

—Introduction—  
**The PRC at the Dawn of the  
Twenty-first Century:  
Why the "China Threat" Debate?**

ANDREW D. MARBLE

She is a nation once at the center of a much larger politico-cultural empire and, as argued by many, exhibits international behavior more appropriate for her former glory than present international merit. Thus, despite being viewed by some as a second- or even third-rate power, she now often squares off, for instance, with the world's remaining superpower across a wide variety of issues. She often uses her permanent UN Security Council seat, for example, to challenge U.S. international security initiatives and has, moreover, adopted questionable practices in regard to nuclear weapons, causing a furor within the United States. Moreover, she is frequently involved in trade tension with the United States, disliking what she sees as Washington's unilateral efforts to control world trade. As one comprehensive example, note that political, nationalist, and economic incentives have led her to limit the showing of American films within her sovereign borders.

---

**Andrew D. Marble**, Guest Editor of this issue and Assistant Managing Editor of *Issues & Studies*, is also a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science, Brown University, USA, and is currently writing his dissertation on the relationship between Chinese military commercialization and the U.S. national interest. The author is grateful to Szu-chien Hsu, Chien-yi Lu, and Chang-ling Huang of the Institute of International Relations at National Chengchi University, Taipei, as well as Ling Xiao of Brown University for helpful comments on this paper.

Although she poses problems to the United States in all these areas, why has anyone yet to raise the specter of the "France threat?"

The reason for posing this question is not to propose that Washington should undertake a policy to contain France. Nor is this point made in order to construct an argument that the United States should or should not fear China. The debate of whether or not China is a threat, to what degree China is a threat, and in what ways China is a threat is the subject of the six articles that appear in this special issue. The goal of this introduction is rather to explain why the "China threat" debate exists at all. Why indeed do we not begin the twenty-first century discussing the France threat or reviving the fears of Japan Inc. that were so popular years earlier? Why has the "China threat" theory appeared only recently, and not at a much earlier or later time? The six articles that comprise this special issue will be reviewed in the context of these important questions.

### Why the "China Threat" Debate?

The "China threat," rather than being an *argument* that China poses a risk to her international neighbors, is better viewed as a fierce *debate* that began in the early to mid-1990s over *if* and *to what degree* the People's Republic of China (PRC) threatens the international community.<sup>1</sup> Important for fully grasping the major reasons behind the appearance, timing, and scale of this debate is an understanding of the research milieu of what are the three main protagonists in this debate: the problem and policy analysis type (including politicians, policy analysts, and the media), those involved in disciplinary studies, and the traditional Sinological school.<sup>2</sup> The environment faced by these groups has been shaped by the intersection in the early 1990s of three distinct trends: (1) massive changes within China as a

---

<sup>1</sup>Denny Roy, "The 'China Threat' Issue: Major Arguments," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 8 (August 1996): 758.

<sup>2</sup>Typology borrowed from Yung Wei, "Social Science and the Methodology of Contemporary Chinese Studies: A Critical Evaluation," in *Power and Policy in the PRC*, ed. Yu-ming Shaw (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), 321-39. Note that there is often overlap between these groups.

nation, (2) epistemological changes in the "China watching" field, and (3) important evolutionary twists in the international system itself.

These three trends are linked to the "China threat" debate through two steps. First, increases in China's military and economic strength—part of the first trend—have stimulated warnings from many protagonists subscribing to realist views of international relations. Second, the three main trends outlined above have also led to the appearance of marked differences in (1) outsider's perceptions of the extent of China's economic and military rise, (2) outsider understanding of China's domestic political process, and (3) how the West views the nature of both the international system in general and China's relationship with the world around her in particular. These diverse views, along with the uncertainties that they create, have been a major factor in turning realist warnings of China's rising capabilities into a full-scale, heated debate over the "China threat."

### Change within China

In his review of the literature of the "China threat" debate, Denny Roy highlights two main types of arguments: those that associate threats with a rise in the PRC's *capabilities*, and those where threats are linked with her *intentions*.<sup>3</sup> This section attempts to show how changes within China have been the starting point of a furious debate over the PRC's capability level.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the PRC has surely not been free of radical and far-reaching change. The "anti" campaigns of the 1950s, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution are all prime examples of sweeping political, economic, and social movements. However, the changes brought about with the reform and opening-up policies initiated in the late 1970s have been the most comprehensive and fundamental. Post-Mao reforms have been marked by *openness to the outside world* by allowing wide-scale, bidirectional flows of people, goods, and ideas; *economic growth* by

---

<sup>3</sup>See note 1 above.

<sup>4</sup>The question of intentions will be discussed later on in this paper.

creating an economic juggernaut both in terms of depth and breadth; and *social reform* by altering the way Chinese society thinks, acts, and dreams. No similar political event in the history of the PRC has had such an intense cumulative impact.

One could further argue that no other country in the world has undergone such comprehensive and radical change during the 1980s, especially no nation equivalent to China in political power (including permanent UN Security Council seat), military strength (including nuclear arsenal), and economic and military potential based on land, population, and resources. Thus, after the first decade of the PRC's opening to the outside world, many in the West and elsewhere began to fear that the rapid domestic changes in China could affect regional and even international stability. The major warning was that China's rapid economic growth might be helping to finance the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) modernization program.<sup>5</sup> Such a fear has arisen because, according to traditional balance of power theory (a view shared by many policy elites, traditional China hands, and disciplinary scholars), rising powers upset the preexisting order by threatening the primacy of established powers.

For instance, Kurt Campbell, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs, noted in testimony before the U.S. Congress that China's strong economic growth, major domestic economic restructuring, large troop reductions, and military modernization are "among the most important challenges and questions that the United States faces over the next several years."<sup>6</sup> Many sources, including Bernstein and Munro's *The Coming Conflict with China*, believe that China's economic and thus military capabilities are becoming increasingly formidable.<sup>7</sup> Munro argues, for instance, that the United States has an unfavorable trade ratio with

---

<sup>5</sup>The launching of this modernization program is analyzed in Robert J. Skebo, Gregory K.S. Man, and George H. Stevens, "Chinese Military Capabilities: Problems and Prospects," in *China's Economic Dilemmas in the 1990s*, ed. Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 663-75.

<sup>6</sup>Remarks of Kurt Campbell, "Commercial Activities of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA)" (Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, November 6, 1997), 18.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Random House, 1997).

China of five-to-one while the unfavorable trade ratio that the United States has with Japan, in contrast, is a mere two-to-one.<sup>8</sup> In the military realm, Chong-Pin Lin noted in the early 1990s that the political role of the PLA was growing; the PLA remained the largest post-Cold War military in the world (despite demobilization accounting tricks); China's sustained double-digit defense increases in the *publicized* annual defense budget since 1989 had more than tripled by 1994 for a cumulative increase of 229 percent (with Beijing's defense figures excluding items considered as defense spending in the West); and the PLA has been developing pockets of excellence capable of directly threatening the United States.<sup>9</sup>

These warnings about the danger of a rising PRC quickly stimulated strong counterclaims. In terms of capabilities, some do not believe that China is anything more than a medium or even small power in terms of economic, military, or political resources. Gerald Segal, for instance, argued that in 1997 China accounted for only 3.5 percent of world gross national product (GNP) (ranking 7th in the world behind Italy); had a per capita GNP ranking a distant 81st (just behind Papua New Guinea); made up a mere 3 percent of world trade (less than the Netherlands); received most "foreign direct investment" from ethnic Chinese (either living abroad or even via disguised investment coming from within the PRC itself); was responsible for only 4.5 percent of global defense spending; accounted for only 2.2 percent of arms deliveries; and was and remains only a second-rate military power slightly more advanced than her third-rate neighbors in East Asia. Thus, Segal argued, there is no reason for the United States to defer to China on so many issues.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Trade ratio refers to the ratio of country A's exports to country B versus the latter's exports to the former. See "Submitted Testimony of Ross H. Munro, Director of Asian Studies, Center for Security Studies, Washington, D.C., before the Subcommittee on International Economic Policy and Trade, House Committee on International Relations, Washington, D.C., June 24 1998," found at <[http://www.house.gov/international\\_relations/105th/ep/wsep62498.html](http://www.house.gov/international_relations/105th/ep/wsep62498.html)>.

<sup>9</sup>Chong-Pin Lin, "Chinese Military Modernization: Perceptions, Progress, and Prospects," *Security Studies* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 718-25.

<sup>10</sup>Gerald Segal, "Does China Matter?" *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 5 (September/October 1999): 24-36.

Arthur Ding's article in this special issue offers a slightly different logic for a similar argument. Ding holds that while the PLA has certainly modernized in the post-Mao period, most increases in capability have come through the purchase of foreign technologies and weapons. Thus the fact that China still lacks an indigenous technological base in most important defense industrial sectors means that the PRC does not have the capability to provide a serious challenge to the United States.

Note also that Jianxiang Bi's contribution to this volume argues that China purposefully projects a false image of domestic strength—to both hide weakness from the view of other nations and as a result of encouraging nationalism at home in order to retain legitimacy in the face of the bankruptcy of communist ideology.

Thus, even for those basing their arguments on realist or neorealist assumptions—the belief that the international system operates on principles based on comparative raw capabilities—there is no firm agreement on either how much China's capabilities have increased or therefore whether or not China poses a threat to the West.

This disagreement over the level of China's capabilities can be explained, in part, due to the fact that the tremendous changes occurring inside the PRC have made general reporting on China unreliable and generalizing subnational data difficult. These issues are discussed in the following section.

### **Change within the China Field**

Three important changes that have evolved since the 1980s within the China-watching community itself have worked to increase the variety of foreign impressions of China: a *rising information paradox*, *epistemological evolution*, and the *partial de-Americanization of the field*. This increased diversity of views, moreover, has clearly become mirrored in the larger debate over the "China threat." The growing cacophony of voices, in turn, has also increased uncertainty among those trying to sort out competing explanations in order to give policy advice or make policy decisions regarding how to deal with a rising China.

### *Information Paradox*

As noted by Bruce Dickson, the China field now faces an information paradox. This change has influenced our *inductive* understanding of the Central Kingdom. On the one hand, there are now many more official and unofficial sources of information about China ranging from local histories and elite biographies to personal contacts, interviews, field research, journals, newsletters, trade publications, and even on-line services. On the other hand, this vast increase in information can often be either inaccurate or even so focused on the specific that the larger picture regarding the PRC gets lost. In addition, China's formidable geographic size as well as rapid growth rates that do, however, vary across time and locality clearly pose challenges to the gathering and analyzing of information regarding Chinese politics, economics, and society.

Thus, China-watching professionals—be they policy types, old "China hands," or social scientists—often complain of, in the words of Dickson, a "flood of information that is impossible to collect and absorb in a timely fashion" and, as a result, "more and more is being written about less and less."<sup>11</sup> This overload and subsequent uncertainty has also played a role in creating the sharp differences of opinion and even angst that has characterized the "China threat" debate.

Returning now to Roy's capabilities and intentions typology, important to note is that changes in the China field have drastically increased the divergences of opinion regarding the PRC's *intentions*. Note that in determining China's intentions, analysts often must rely on *deductive* reasoning. There are two main reasons why the China field has, since the 1980s, faced a wider array of competing deductive understandings of China—the rise of social science methodology in, and the incorporation of a growing number of PRC nationals into, the China studies field.

### *Epistemological Evolution*

As noted by Harry Harding, the first generation of China scholarship was comprised of a relatively small number of scholars—the traditional

---

<sup>11</sup>Bruce J. Dickson, "Trends in American China Watching," *Taipei Times*, October 25, 1999.

Sinologists—who earned their reputation by undertaking broad research on ambitious topics, resulting in scholarship that was mostly descriptive in nature.<sup>12</sup> This work was criticized for its formalism, overgeneralization of domestic politics, underconceptualization, and insistence on viewing China as a unique case.<sup>13</sup> The second generation of scholars was a more left-leaning group that was discontent with what they saw as the conservative, government-influenced first generation of China research.<sup>14</sup> This new generation took advantage of the vast increase in information on the PRC unleashed by the Cultural Revolution, moved from general to specific topics, became much more focused on informal rather than formal institutions and mechanisms, and began to treat China increasingly as a testing ground for more general theories, thereby marking the first step toward the rise of social science methodology.

China's opening and reforms that began in the late 1970s provided the shock necessary to discredit this second and more leftist approach to understanding China. What resulted was a third generation of scholarship that has sought to undertake more objective research on China. Thus, this third generation—a much larger and more diverse group of scholars—has downplayed ideology and instead sought to actively use the tools of social science to understand the unprecedented political and economic changes that have occurred in post-Mao China at all three levels of theorizing: general, mid-level, and specific. This transition was marked by, in the parlance of Alex Inkeles, the success of the generalists and comparativists (together making up the disciplinary studies field) in marginalizing the particularists (the traditional Sinologists of the first generation).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>For an excellent look at the "generation" approach to China-watching see Harry Harding, "The Study of Chinese Politics: Toward a Third Generation of Scholarship," *World Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 1984): 284-306.

<sup>13</sup>Chalmers Johnson presents a different view by arguing that traditional Sinologists in fact did use paradigms, concepts, and thus comparative frameworks. Johnson does argue, however, that frameworks used in early Sinological research were deficient—being flawed and misleading. See Chalmers Johnson, "What's Wrong with Chinese Political Studies?" *Asian Survey* 22, no. 10 (October 1982): 920.

<sup>14</sup>See Mark Selden, "Asia, Asian Studies, and the National Security State: A Symposium," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 29, no. 1 (January-March 1997): 3-5.

<sup>15</sup>Particularists believe that commonalities in human behavior are most often manifested differently across time and place due to the inherent uniqueness of any particular area in any



How is the development of the China field as outlined above related to the "China threat" debate? These epistemological developments have led to vast variation in how the China field analyzes the PRC both as a nation and as a member of the international community.

First, the traditional Sinologists continue to play a diminishing but still important role in the China field, and often view the PRC from a perspective completely different than those armed with newer social science precepts. Ezra Vogel takes note of the well-established and respected area studies journal, *The China Quarterly*, which brings together people working on China from a variety of social science disciplines—a group of traditionalists who feel bound more by their interest in China than in any emphasis on methodology. Vogel also identifies another group, however:

[Y]oung China specialists writing Ph.D. theses and young faculty seeking tenure appointments know that their career advancement depends more on the judgments of senior faculty in their discipline than on the opinions of other China specialists. As a result, the research of younger scholars tends to cluster around issues of interest to a particular discipline: for example, economic growth, political decision making at elite and local levels, or local organizations.<sup>16</sup>

These different orientations toward both research topic and methodology as well as resulting differences in both the professional and even social networks of these two types of China watchers have all contributed to an important cleavage in the way the field views the PRC, a split which is often reflected in the debate over China's capabilities and intentions.

Second, both the increased size of the China studies field and the new and predominant focus on generalist and comparativist research have provided a vast increase in methodological tools, theories, and conceptions for

---

particular time frame. In their view, the art of direct observation and participation in the environment under question is of much more importance than the scientific emphasis on indices and variables. Generalists, on the other hand, stand in direct contrast to particularists, and instead look for repetition, commonalities, and laws that are valid across cases and thus seek to build testable theories and hypotheses. The comparativists, finally, fall in between the other two, using categories for description and analysis which they assume are generally—but not always—applicable. For the full discussion see Alex Inkeles, "The Generalists and the China Specialists," *American Asian Review* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 67-97.

<sup>16</sup>Ezra F. Vogel, "Contemporary China Studies in North America: Marginals in a Superpower," in *The Development of Contemporary China Studies* (Papers read at the Chinese University of Hong Kong to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of its Universities Service Centre in June 1993) (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1994), 191.

analyzing political phenomena. Writing in the mid-1980s, Harding outlined eight types of models—structural, normative, Mao-in-command, factional, bureaucratic, tendency, generational, and interest group models—that could be used to understand China's domestic politics, each of which could be comprised of several sub-models.<sup>17</sup> This use of general theory has, since the 1980s, also been increasingly applied to China's foreign policy and international relations.<sup>18</sup> The task for the third generation of China scholars, Harding argued, was to reduce this number of models to a more manageable number, thus increasing the predictive value of scholarly research.<sup>19</sup>

How did these changes help give rise to the "China threat" debate? Our understanding of the PRC's behavior springs from our understanding of China herself. Because social scientists (especially comparativists) increasingly look at China through a wide array of lenses, across a much-expanding scope of topics, and via a host of different methodologies, their overall conclusions of China's past, present, and future developments and behavior are all often quite different. This variety has helped to stoke the fierce debate over how to measure China's intents and/or capabilities. Synthesizing these different views and reaching agreement on what are the more accurate lenses through which to understand China—a task necessary for those wishing to form U.S. policy toward the PRC—has proven to be a quite difficult and conflict-ridden enterprise. If anything, more and more theoretical tools are available for understanding China than ever before. Therefore, the "China threat" debate helps point how the China field and the social sciences in general must increase their efforts at answering Harding's call for a productive synthesis of divergent views.

### *The De-Americanization of the China Field*

Changes in the China field since the 1980s were not solely limited to

---

<sup>17</sup>Harry Harding, "Competing Models of the Chinese Policy Process: Toward a Sorting and Evaluation," in *Perspectives on Development in Mainland China*, ed. King-yuh Chang (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), 61-84.

<sup>18</sup>As noted in Bin Yu, "The Study of Chinese Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 46, no. 2 (January 1994): 256-57.

<sup>19</sup>Harding, "Competing Models of the Chinese Policy Process," 61.

the rise to predominance of social science precepts. There was also a cohort change in the China field that allowed a new type of scholar to enter the field. The first group of Sinologists arose in the 1950s and began to retire from active teaching and research in the 1980s. From the 1980s and forward, teaching and research positions became increasingly available not only to younger American social scientists but also to those PRC nationals who were educated in the United States—many of whom live and work or have spent a large amount of time in the United States or elsewhere in the West.

Indeed, by the late 1980s and early 1990s these Chinese scholars began to capture many choice teaching and research positions in top-flight American universities and think tanks. Examples include Zhiyuan Cui (MIT), Yasheng Huang (Harvard Business School), Minxin Pei (formerly of Princeton University and now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Tianjian Shi (Duke University), Dali Yang (University of Chicago), and Quansheng Zhao (American University).

The participation of these Chinese scholars has helped lead to a diversification of viewpoints in the China watching community in two ways. First, having grown up in China, these scholars possess a repertoire of conceptual frameworks, assumptions, base knowledge, and contacts relating to China that differ vastly from those of American Sinologists. These unique resources and sensitivities are clearly reflected in Bi's articulation of the diversity of Chinese cultural orientations as well as Suisheng Zhao's description of China's Taiwan policy from the perspective of decision-makers in Beijing, both of which can be found in this special issue.

The second way in which the participation of Bi, Zhao, and other Chinese scholars help diversify the arguments found in the China studies field is because the range of views within this group of Chinese scholars is also quite diverse. Bi's article clearly shows how even within China there is a controversial debate over what exactly characterizes Confucian culture, a debate which has therefore led to different views on how Confucianism affects politics. He explains that the opinions held by Lu Xun and other radical scholars—that Confucian culture was "cannibalistic ritualism" that devoured China's best and brightest—were contrary to the views held by mainstream Chinese intelligentsia that Confucianism is an ethics-centered,

harmony-seeking culture. Bi's reminder of the existence of diversity in the Chinese understanding of Confucian culture helps us view Huntington's "clash of civilizations" generalizations in a more nuanced light.

Although not a PRC national, June Dreyer's argument supports this view of diversity within China. She provides insightful analysis into three main schools of strategic thought within the Chinese military: philosophies centered around Maoist People's War, rapid military modernization, and make-do-with-existing-equipment sentiments. She demonstrates how these different conceptualizations and orientations have led to differences of opinion between these three schools regarding how China should respond to a perceived U.S. threat that has been made increasingly visible by the Kosovo conflict. Dreyer thus reveals the deep divisions in conceptualization and policy orientations among even the PLA itself—an organization often painted in the United States as a monolith.

In addition to reflecting unique differences in conceptualization and orientation, these Chinese scholars who have entered the China studies field since the 1980s have had an impact precisely because of their exposure to the West. Due to their training, contacts, institutional affiliations, and familiarity with the Americas and Europe, these Chinese scholars have been able to actively engage in the main dialogues of the Western China studies field—including the "China threat" debate itself. The articles by Bi and Zhao that appear in this volume are excellent cases in point.

We must clearly also add Chinese scholars from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere to this discussion. Although not having grown up in the PRC, these scholars enjoy the benefits of language and cultural similarities with mainland Chinese that can greatly facilitate research on China. Their experiences living in Asia, moreover, can also help result in unique perspectives. Arthur Ding's article in this volume, an analysis based on many primary sources, is another example of how the accumulation of knowledge in the study of China has benefited from the "de-Americanization" of the field.

In sum, these diverse opinions among scholars in the China field resulting from the information paradox, rise of social science precepts, and partial de-Americanization of the field have all helped lead to a sense of uncertainty or even angst among those seeking to understand China's ca-

pabilities and intentions. When the collapse of the former Soviet Union set many in the United States to scanning the horizon for the next possible threat and when balance-of-power considerations thus led to fears of a rising PRC in the early 1990s, these warnings fell on a China field—now in actuality a much larger and more differentiated and amorphous group—that was primed to begin a pitched internal battle over "the reality" of Chinese politics.

### **Change within the International System**

Systemic level changes—the collapse of the Soviet Union and the search for the next rising power—thus sparked the initial "China threat" fear. Moreover, changes were also afoot in the international system and thus in international relations theory in the late 1980s that at the same time began to challenge many of the widely accepted views of world politics held by both the foreign policy and academic communities—adding yet another layer of contention and angst to the "China threat" debate.

To be certain, the late 1980s and early 1990s was a turbulent, if not revolutionary, period. During this time frame, the dominant intellectual and policy framework—superpower competition—that characterized the post-World War II era collapsed along with the Soviet empire. Moreover, no new framework has arisen since then to give order to international politics.<sup>20</sup> Even among realists who believe intentions flow simply from capabilities, there exists a debate over whether the world is unipolar or multipolar. For policy analysts, social scientists, and traditional Sinologists with a more liberal orientation, the collapse of the Cold War order has also brought forward increasingly different perceptions of, and hopes for, a new world order. These groups debate the characteristics of a new "multilateral" world order, including the possibility of consolidating a world of democratic states. None of these news lenses for viewing the present inter-

---

<sup>20</sup>The multifaceted and almost schizophrenic nature of the international system in the late 1990s is discussed in Akira Iriye, "The End of the Century: Emerging Themes, Disappearing Themes," *Issues & Studies* 34, no. 10 (October 1998): 10-24.

national system have proved totally accurate, however. Note that the Gulf War of the early 1990s could be seen as supporting both liberal and realist viewpoints. Similarly, tension between the norm of state sovereignty versus the ideal of humanitarian concerns still continues to divide the global community.

Given these sharp differences of opinion on international security and political concerns, can a new world order possibly be developing that is focused solely on free trade ideology? One only needs to be reminded that while successful agreements reached at earlier rounds of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) passed all but unnoticed, the first major post-Cold War effort on the part of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to expand trade was brought to an early end by civil disorder in Seattle at the hands of cross-national lobby groups promoting labor, environmental, and other causes.

If not politics and not economics, is culture then key to the emerging world order? How keen of an insight is Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" argument? One only needs to be reminded of the widespread furor touched off by this theory in academic and policy circles—including Bi's discussion of the China case noted above—to be assured that no consensus yet exists that such a cultural ordering of world politics is imminent.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, therefore, we now face a myriad of important questions: What is the role of military power in the post-Cold War world? What is the role of economic power? How important is culture in directing cooperation and conflict? To what degree are international organizations a force for the peaceful resolution of disputes, or simply for the continuation of raw power calculations? So many ideas exist and compete for explaining how the world is, will be, or should be. What is correct? How do we choose?

In addition to spurring a crisis in the conceptualization of world order, the end of the Cold War division in Europe also led international relations

---

<sup>21</sup>See Yu-ming Shaw, Philippe Regnier, and Andrew D. Marble, eds., Special Issue: The Clash of Civilizations, *Issues & Studies* 34, no. 10 (October 1998); Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-49; responses to Huntington's thesis, *ibid.*, no. 4 (September/October 1993): 2-26; and finally Huntington's response in "If Not Civilizations, What? Paradigms of the Post-Cold War World," *ibid.*, no. 5 (November/December 1993): 186-94.

specialists to turn their attention to other areas of the globe. Charles Morrison notes how between 1983 and 1989, the journal *International Security*—a periodical devoted to global security rather than regional studies concerns—published a mere five articles on Asia, only one of which—a historical treatise—was related to China. Between 1990 and 1994, however, the journal included six articles, three of which were directly related to concerns of the present-day Chinese military.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, moreover, the diverse views created by the collapse of the Cold War framework for understanding world politics have also influenced how academics, the media, policy analysts, and politicians think about China's place in the world. The authors participating in this special issue are no exception.

In the post-Cold War era, what constitutes the value of China's Security Council seat, nuclear weapons, and (even if we can agree on a measurement) military and economic modernization? How do we interpret Dreyer's point that China is the only permanent UN Security Council member without an aircraft carrier? Is what matters today perhaps economic rather than political power? If so, is the WTO then a forum for nations—like China—to seek economic dominance? Or, as argued by Jan Prybyla in his article, is the Organization a reflection of the liberal principle of "the absence of desire to exert power over others," as embodied in what used to be called "most-favored-nation" (MFN) status but is now called "normal trading relations" (NTR)?

Specifically, how will China's historical legacy of being forced into unequal foreign concessions influence Beijing's attempt to fit into the emerging world structure, an order in which the United States and others are trying to increase the currency of norms that run counter to the idea of sovereignty? This question actually involves two related issues. The first centers around the degree to which nationalism influences China's foreign

---

<sup>22</sup>See Charles Morrison, "Asia-Pacific Security Studies in the United States," in *Studying Asia Pacific Security*, ed. Paul M. Evans (Proceedings of a conference on the Future of Asia-Pacific Security Studies and Exchange Activities, Bali, Indonesia, December 12-15, 1993, cosponsored by the University of Toronto/York University Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, Canada and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Indonesia, 1994), 259.



policy behavior, while the second concerns China's willingness to accept sovereignty-limiting norms.

Zhao's article touches upon the question of sovereignty. He argues that despite China's history of what some have called the "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreigners (beginning with the Opium War), and despite the fact that the CCP has used nationalism to fill the void left by the implosion of communist ideology, Beijing's policy toward Taiwan has for the most part been prudential, rational, and peaceful. Zhao also notes, however, that during the Taiwan Strait missile crisis in the mid-1990s, the PLA was not yet able to win a decisive war. Given this fact, we are unable to confirm whether or not China's behavior toward Taiwan is governed—in the final analysis—by power calculations or by peaceful norms of conflict resolution.

That the Politburo chose a modern design by a French architect for the soon-to-be-built, US\$360 million National Theater rather than opting for a more traditional Chinese design by any PRC national<sup>23</sup> perhaps provides further anecdotal evidence that the CCP may not so desperately need the crutch of nationalism to prop up the party's legitimacy and, instead, is seeking to join the "modern world community." Will China's desire to be a full participant of the "international community" mean, however, that she will adopt the newest norms that require limitations on state sovereignty?

Prybyla's article raises this point directly by noting that, contrary to earlier "at the border" tariff reductions that were the focus of earlier GATT rounds, the proposed regulations of the WTO today affect such domestic issues as domestic corporate and financial structures, health regulations, environmental protection, telecommunications and other issues which sovereign countries have traditionally viewed as being related to national security. Will China be able to accept ascendancy to a new international system that places less value on national sovereignty? Does that fact that China has recently dispatched a contingent of police to aid in UN reconstruction efforts in East Timor—the PRC's first time participating in UN

---

<sup>23</sup>See Lorien Holland, "Magnum Opus," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 27, 2000, 62-63.



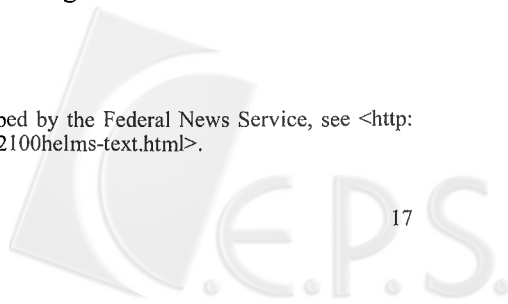
peacekeeping efforts—represent the beginning of a more flexible approach on sovereignty issues, or at least a more responsible international presence? Or is this simply a sign that the PLA is coming into its own and China is ready to increase her global military presence?

An example raised by Evan Medeiros touches upon a related point regarding the intersection of the U.S. national interest, international organization, and the "China threat" debate. He writes that China's exports of Silkworm missiles, while not violating any international nonproliferation agreement, did in fact directly affect U.S. security interests. This argument directly relates to a wider debate that is taking place in and around Washington: do international regimes, organizations, and agreements protect the U.S. national interest? This debate has actually raged off and on throughout the history of American politics; note Woodrow Wilson's failed attempt to secure U.S. backing for the League of Nations, a tool to "rid the world of the scourge of war." Jesse Helms' recent speech to the UN Security Council clearly reflects one opposing, present-day view: the world's premier international organization fails to protect the interests of 240 million Americans.<sup>24</sup> In sum, if the United States cannot define what is in her own national interest, can we expect agreement on the question of whether or not China poses a threat to the United States?

Finally, the China field is also divided on the question of the linkage between international relations and domestic political change. For instance, given that the Soviet empire collapsed peacefully, why did the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen not similarly lead to democracy in China? Moreover, note that Prybyla argues that one of the principles at the core of the WTO system is that economic exchanges must be conducted within a framework of law. He also notes that Human Rights Watch approved of the deal reached between the United States and China over the PRC's entry into the WTO, calling the agreement "good for trade but also for human rights and the rule of law." However, Prybyla also raises the counterargument to this line of reasoning by noting that some do not believe that

---

<sup>24</sup>For the full text of Helms' speech, transcribed by the Federal News Service, see <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/global/012100helms-text.html>>.



market-induced growth and higher income will give rise to "a kinder and gentler China." What does this debate mean for U.S. policy to "expand democracies" in the post-Cold War world? How do democracies expand? What steps can and should we take to encourage a more liberal China? Moreover, is there a general historical trend toward liberalization? Is China part of that trend or is she somehow different, as many traditional Sino-logists have argued all along?

### Conclusion

The "China threat" theory is thus more than simply an argument that a rising China is going to challenge U.S. security, East Asian regional stability, or the global order. The theory is in fact a debate between a variety of contending theories. These arguments have been conditioned in a historically unique period characterized by the intersection of three main trends. First, China—with its large land mass and population—is undergoing rapid economic and military developments, the full extent of which is not known. Moreover, these changes are occurring at a time when the China studies field—for a variety of reasons—is utilizing a wider range of general theories and frameworks as conceptual lenses from which to debate explanations of Chinese behavior. Thirdly, both these developments are occurring at a time where many of the frameworks for understanding world politics and national behavior are either discredited or are being seriously challenged at both the empirical and theoretical levels. No other country in the short-to-medium term shares a similar set of circumstances. This uncertainty-induced global angst is casting the shadow of the "China threat" debate into the new century.

