

9-11 and the Implications for East Asian Security*

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What Does the War on Terrorism Have to Do with East Asian Security?

When Bin Laden's operatives crashed jet airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it was not immediately obvious that waging war against this particular band of Middle East terrorists would necessarily have much impact on a region a third of the globe away. On the other hand, given America's preeminent position in the world and various global security commitments, it is not surprising that even a "policing action" against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan would have some spillover effect on America's geopolitical business elsewhere. Of course, this has turned out to be the case.

Notably, the anti-terrorism campaign arising from the events of September 11 resulted in Japan's authorizing its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to take part in a military operation well outside the surrounding waters of

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Japan. This decision was no small step for Japan and signaled that, just perhaps, Tokyo was beginning the process of assuming a more normal role in Asian security matters. Also noteworthy—and a bit surprising to some—was how little immediate impact 9-11 had on U.S.-China relations. Although talk of "cooperation" was plentiful, in fact, the United States asked little of China; the Bush administration did not trade China's cooperation at the United Nations for more recognition from Washington of the PRC's own domestic "terrorist" problems or for new concessions on the issue of Taiwan. Finally, 9-11 had the obvious effect of focusing the new administration's attention on the Middle East and Central Asia and, in turn, diverting focus away from the Pacific-Asian theater, an area to which the Bush government had wanted to give a higher strategic priority than previous administrations.

In the weeks and months that followed 9-11, however, the fuller implications of the war became increasingly apparent. The first and most obvious was the rapid undoing of China's recent efforts to create an anti-hegemonic (i.e., anti-U.S.) bloc. In short order, Moscow threw its lot in with Washington, as did the various "'stans" of Central Asia, including long-time Beijing friend, Pakistan. Virtually before the ink was dry on the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement,¹ it was a dead letter. Given Japan's decision to send the SDF abroad, new military-to-military ties between the United States and the Philippines, and growing cooperation between Washington and New Delhi, many in China came to see the United States as using the war against terrorism to dominate global affairs on an even larger scale and, in turn, tighten the security noose around Beijing's neck.²

¹On June 15, 2001, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan signed an accord establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. One month later, on July 16, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a treaty of "friendship and cooperation." As CNN analyst Willy Wo-lap Lam noted at the time, with these two accords Beijing was "convinced it had made much headway in combating 'American hegemony' and building a multi-polar world order." See "Combating American Hegemony," <CNN.com>, June 20, 2001. See also John Pomfret and Peter Baker, "China's Leader in Moscow to Sign Pact: Treaty Reflects Two Nations' Opposition to U.S. Supremacy," *Washington Post*, July 16, 2001, A9.

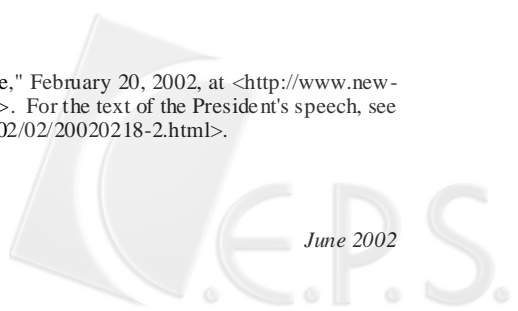
²Examples include Tom Donnelly, "China's Persecution Complex," *Weekly Standard*, January 28, 2001 and "China Feels Encircled," *The Economist*, June 8, 2002.

In addition, there is what I have termed the "Asia Corollary" to the doctrine set out by President George Bush in his "State of the Union" address.³ At the core of the Bush Doctrine is the recognition that "regimes" (i.e., the character of a state's government) are critical. The "axis of evil" consists of certain kinds of regimes that, given weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terrorists with global reach, are too dangerous to leave in place over the long term. Conversely, liberal democracies rarely, if ever, go to war against each other and can be trusted to handle WMD arsenals in a responsible manner. In the President's trip to Japan and China in February 2002, he made clear what this new emphasis on "regimes" meant for Asia.⁴ First, he reiterated that his vision "for the security of the Asia-Pacific region" is tied to "a fellowship of free Pacific nations." Second, he reaffirmed America's "commitments to the people of Taiwan." Finally, he pointedly rejected the idea that Western-style liberties have no relevance for China's future, arguing instead that America will continue to challenge China on the "universal values that gave our nation birth." In conducting a global war against terrorism and the states that support and work with terrorists, President Bush demonstrated a heightened appreciation for the fact that the civilized world's security is best served by the expansion of liberal democratic states and by those states working together. Policies that promoted those goals were not only morally correct but they had also become a strategic imperative.

So, in answer to the question raised above, America's war on terrorism potentially has significant implications for East Asian security and, in particular, China's own position within that region. To summarize: since 9-11, American security interests have brought U.S. and allied troops to China's borders, given Japan an enlarged security role, increased cooperation among America and Asia's democratic states, routed the Beijing-led anti-hegemony movement, put some of China's "friends" (such as Iran,

³See Gary Schmitt, "Asia and the Bush Doctrine," February 20, 2002, at <<http://www.new-americancentury.org/bushdoctrine-022002.htm>>. For the text of the President's speech, see <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/20020218-2.html>>.

⁴Ibid.



Iraq, and North Korea) on notice, and resurrected democratic ideology as a legitimate tool of statecraft. By most measures, the geostrategic trend line for China has been headed downward since al Qaeda terrorists struck Washington and New York.

The U.S.-China Competition in East Asia: China's Reaction to 9-11

The fact that China's prospects have been headed downward, of course, matters because the long-term defining feature of East Asian security is—and still remains—the competition between the United States and China for regional supremacy. This is not to deny the importance of events, for instance, on the Korean Peninsula or in Indonesia. Yet the reality is that these and other issues will almost certainly be addressed within the framework of what Professor Aaron Friedberg of Princeton has called "the struggle for mastery in Asia" between Washington and Beijing.⁵

Although China's leaders are almost certainly not happy with what has taken place since 9-11, it is difficult to predicate what their actual response to these changes in the strategic environment will be. A key reason is that Beijing's security perspective is not driven simply by traditional concerns of inter-state balances of power and calculations of national interest. Equally important are concerns about the regime's internal stability. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) legitimacy as the ruling entity in China rests on its ability to keep the economy humming and to be the staunch defender of China's national honor.⁶ However, the party will find tying its

⁵Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Struggle for Mastery in Asia," *Commentary*, November 2000.

⁶As Thomas J. Christensen remarks, "Given the near gutting of any other ideological justification for their rule during the capitalistic reform program initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, besides economic performance the Chinese Communists have little else to bolster their mandate for power than nationalism and the maintenance of national stability and integrity." See Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems with Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 14-15.

destiny to China's economy to be increasingly difficult. As the domestic economy matures, the country's economic performance will inevitably slow and China will face the same kind of economic cycles that mark such economies. This is in addition to addressing the more immediate problems China faces with its banks, rust-belt industries, and agricultural sector. As a result, one might reasonably expect that the CCP will be even more tempted to stoke Chinese nationalism and, in turn, promote the party's own role as the country's defender. Yet, as China's rulers have already experienced, the forces of nationalism are not so easily contained, especially for a country that understands itself as a rising power and—as whose elites believe—is destined for greatness.

If this is the case, China's leaders cannot help but be increasingly concerned with American policies that, whether intended or not, act to frustrate that particular vision of national greatness. Here we enter the realm of perception management, however. In this context, moreover, such normal keys to understanding state behavior—such as an objective assessment of the military balance of power between adversaries—may well prove to be not as determinative as they might normally be. What may matter as much is the subjective view of the Chinese over the direction of military and political trends in Asia and, in turn, the CCP leadership's own views about the party's need to guard its own prestige by being the defender of China's national honor and prestige.

Equally problematic is that Chinese leaders might not believe that Beijing must have the clear upper hand militarily before using force, or that using force requires an explicit challenge to its sovereignty—such as an explicit declaration of independence by Taiwan. If past history is any guide, Beijing has sometimes gone to war with a goal not of winning a war outright but to coerce its adversaries into changing policies or simply to disrupt the geopolitical trend lines that they believe are headed in the wrong direction.⁷ Moreover, Chinese strategists have a somewhat elastic notion

⁷Not out of character, for example, was for China in its 2000 White Paper to indicate that a lack of perceived progress on "reunification" between Taiwan and the mainland was sufficient grounds for resorting to military force. Full text of the 2000 White Paper was reprinted

of what constitutes "self-defense" and the Chinese nation.⁸ Hence, their claim that China is non-expansionist and a pacific power has to be taken with a grain of salt. In short, these points, when combined with the strategic implications of 9-11 and the need for the CCP to live up to its role as the guarantor of China's nationalist sensibilities, create a potentially dangerous and combustible mix.

That being said, striking is that Beijing has reacted to this change in the international situation in a relatively restrained way. Even the meeting between Taiwan's defense minister and the U.S. deputy secretary of defense—the highest-level defense contact between the two governments since 1979—caused little more than a perfunctory reaction from the mainland.⁹ Why has China been uncharacteristically subdued? This question is difficult to answer with any certainty. However, as Georgetown University's Robert Sutter, a former National Intelligence Officer of the U.S. Government, has reasonably speculated, "Preoccupied with difficult leadership succession issues and protracted economic and social challenges to China's internal stability, Beijing leaders have sought to ... avoid the broad and internally wrenching ramifications of any major change in China's U.S. policy."¹⁰ China's winning bid for the 2008 Olympics has also possibly

in *Issues & Studies* 36, no. 1 (January/February 2000): 161-81. On the larger point, see Mark Burles and Abram N. Shulsky, *Patterns in China's Use of Force: Evidence from History and Doctrinal Writings* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, MR-1160-AF, 2000).

⁸For a brief overview of this point, see Andrew Scobell, *China and Strategic Culture* (Carlisle, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, May 2002).

⁹In early March 2002, Taiwan Defense Minister Tang Yiau-ming (湯曜明) met with Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly at an arms sales conference held in Florida, the highest-level documented defense talks between the United States and Taiwan in twenty-two years. Beijing was quick to criticize the meeting, but as Joseph Bosco of Georgetown University notes, "compared with Chinese reactions to lesser 'provocations in the past,' its protestations against Bush's no-nonsense approach have been relatively muted and ritualistic." See Joseph Bosco, "Bush Deftly Plays the Taipei-Beijing Card," *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 2002, (Editorial Section) 9. Similarly, Robert Ross of Boston College says that in the wake of this meeting and indications of closer ties between Washington and Taipei that it is interesting that "the dominant line coming from China is that the Taiwan issue 'could become a problem, not that it is a problem'." See "China's Worrying Friendships," *The Economist*, April 27, 2002.

¹⁰"Grading Bush's China Policy: A-," *PacNet Newsletter* #10 (March 8, 2002), which can be found at <www.csis.org/pacfor/pac0210htm>.

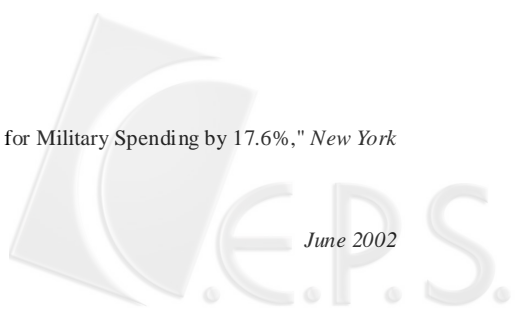
reinforced this restraint by allowing China's leaders to pocket some points on the nationalist agenda at home while at the same time inducing some caution abroad out of fear that any provocative actions on Beijing's part could cause a boycott similar to the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980. Finally, China's leadership might well believe that, regardless of the current direction of the war on terrorism, Washington will not be able to sustain that effort over the long run. America's edge in military capabilities and technology is not matched by American constancy.

Whatever the reasons for this somewhat moderate rhetorical reaction on the part of Beijing, China has not made the corresponding decision to slow military modernization efforts or reduce the armed threat that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) poses to Taiwan. To the contrary, defense spending continues to climb significantly.¹¹ For the time being, then, Beijing seems inclined to speak softly but continues to build a big stick.

The U.S.-China Competition in East Asia: Washington's Response

What, in turn, should be the Bush administration's response to China's behavior since 9-11? One can assume that the initial reaction among the permanent bureaucracy, most Sinologists, and many policymakers is to leave well enough alone. If China is not complaining, that's all to the good, it will be argued. Even possible is that there will be efforts to "reward" Beijing's behavior by putting on the "back burner" plans to upgrade ties between Taiwan and the United States and/or to expand defense cooperation with Japan. The goal will be to avoid giving China a reason to reverse its present moderation. In some respects, given what is on America's plate at the moment, this approach may look quite reasonable. This view, however, is shortsighted.

¹¹Erik Eckholm, "China Is Increasing Its Budget for Military Spending by 17.6%," *New York Times*, March 7, 2002, A13.



At some not-too-distant point, the transition from the third to the fourth generation within the leadership ranks of the CCP will be effectively completed. In addition, the Olympics will either be too close in time for the Committee to consider changing venues, or the event will have already come and gone. For these and other reasons, unrealistic is to think that this period of relative quiescence will last. Certainly unrealistic is to ignore China's continuing military modernization or continuing insistence that Taiwan become part of the mainland. Sitting on one's hands might bring some short respite from the competition between the United States and China in East Asia, but not for the long term. The underlying reality is that until and unless China becomes a stable liberal democracy—that is, until the current regime is replaced or falls of its own weight, Beijing will continue to see the United States as standing in the way of China's taking its rightful place in the region.

A more hardheaded approach would be for Washington to take advantage of this current period by taking a number of measures that would, when the CCP sheds this preoccupation with its internal affairs, have the effect of dissuading China that there exists any optimistic scenario for coercing Taiwan or deterring the United States from maintaining its leading role in the region. The goal should be for the United States to remain so superior in terms of military capabilities that Beijing cannot delude itself into thinking there exists a realistic military option. Such a policy would recognize that the competition between the two states for preeminence in East Asia is not likely to disappear but might be diverted to less dangerous arenas.

At the conceptual level, a strategy to achieve the above goal would have three basic components: (1) to improve Taiwan's defenses both qualitatively and quantitatively; (2) to begin putting in place a new security order that ties together and integrates the democratic states of the Asia-Pacific; and (3) to increase the capabilities of U.S. forces in the region by fielding missile defenses, adding naval and air bases, and acquiring the kinds of military equipment and systems needed to project power more effectively over the vast distances of the theater. The Pentagon's most recent Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) laid out much of what needs to be

done.¹² However, implementing those ideas, not surprisingly, has been slowed because of the war in Afghanistan and the strain of military operations elsewhere.

The steps outlined above are essential if the United States wants to deter with confidence Chinese risk-taking in the future. Nevertheless, also essential is that the Bush administration successfully complete the next step in the war on terrorism: removing Saddam Hussein's regime from power. President Bush has made no secret of the fact that he thinks that getting rid of Saddam is a necessity.¹³ If that task is not done relatively soon and done decisively, however, American credibility will suffer a significant blow. A failure to remove Saddam will be understood as a defeat for the United States, and will be seen as such not only in Europe and the Middle East but in East Asia, as well. In a world of perceptions, backing down in this instance cannot help but change how Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei calculate the willingness of the United States to use its power; just as a decisive victory over Saddam cannot help but reinforce the view that East Asian security leadership is in good hands.

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¹²The 2001 QDR can be found at <<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf>>.

¹³Carla Anne Robbins and Jeanne Cummings, "How Bush Decided That Iraq's Hussein Must Be Ousted," *Wall Street Journal*, June 14, 2002, A 1.