as a source for behavioral modification. The hallmark of strategic success is the ability to resist unnecessary agitation in the face of challenges and to eschew wanton behavior that dissipates energy. An impulsive and over-confident enemy can be expected to make these same errors, and its mistakes will redound to one's advantage without requiring strenuous exertion.

### **The Power-Transition Prism and Playing for Time**

Strategies for dealing with the hegemon call for not only an understanding about U.S. self-image but also its image of China. During the Cold War, China's status was subordinate to Washington's competition with Moscow. The United States cared about China primarily because of Beijing's strategic relationship, either friendly or hostile, with Moscow. Since the demise of the U.S.S.R., however, China has been accorded more intrinsic than derivative importance in U.S. strategic thinking, assuming the role of a leading candidate as Washington's strategic competitor. It would be difficult for any

reasonably attentive America watcher in China to miss these hallmarks of U.S. policy conception.

What are then the prevailing analytic logic and categories fashionable in American policy and intellectual circles for understanding China? Again, it would be difficult for Chinese analysts attuned to U.S. discourse to overlook the dominant frame or prism being applied by Americans to the evolving bilateral relations. Power-transition theory appears to offer the most persuasive and congenial optics. According to this theory, systemic war beckons when a rising challenger dissatisfied with the international status quo catches up with a dominant power in decline.<sup>8</sup> Imperial and Nazi Germany's overtaking of British power sparked the conflict dynamics leading to World Wars I and II respectively. Peaceful transitions, however, are possible when they involve two democratic regimes or satisfied powers.<sup>9</sup> The clear implication is that unless China changes its domestic political character, its rising power is a threat to the United States.

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<sup>8</sup> Power-transition theory has evolved over time. The original formulation can be found in Organski 1968 and Organski and Kugler 1980. More recent appraisals of the research program based on this theory can be found in DiCicco and Levy 1999 and Kugler and Lemke 2000, 1996. The salience of issues raised by power-transition theory is attested by a recent workshop held by the Sino-American Security Dialogue Group in China, entitled "'China's Rise' and U.S.-China Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Power Transitions and the Question of 'Revisionism.'" A general application of the power-transition theory to the international situation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with attention to China as the leading challenger to U.S. hegemony, can be found in Tammen *et al* 2000. Johnston, 2003 addressed specifically the question of whether China is a status-quo power. That power-transition theory has received so much attention at a supposed "unipolar moment" points to the mixture of confidence and anxiety, and the cross-currents in both U.S. policy and academic circles referred to in the previous section.

<sup>9</sup> Actual historical reality is considerably more complicated than these assertions. The relationship between the United States and the U.K. was acrimonious before 1895. They were bitter, even hostile, rivals in the Western Hemisphere and Asia Pacific. Vasquez 1996. Moreover, the U.S. and Germany had both long overtaken the U.K. before the outbreak of both world wars, which were precipitated more by German concerns about a rising Russia/U.S.S.R. than a declining U.K. Copeland, 2000. In addition, there have been peaceful power transitions when a democracy overtook a non-democracy, and vice versa. Recent examples include a re-united Germany gaining ascendancy over Russia in economic size and, measured in purchasing-power parity, China passing over Japan. For a more extended treatment of power-transition theory applied to Sino-American relations, see Chan 2004.

As the designated challenger to U.S. dominance, what are sensible strategies for China to manage the hegemon? Beijing has everything to gain by reassuring Washington that it has limited goals and peaceful intentions. Contrary to the suggestion of power-transition theory, it is not in the interest of a latecomer to instigate a premature confrontation with the still-dominant hegemon. Instead, the latecomer has every incentive to avoid and postpone a showdown as time will further improve its bargaining position. Concealment of one's true strength and fostering the hegemon's sense of superiority help to curtail the latter's motivation to wage a preventive war.<sup>10</sup> After all, a self-confident hegemon is far less likely to succumb to the preventive motivation than a desperate hegemon caught in a deep and irreversible decline. A distracted hegemon— one whose attention is drawn to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea— would also divert attention and other resources directed at China. This distraction affords China the time to become stronger. In the meantime, self-discipline in the sense of not being enticed or otherwise goaded into futile competition with the hegemon— such as in an armament race, a mistake committed formerly by the U.S.S.R.— is paramount. Contrary to the predominant concerns of those Americans sharing the “China threat” perspective, the last thing Beijing wants to accept is to engage in an arms race with Washington, a competition in which the latter has a huge lead and a tremendous comparative advantage and, conversely, a competition that can only lead to the China's economic exhaustion. As will become clearer later, however, this Chinese view hardly implies pacifism or

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<sup>10</sup> An insightful discussion on the motivation behind preventive wars can be found in Levy 1987. Copeland 2000 studied this motivation in several historical episodes, including the concerns and calculations of German leaders prior to World Wars I and II. Schweller 1992 argued, however, that democracies are unlikely to launch a preventive war due to the nature of their political institutions and ethos. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, justified explicitly by the Bush administration as an attempt to prevent Saddam Hussein from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, tends to undermine this argument.

disarmament. Rather, it emphasizes minimal deterrence, whereby Washington will have to face, in Beijing's estimation, unacceptable costs should there be a military showdown. In this fundamental sense, China's basic doctrine is strategic defense.

Convincing the hegemon that its dominant status is secure is only part of the reassurance game; the other part calls for a deliberate demonstration of good international citizenship. An avowed adherence to traditional principles such as state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in others' domestic affairs offers tangible evidence of a status-quo orientation, and presents one as a vocal supporter of popular international rules and norms. These same principles provide a legal and normative defense against the hegemon's demands for concessions. Active participation and reasonable conduct in international governmental organizations contribute to a reputation for accepting multilateral diplomacy and help to refute charges of revisionist ambitions.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, when the United States resorts to unilateralism and challenges international consensus, it undermines the very institutions and principles that it has worked to establish and that it has championed in the name of the entire international community. In this light, recent U.S. opposition to participating in various international organizations and conventions can be seen to subvert the normative order for its hegemonic rule. Examples of Washington's decision to stay outside rather than inside than the relevant international communities include the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Land Mines Convention, the Law of the Sea Convention, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Kyoto Protocol, and the International Criminal Court.

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<sup>11</sup> Scholars tend to agree that China has behaved constructively in multilateral institutions, and has adhered to the rules and procedures of these organizations. See Pearson 1999 and Lardy 1999 for China's conduct in international economic regimes. Kim's 1979 study on Chinese participation in the United Nations is dated but still relevant.

Significantly, in cases such as the creation of the International Criminal Court, Beijing also has serious reservations. Washington's announced rejection, however, makes it possible for Beijing to "hide," thereby sparing the latter the political costs of having to mount its own unpopular opposition. "Standing aside" and "taking a back seat" afford this advantage, among others.

Naturally, the incumbent hegemon is less likely to strike against an upstart if it is distracted by other more pressing concerns. Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, and North Korea divert Washington's attention and disperse its forces. These episodes also enhance Beijing's bargaining leverage as its acquiescence and even assistance are sought. These so-called rogue nations assume a role in Washington's adversary category that China can well imagine itself occupying in their absence. This adversary category is more likely to be crowded with many nominees if the hegemon is self-confident than if it is doubtful of its own capacity to act. A self-confident hegemon can also be expected to be impatient with the tedious efforts necessary to overcome the challenges of collective action and to overlook others' incentives to free ride. Concomitantly, its proclivity to resort to unilateral action on multiple fronts will alienate important third parties, which are now more self-motivated to form a countervailing coalition to check the hegemon.

The logic of power transition should suggest that a dominant power in decline is more dangerous than one that feels secure in retaining its supremacy. A latecomer seeking to catch up will want to foster the hegemon's self-confidence and complacency rather than to abet its anxiety about losing its dominance. Differential growth rates should improve the upstart's strategic position over time, thus counseling against any rash action that would interrupt or cut short its growth spurt. That it is in the latecomer's

interest to seek time and ensure stable conditions to realize its full development potential lends credibility to its signals to reassure others of its benign intentions. At the same time, others will be less prepared and inclined to interfere with its growth trajectory if this upstart is successful in persuading foreign audiences that its domestic conditions are the primary driver of its economic expansion, that its expanding economy offers collateral benefits for others, and that setbacks in its development quest will have serious ripple effects abroad. Significantly, China has become increasingly important as an economic partner for traditional U.S. allies, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, and have in some cases displaced the U.S. as the leading importer of goods and capital from them. This trend suggests that these significant others will now have a greater stake in China's continued economic well-being, and would be self-motivated to dampen any disturbances in Sino-American relations that can affect them adversely. This does not suggest that there is necessarily a convergence of interests between China and its neighbors, which will clearly be untrue as a generalization. Rather, this remark simply suggests that the emergent multilateral ties point to a mixed motive game in which Beijing has become more adept at avoiding isolation and being targeted for concerted blocking actions by others as was China's predicament during the 1950s and 1960s.

Beijing's strategy for managing the hegemon requires exactly the opposite modal behavior than that which is expected by the power-transition theory. The prevailing U.S. rendition of this theory hypothesizes a cocky and impatient challenger whose imprudence gets it into a premature and asymmetric fight that it is destined to lose. Instead, if this analysis is correct, one would expect China to play for time, to avoid an inflated profile,

to profess modesty in goals and capability, and to seek to expand and strengthen multilateral ties and institutions. The underlying strategic logic cautions against over-playing one's hand, and extends to the hegemon ample opportunity to over-play its hand. Self-restraint, rather than restraining the other, becomes a cardinal tenet for the successful management of hegemon. At the same time, the other's failure to exercise proper self-discipline causes over-extension, contributes to domestic hollowing and dissension, and arouses counter-mobilization abroad, developments that would, in turn, set the hegemon on a course of eventual decline. Classic Chinese military treatises are well known for their enjoinders to feign weakness and bide time, to abet the other's arrogance and distract its attention to alternative targets, and to prevail over the other without having to fight.<sup>12</sup> This strategic perspective implies an extended time horizon and a certain confidence in persevering through and recovering from the inevitable and occasional setback that interrupts a generally favorable long-term trend.

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<sup>12</sup> These injunctions and their application during the Warring States period of Chinese history received extensive treatment in classic Chinese military texts (the *Seven Military Classics*, including Sun Tzu's *Art of War*). In the following passages, Sawyer 1994, pages 108 & 121 offers two exemplary references to the pertinent strategic ideas at work: "By acting submissively, feigning loyalty, and playing upon King Fu-ch'ai's desires for victory and power over the northern Chou states through Po P'i's persuasions, [the kingdom of] Yueh insidiously deflected attention away from itself and ensured that [the kingdom of] Wu would dissipate its military strength and energy;" and "Whenever possible [King Kou-chien] increased [King] Fu-ch'ai's arrogance, played upon his desires, and encouraged him in his deluded campaigns against Ch'i in the north." For all their supposed comparative advantage in appreciating and capturing the nuances of traditional cultural perspectives, there is a general dearth of sensitive and sophisticated scholarship on Chinese strategic thought and conduct among Sinologists writing about contemporary military and diplomatic affairs. Much of their research fails to go beyond ritualistic references to the so-called Middle-Kingdom syndrome and the supposed importance of "face" to the Chinese. Indeed, the prevalent mode of analysis by U.S. academics writing on Chinese foreign policy tends to follow the Western Clausewitzian tradition emphasizing armament procurement and alliance behavior. For two exceptional attempts to relate to Chinese cultural legacies in strategic matters, see Johnston 1995 and Nathan and Ross 1997.



## **Role Reversal and the Logic of Engagement**

Classic Chinese thought enjoins the application of the other's spear against its own shield.<sup>13</sup> One emulates the other and adopts the latter's own strategic advice and tools to contain threats emanating from it. What would reasonably attentive Chinese observers conclude from the open discussions among their American counterparts about useful approaches to deal with China? The latter include some influential voices advocating containment with an emphasis on the use of coercive instruments and denial strategies to block China's power ascent and to check its perceived ambitions. I will address this policy line later in the next section.

Chinese observers will surely notice that the arguments of containment proponents have not gone unchallenged. There has been an ongoing debate in the U.S. pitting these advocates with others who argue in favor of engagement.<sup>14</sup> The so-called engagers wish to integrate China into the existing international institutions and global conventions. They see widening and deepening economic interdependence as another way to restrain Beijing's bellicosity in its foreign relations and to encourage its domestic political and economic liberalization. Either implicitly or explicitly, they hope to "reform" China by influencing its values and practices through regular interactions and positive exchanges designed to shape its policy agenda and manipulate the influence and interests of its domestic stake-holders.

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<sup>13</sup> This injunction incorporates the idea of turning the tables on the opposition and of administering to the other its own medicine, but its subtlety extends beyond these meanings. The story from which this injunction is supposed to have originated also refers to the exposure of contradictions in another person's arguments or rationale. Indeed, the Chinese concept for contradiction derives from the combination of characters for spear and shield. My short-hand reference to role reversal does not quite capture all these ideas plus the notion of exploiting the inherent contradictions in the other's position.

<sup>14</sup> Shambaugh 1996 offers an analysis of how this U.S. debate is likely to be interpreted and received in China.

The engagers' arguments are embedded and elaborated in a large body of theoretical and empirical work falling under the rubric of democratic peace.<sup>15</sup> This literature ostensibly owes its intellectual pedigree to Immanuel Kant's treatise on perpetual peace,<sup>16</sup> where he argued that a republican form of government, a cosmopolitan outlook, and a pacific union of like-minded states would provide the foundation for durable international peace. Contemporary scholars deduce or infer from Kant's seminal presentation that competitive and pluralistic politics, economic interdependence, and normative socialization in the rules of foreign conduct can dampen the danger of militarized disputes and even wars among states. Many have reported evidence lending support to this proposition. States with more pronounced democratic institutions, higher volume of bilateral trade, and a larger number of shared membership in intergovernmental organizations have been better able to maintain dyadic peace than other pairs lacking these attributes. Political competition and accountability, foreign economic intercourse, and participation in intergovernmental organizations form the three pillars of the so-called Kantian peace. They are each supposed to contribute to peace directly, and they are also expected to form a virtuous cycle whereby they reinforce each other and thus facilitate peace indirectly. For instance, democratization and increasing foreign trade encourage greater participation in intergovernmental organizations, which in turn strengthens international norms and promotes reciprocal adjustment.

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<sup>15</sup> The literature on democratic peace is huge and growing. A representative and particularly cogent example is provided by Russett and Oneal 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant 1795.

There is little mystery that this is the policy recipe advocated by U.S. liberals for dealing with and indeed for transforming China. There is, however, sometimes dismay and even surprise when the Chinese apply these same methods in dealing with the United States, such as when the U.S.-China Business Council lobbied the Clinton Administration to be more accommodating to China in negotiations on the latter's membership in the World Trade Organization. Chinese activities in the United Nations (especially in the Security Council) and regional fora such as the Association for Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea) are likewise taken to be deliberately designed to hamper the unilateral exercise of U.S. power.<sup>17</sup> Naturally, the ongoing and expanding U.S. trade with and investment in China present a double-edged sword. Deep, interlocking commercial interests create stake-holders not only in China but also in the United States to continue and expand these existing ties and to guard against their rupture. Whether one or the other side is more vulnerable to economic disruptions depends on a host of factors, including the ease of substitution and the evaluation of prospective economic loss relative to other policy goals.<sup>18</sup> It seems reasonable, however, to expect that as intra-Asia trade and cross investments mount, China's dependence on the U.S. market and capital will concomitantly decline. Conversely, the United States may continue its heavy reliance of foreign capital, including Chinese capital, to sustain

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Gries 2004, page: 7, quotes a Chinese analyst at a Foreign Ministry think tank remarking that "increasing regionalism is an important way to restrain American hegemonism."

<sup>18</sup> Hirschman 1945 provided the classic study on the use of economic statecraft. A more recent treatment on economic coercion and bargaining power was offered by Wagner 1988.

its fiscal deficit. Moreover, both sides can seek to use multilateral diplomacy and international organizations to its advantage in an effort to constrain the other.<sup>19</sup>

The greater the tendency to see liberal approaches of engagement as exclusive American tools to mold China, the less prepared the United States is for Chinese attempts at role reversal. The ethnocentrism embodied in the liberal view that the supposed statecraft for engagement would be available to the U.S. only to manipulate others and would somehow be inaccessible to others offers an example of the hegemon's hubris and inclines it to overlook the possibility that those seeking to resist and modify its designs may actually be favored by some structural advantages. Differences in domestic openness and diversity would presumably imply differences in the ease with which China and the United States may each try to influence the other's interest groups. The numerical majority of non-Western states in intergovernmental organizations with universal membership would tend to suggest that Beijing would probably have a more receptive audience than Washington. Nationalism of the part of the Chinese masses would enable Beijing to resist concessions, such as with respect to Taiwan, on the grounds of political legitimacy and popular mandate. Two other paradoxes are pertinent. Domestic opinion can exercise powerful restraints on the hegemon's and its allies' plans for military hostilities abroad. That public opinion in all the major OECD member states was opposed to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and that even in the United States the

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<sup>19</sup> It seems that America's China watchers are disposed to assume that international treaties, norms, and organizations should be applied to constrain and transform China. They seldom appear to give consideration to the possibility that others, including China, may seek to use the same international treaties, norms, and organizations to restrain the United States. This omission is surprising because, after all, Washington's disenchantment with some international organizations (e.g., International Labor Organization, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) is well known. Its recent decision to abrogate the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty is but the latest of a long list of refusals to support international agreements such as those mentioned in the text.

electorate has been deeply divided over this issue put the Bush administration on the political defensive and offers ostensible foreign supporters a politically convenient way to “drag their feet” or otherwise decline to join the “coalition of the willing.” A second paradox derives from the fact that those corporate interests with the largest stake in economically engaging China happen also to be an important constituent of the neoconservative coalition. This coalition is accordingly cross-pressured by its economic interests in the Chinese market and its political impulse to contain China.

### **Porcupine Magnified or Size and Resolve Do Matter**

It would not be difficult to infer from the discussion thus far that conventional U.S. conceptions of resistance and deterrence, relying on either internal armament or external alliance, present a game that China would be leery to participate in. To arm race against the United States or to engage in competitive acquisition of military allies would be to play into U.S. strength and China’s weakness. The fatal error of the U.S.S.R. was its failure to recognize Moscow’s and Washington’s respective competitive advantages and disadvantages.

These remarks do not imply that somehow military capability and the defense of the homeland are irrelevant or unimportant to the Chinese. They sure are. At the same time, war-winning capabilities and alliance politics need not be the only or even the main avenue to achieving national security. In China’s case, a first line of defense is the projection of an image of “too big to swallow.” China’s sheer size, territorial and demographic, provides a powerful deterrent to anyone who would contemplate repeating Japan’s project of conquest prior to and during World War II— or what the United States is trying to accomplish in Iraq. An invader will surely encounter a case of serious

indigestion in attempting to gain physical control over China. China's comparative advantage lies in forcing an invader to fight on its home turf and in ensnaring the invader in a protracted war of attrition. There are very few other countries which can feel a comparable sense of confidence in the protection afforded by their physical size and cultural resilience. However powerful a would-be hegemon may be, it would not mistake China for Iraq or Kuwait. To the extent that China is vulnerable to foreign encroachments, the source of its weakness tends to stem from the danger of internal decay and fragmentation.

Deterrence against a militarily stronger adversary does not require symmetric retaliation— as when two boxers match blow by blow. Nor does deterrence require capabilities to assure the complete destruction of the other side. Effective deterrence can be undergirded by a declared posture of assured resistance rather than a demonstrable capability to inflict assured destruction. Palpable physical and psychological preparation for a war of endurance and privation serves to signal that a more powerful foe cannot hope to over-awe China and expect a quick, easy victory in case of a military conflict. China will fight long and hard, and it professes to be willing to suffer greater hardship to outlast the opposition. Consequently, Beijing's strategy of deterrence seeks to project not necessarily a superior retaliatory force but rather an asymmetry of resolve in its favor. The underlying rationale does not so much try to persuade an aspiring hegemon that it cannot score more points in the beginning rounds of a match, but rather urges the opponent to ponder about how it plans to bring this match to a conclusion.

Effective deterrence also does not require a demonstrable ability to defeat an enemy on the battlefield. All that is required is to convince potential adversaries that the

expected disutilities of war will outweigh its expected utilities. Indeed, one can be defeated on the battlefield— such as in the case of the Viet Cong’s Tet Offensive and Anwar Sadat’s initiation of the Yom Kippur War— and still score a political and psychological victory. That a militarily weaker party can accept war with a stronger adversary is explained by the fact that the former does not have to defeat the latter in order to make a gain from fighting.<sup>20</sup> For war between the parties to occur, all that is required is that both are convinced that they can perform better on the battlefield than the other side expects it to. Accordingly, each believes that it can gain a better deal by going to war than its counterpart would otherwise concede in the absence of war. The same logic would argue that effective deterrence to avoid war requires only that the defender demonstrate to the potential attacker that the negative consequences of waging war will exceed the latter’s threshold for acceptable costs.

Finally, deterrence efforts need not rely solely on one’s own retaliatory or defensive capability, and not even the active assistance of allies and partners. To the extent that unwanted events will have negative ripple effects for significant others that the hegemon cares about, the latter will be self-restrained from playing its stronger hand. Thus, Washington would presumably be leery of taking a more forceful stand if resultant Sino-American tension will dampen economic activities or exacerbate political problems in friendly Southeast and Northeast Asian countries. The deterrence in question here does not call for the active mobilization of a defensive alliance; rather, it relies on the creation of cross-national stake-holders whose economic vitality and regime legitimacy

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<sup>20</sup> For discussions on conflict involving asymmetric dyads, see Mack 1975 and Paul 1994. These studies are also pertinent to the question why Davids sometimes prevail over Goliaths.

are important to Washington and whose well-being is intertwined with the evolution of Sino-American relations.

### **From Doctrinal Admonitions to Policy Behavior**

Some readers may be puzzled by the discussion on deterrence in the last section. Why should the Chinese worry about deterrence? Who in her right mind would want to attack or invade China? In response, the Chinese would point to the U.S. assault on Serbia and Iraq, its avowed wish to institute regime change in “rogue states,” the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the violation of Chinese airspace by U.S. surveillance aircraft, and Washington’s ongoing development of a missile-defense system to protect the United States from attack. The Chinese will also surely mention Taiwan in this litany. Beijing’s approach to the Taiwan problem illustrates various strategic elements discussed earlier.

As a global power, the United States sees its interests engaged in many places and must therefore allocate its resources and attention to multiple concerns, including its ongoing military involvement in the Middle East. In contrast, China can focus on one overriding goal of national re-unification. There is accordingly an asymmetry of attention in favor of Beijing, which also has a locational advantage that offsets Washington’s overall force superiority. Thus far, Beijing has eschewed a military confrontation, preferring to count on long-term trends in political and economic transformation to improve its bargaining position. It has pursued a series of blocking actions, having generally succeeded in isolating Taiwan diplomatically in the international community and the United States militarily in sponsoring any prospective opposing “coalition of the willing” even though Washington has continued to provide



arms to Taipei. Instead of contesting superior U.S. military forces, Beijing has sought to demonstrate that it has a higher stake and greater resolve in the matter of Taiwan's status, a matter that will continue to be the principal irritant and a dangerous flashpoint in its bilateral relations with Washington that simply will not go away. In the meantime, the campaign to re-unite Taiwan with the Chinese Mainland serves useful domestic purposes by rallying nationalism and legitimating the incumbent elite. The Chinese Mainland has already displaced the United States as Taiwan's leading trade partner and investment destination, so that over time this trend of economic integration can present a countervailing force to political division. Significantly, Taiwan's democratization has turned out to be a double-edged sword for both Taipei and Beijing. Whereas the pro-independence forces have gained a large and legitimate voice in Taiwan politics, other interest groups have emerged to advocate closer ties and less confrontation with the Mainland. The latter groups include those experiencing rising cross-Strait business exchanges and intermarriages, developments that have stemmed from the dismantling of political controls from the island's days as a garrison state. Recent elections indicate that the so-called pan-green and pan-blue forces (that is, those advocating greater independence from China and those advocating closer cooperation with China) have roughly comparable levels of voter support. Given the preceding discussion, the economic and social forces reflecting changes in internal conditions should, in Beijing's view, carry greater weight in determining the eventual resolution of the Taiwan issue than possible evolutions in external relations, including possible U.S. military opposition to China's re-unification goal.

Earlier discussion would also suggest that China would not blindly oppose the United States on all or even most issues of vital importance to Washington. Indeed, one would rather expect the opposite, with Beijing declaring public support for international cooperation to combat terrorism, to prevent nuclear proliferation, and to resist commercial protectionism. On these matters, Beijing should find its interests to converge with Washington's. It would, however, leave the United States to do the heavy lifting in organizing multilateral collaboration if possible and undertaking unilateral action if necessary. China would then be able to "free ride" on U.S. efforts, benefiting from the ensuing "public goods" without having to exert itself.

One would also expect Beijing to profess a preference for multilateral fora in order to restrain unilateral impulses on the part of the United States. Cumbersome institutional procedures add to the transaction costs faced by Washington, which thus allows China to avoid bargaining bilaterally with the United States at a relative disadvantage. The same logic argues that Beijing would generally prefer to let others take the lead in opposing the United States. Thus, it took a back-seat to the resistance by France, Germany, and Russia to the U.S. attempt to seek U.N. legitimation for its attack on Iraq. Rarely will one find China to be isolated as the lone dissenter. When faced with such a prospect, it is far more likely to acquiesce quietly than to defy publicly. Thus, Beijing has exercised its veto prerogative on the Security Council very sparingly in comparison to Washington. When faced with a majority favoring an objectionable proposal, it would rather choose "not participating" than to using its veto to block its passage.<sup>21</sup> It would often seek and receive side payments for its acquiescence.

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<sup>21</sup> Chan 2003.

China's leaders can also be expected to seek issue linkage, re-defining or re-framing Washington's expressed concerns to redound to China's benefit. Thus, for example, in exchange for Beijing's support in Washington's campaign against Al Qaeda, China was able to gain a U.S. agreement to classify Muslim insurgents in Sinkiang (such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement) as terrorists. In professing support in principle for international regimes to prevent the proliferation of weapons, Beijing is able to direct Washington's attention to U.S. sales to Taiwan. Human rights are defined to include national self-determination, racial non-discrimination, and entitlement to economic development. Attempts at influence therefore aim at altering policy optics in such a way that it would be difficult for Washington to choose selectively to have its way on only those issues that it cares more deeply about. In the language used by this project's framework, Beijing seeks to expand or shape the interpretation of international rules to modify or delay the pursuit of U.S. preferences.

Given the preceding discussion, it would be natural for Beijing to focus on matters that would inherently give it more policy space and perhaps even greater bargaining leverage. These tend to be matters that the U.S. elite and public are internally conflicted as they are torn by competing interests and avowed principles. "Free trade" offers an example of such a wedge issue. Access to the Chinese market is important to many large U.S. corporations, which tend to historically support conservative Republican candidates. To the extent that U.S. business groups are self-motivated to continue and expand commercial ties with China, they become the best advocates Beijing can hope to have for a friendly U.S. posture. Similarly, to the extent that liberal Democrats have historically favored a large role for international organizations, the norms and rules from

existing regimes can be used to argue against unilateral U.S. actions whether in trade protection or armed intervention. Given its extant issue and political cleavages, unwanted U.S. policies tend to be forestalled by prolonged and often fruitless domestic debates and, if the policies are executed, they are likely to be less severe and less durable than one would otherwise expect (such as with respect to actual or threatened U.S. economic sanctions stemming from alleged Chinese abuses of human rights or intellectual properties). U.S. concerns for how its actions may damage the very international regimes that it has heretofore played an active and leading role in constructing also cause Washington to refrain from playing its stronger hand against Beijing. As just implied, the United States is likely to be self-deterred from fully exercising its hegemonic power. The prospect of such self-restraint, however, depends more on the dynamics of U.S. politics and the framing of its domestic debate than active opposition from abroad. Oftentimes, tensions among competing U.S. goals and even outright contradictions create policy predicaments that tie Washington's hands and dampen its audacity. The Bush administration's attempt to re-involve the United Nations in Iraq after dismissing its irrelevance and its resistance to Shiite demands for direct election illustrate the binds that can ensnare even a hegemon—and not just in terms of public relations.

## **Conclusion**

Those writing in the tradition of “China threat” tend to emphasize Beijing's rising military stature and hegemonic ambitions. They point to the danger of an assertive China throwing its weight around and precipitating a confrontation with the U.S. as a result of its

expansionist agenda.<sup>22</sup> If the analysis presented in this paper is nearly correct, one would expect a cautious rather than reckless China, one that seeks accommodation or acquiescence to U.S. hegemony. Its strategy to hamper the exercise of U.S. power and constrain its moves will reflect soft deterrence and passive resistance rather than active and militant opposition based on arms buildup and alliance formation.

Key elements of China's approach to managing the hegemon place a premium on feigning weakness and conserving energy, eschewing competition in the other's strong suit, abetting the opposition's excesses, diverting the latter's attention to alternative targets, and projecting an image of being too big to swallow and too tough to mess with. In short, this approach accords with Sun Tzu's observation that "being unconquerable lies with oneself whereas being conquerable lies with the enemy; one who excels in strategy succeeds in making oneself unconquerable even though it is not within his control to make the enemy necessarily conquerable."<sup>23</sup> By implication, fatal strategic setbacks are more likely to be due to one's own mistakes than the opponent's actions. Avoidance of such errors helps to put one in an unassailable position. Allowing one's opponent ample opportunity to commit these errors would conversely put itself in a self-defeating position.

Although I have in this paper dwelled on Chinese strategic reasoning and conduct, it would be a mistake to infer from my remarks that the characterization and interpretation given are uniquely or distinctly Chinese. Despite the prediction of neorealists, it appears that balancing against a rising or extant hegemon has not been the

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<sup>22</sup> e.g., Bernstein and Munro, 1997; Roy, 1994

<sup>23</sup> There are many translations of Sun Tzu's Art of War. Sawyer (1994) is one rendition.

dominant behavioral modality in history. When faced with hegemonic threat, states have instead tended to appease, bandwagon, pass the buck, “hide,” and “transcend” by offering institutional arrangements to go beyond resolving an immediate dispute.<sup>24</sup> Thus, as Schroeder noted, Napoleonic France was defeated only because it insisted on attacking its allies and neutrals, thus thwarting their attempts to appease and bandwagon.<sup>25</sup> By repeatedly lashing out against its neighbors, France finally produced by its own aggressive actions a coalition of opposing states that Britain’s diplomacy had sought but failed to bring about. In the same vein, Taylor remarked that Nazi Germany brought about its own downfall by not only fighting Britain and France, but also by declaring war on the U.S.S.R. and the United States—the two world powers that only wanted to be left alone.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, a hegemon’s recklessness and arrogance turned potential allies and neutrals into enemies. The impetus that fostered a coalition against the hegemon came from its own aggressive actions rather than a natural instinct on the part of the weaker states to balance against its power.

It would also not escape the reader’s notice that the logic of hegemonic decline given by Chinese strategists also corresponds with another well-known process described by historians. A tendency to “over-reach”—to take on extensive foreign commitments beyond the domestic economy’s capacity to sustain—has been an important part of the familiar story of imperial decline,<sup>27</sup> with the U.S.S.R. being but just the latest empire to

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Schroeder 1994a and 1994b on the rarity of balancing behavior when states face a hegemonic threat. On buck-passing and bandwagoning, see also Christensen and Snyder 1990 and Schweller 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Schroeder 1994a and 1994b.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor 1961, page 278.

<sup>27</sup> Kennedy 1987.

suffer from severe economic decay and political disintegration due to a crushing security burden.<sup>28</sup> That at some point military expenditures would impose an opportunity cost in foregone domestic spending, whether in public or private consumption and investment (including investment in human capital), seems a reasonable certainty.<sup>29</sup> In attributing a tendency for a hegemon's excessive ambitions to eventually deplete its available resources and cause a domestic crisis of confidence, the Chinese views are again unexceptional.

In terms of the modalities and actions presented in the general framework for this project, the Chinese strategic conception clearly favors some elements while de-emphasizing others. There is a strong legacy for Beijing to form whatever "united front" that is useful for containing its main antagonist of the moment. Its modalities accordingly include both participation in formal institutions excluding U.S. membership and informal caucuses inside institutions with U.S. representation. Unilateralism is possible but not likely except in unusually favorable or dire circumstances involving core values to the regime. With respect to the action categories, Beijing tends to be eclectic. Its inventory includes bloc creation, rule expansion, consent and exploit, schedule delays, conditional support, linkage politics, and standing aside. A resort to "craziness" and "martyrdom" and to conjuring up system-destabilizing vulnerability (if not "helplessness") is also possible. One<sup>30</sup> may recall that projecting an image of too-tough-to-be-messed-with is precisely based on a supposed willingness to take on powerful

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<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Wohlforth, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> The classic study on this subject is Russett 1970. See also Chan and Mintz 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Again there seems nothing culturally unique about "martyrdom" approaches to national defense, as one is reminded by references to "Alamo," "Masada" and "Kamikaze."

adversaries and to endure extraordinary privation. There is not a shortage in China's revolutionary folklore, including episodes in the Korean War that celebrates extreme personal sacrifice and collective hardship in protracted struggles against long material odds. Concomitantly, one encounters occasional references to China's regime fragility and economic instability, with the insinuation that in the absence of foreign understanding or facilitation, such vulnerabilities can well trigger severe repercussions regionally and even globally. In this sense, China's size serves not just a defensive purpose in the sense of protecting it from foreign domination. This size also confers a certain external importance in the sense that what happens inside China, for better or for worse, can cause non-trivial ripple effects for others. As the Chinese economy becomes a bigger part of the regional and global economy, this importance is likely to grow.



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