USS *Ronald Reagan* leads multinational formation of ships during interoperability exercise Rim of the Pacific 2010

U.S. Navy (Scott Taylor)

U.S.-China Relations
NO NEED TO FIGHT

By DANIEL S. LARSEN

At a recent Canadian defense conference, a speaker from the U.S. Naval War College demonized China and concluded with a phrase often attributed to Leon Trotsky: "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." This unbalanced and unsophisticated approach is a hallmark of conflict theorists who maintain there simply has to be a fight between the United States and China. Led by the offensive realism of John Mearsheimer, the "let's fight" approach conflicts with stated U.S. positions, which seek a "positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationship with China."[1]

The place and role of China on the world stage are not a new concern. In 1972, as President Richard Nixon traveled to China, he identified three things China wanted: "1. Build up their world credentials; 2. Taiwan; and 3. Get the U.S. out of Asia." His thoughts about what the United States and China both wanted included: "1. Reduce danger of confrontation and conflict; and

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President Obama talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao after bilateral meeting at G20 Summit

White House (Pete Souza)

2. a more stable Asia."[2] That same year, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote about a "2-1/2 powers world," where the United States and Soviet Union were the 2, and China was the 1/2, wielding "considerable political leverage" and whose impact was to "increase uncertainty, to complicate planning."[3] Today, with a geostrategic emphasis shift from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region, the world power situation is somewhat changed—the United States and China weigh in at one each, and Russia weighs in at one-half.

This means we have to deal with China. If our political and strategic approach is to demonize it, we risk a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Chinese are not infallible, all-powerful, or malevolent. China is a normal rising power with unique historical legacies, and we must seek engagement rather than vilification. The United States should not approach engagement with trepidation. China has significant domestic constraints that will limit its development as a global military power. China is more likely to be a regional military power; therefore, it will be neither adversary nor partner.[4]

Although almost everything seems to be made in China today, China's economy and resources are not unlimited and its stability is not guaranteed. Nationalism, demographic pressures and premature aging, increasing social pressures, regime survival, environmental degradation, corruption, and limited resources will test China's ability to continue its phenomenal economic gains and rise to global power and leadership. In an influential *Foreign Affairs* article, Zheng Bijian noted that because of China's large population, "Any small difficulty in its economic or social development . . . could become a huge problem."[5] Zheng posits that it will be 2050 before China will be a "modernized, medium-level developed country."[6]

While the Chinese may be lowballing their estimates and definitely their ambitions, it seems unlikely that they can indefinitely keep up their economic success, which is the foundation for their military development and modernization. The National Intelligence Council estimates that the "pace of China's economic growth almost certainly will slow, or even recede, even with additional reforms to address mounting social pressures."[7] At that point, Chinese leadership will face difficult choices regarding funding allocations for military versus economic and social development. If Zheng is right, stability could take precedence over military modernization in order to avoid huge problems rippling through more than a billion people.

Predictions of the heights to which Chinese power can ascend vary widely. Robert Kaplan has called China an "über-realist power" that is "beginning to turn outward."[8] In 1968, Hans Morgenthau said, "China is the most powerful nation of the mainland in Asia and potentially the most powerful nation in the world."[9] While Morgenthau's mainland Asian prediction echoes true today, others are less enamored with China's potential. Robert Jervis puts Russia and China in close company when he says they "lack many of the attributes of great powers" and "can pose challenges only regionally."[10] Mearsheimer predicts an "aggressive" China "determined to achieve regional hegemony."[11] And *regional* is the key word.

In the end, China is tougher to predict than most—almost everything except its economy is virtual, future, and opaque. Economically, it is already a global power. Militarily, it is a mainland Asia and regional Asia-Pacific power, but it is doubtful China will become a global military power. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is untested, "constrained largely by the lack of robust strategic lift capabilities,"[12] needs modernization, and is not on par with the U.S. military. Technological discrepancies between the U.S. and Chinese militaries will require that China spend more to catch up or leap ahead. To correct perceived discrepancies, the PLA has focused on new capabilities such as area denial, blue-water naval forces, and limited power projection.[13] These efforts will continue, but they remain dependent on Chinese economic performance and domestic constraints. China cannot buy every piece of military kit it wants any more than it can buy all of Eurasia or the Eastern Hemisphere.

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In the meantime, the United States cannot hedge its bets toward the optimistic side. If China arrives in mid-century as a "modernized, medium-level developed country," it will only be medium level using fuzzy per capita math. Its military will be significantly more powerful than a medium-level country. Therefore, we must continue to "monitor China's military modernization program and prepare accordingly to ensure

that U.S. interests and allies, regionally and globally, are not negatively affected."[14]

The United States and China will have to interact because China is becoming a regional power, and that rise carries with it associated geostrategic and economic shifts. There are numerous areas for cooperation, such as nuclear counterproliferation and counterpiracy, but there is no utilitarian harmony principle here; there will be divergent interests.[15] Even so, we cannot assume that every divergent Chinese interest derives from an underlying malign intent. M. Taylor Fravel notes

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that, so far, China has "pursued foreign policies consistent with status quo and not revisionist intentions."[16] Opportunity costs would increase were China to turn aggressive regionally or globally, assuming Chinese foreign policy follows a rational actor model. Some Chinese leaders and actors may not act rationally, however. In that event, these actors' worldviews and their misperceptions and miscalculations could lead to an arms race, conflict spirals, and a security dilemma, not to mention "signaling China's 'type' as an aggressive rising power."[17]

Regardless of Chinese intentions, the United States should follow the "traditional American interest in the maintenance of the balance of power in Asia."[18] According to Nicholas Spykman in 1942, this interest "predates the threat of the emergence of a great naval empire across the Pacific. It was originally inspired . . . by anxiety about our position as an Asiatic power."[19] While trying to maintain the balance of power in Asia, the United States should understand how a conflict with China might develop. Such knowledge will help make it possible to work with China to minimize potential conflicts. According to Kenneth Waltz, "The search for causes [of conflict] is an attempt to account for differences."[20] These differences could include competing spheres of influence, competition for resources, and disagreement over the rules of the system and who makes them, as well as issues of pride or prestige. Of these differences and issues, the last may be the most important and dangerous regarding Taiwan. In 1968, Morgenthau assessed the issue of Taiwan as being the "most likely casus belli between the United States and China."[21] Knowing this, can the United States work with the Chinese and Taiwanese to ameliorate tensions and move toward a political settlement, while sustaining a vibrant democracy in Taiwan?

There is no need to fight with China. As President Obama has said, the "relationship has not been without disagreement and difficulty. But the notion that we must be adversaries is not pre-destined."[22] President Nixon was more hopeful and specific: "We must now ensure that the one quarter of the world's people who live in the People's Republic of China will be and remain not our enemies but our friends."[23] We do not have a choice on whether we will deal with China, but we do have a choice on how we deal with China.

The Chinese will not get President Nixon's third observation regarding what China wants—the United States out of Asia—because the United States is also a Pacific nation. Although always preparing for the possibility of conflict, the United States needs to identify choices that will engage the Chinese, establish confidence, and enhance security, while binding China to the international system. The adversarial tenets and predictions by conflict theorists are to be closely interrogated, albeit not wholly ignored. We need to educate our future senior military leaders, not with a diet of hyperbolic enemy images, but instead with a broad base in international relations and a realistic understanding of China's potential role, power, and challenges. We must avoid a narrow focus on offensive realism and power transition theories, joined by the wrongheaded belief that war is inevitably interested in us. As Robert Jervis so wisely notes, "Expectations of peace close off important routes to war."[24] We should not let a constructed enmity lead us down the wrong route to our future with China. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, May 2010), 43.

[2] Jim Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1999).

[3] Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Opinion: The Balance of Power Delusion," *Foreign Policy*, no. 7 (July 1972), 56.

[4] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Geostrategic Triad: Living with China, Europe, and Russia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2001), 9.

[5] Zheng Bijian, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005), 19.

[6] Ibid., 21.

[7] U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 49.

[8] Robert D. Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 3 (June 2010), 24.

[9] Hans J. Morgenthau, "The United States and China," *International Studies* 10, no. 1 (January 1968), 23.

[10] Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace," *The American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (March 2002), 2.

[11] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 402.

[12] M. Taylor Fravel, "International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (December 2010), 509.

[13] Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010), 29–33.

[14] *National Security Strategy*, 43.

[15] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 88.

[16] Fravel, 506.

[17] Ibid., 510.

[18] Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Roots of America's China Policy," *The China Quarterly*, no. 10 (April 1962), 46.

[19] Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 155.

[20] Waltz, 29.

[21] Morgenthau, "The Roots of America's China Policy," 26.

[22] Department of Defense, "U.S.-China Defense Background," January 8–14, 2011, available at <www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111_gates1/china.aspx>.

[23] Richard M. Nixon, "Resignation Speech," August 8, 1974, available at <www.pbs.org/newshour/character/links/nixon_speech.html>.

[24] Jervis, 3.