

*Commentary*

## DOES CHINA'S RISE THREATEN THE UNITED STATES?

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### **Power Transition?**

Since the Chinese government launched its reforms, the economy has been taking off with extraordinary speed for almost three decades. If the economy continues to grow at such astronomical levels, China will be in position to surpass the United States in the next few decades. China's rise has an immediate impact on every aspect of Western societies, both in opportunities and in challenges for other countries.

In world history, "There have been two great shifts of power on the world stage during the past five centuries: the rise of Europe following the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the United States after its Civil War."<sup>1</sup> Power transitions usually come with international conflicts. Rising powers want to gain more authority in the global system, and declining countries are afraid of loss of their dominant position. Thus, conflict, even a war, between a rising power and a declining power is likely to happen. In this sense, Westerners worry that historical tragedies will repeat between the United States and China.

Many Americans think that China's rise is weakening Western societies and fostering fears in the United States and the Asia-Pacific region, while China is using Western capital to build up

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1. Li Yi, *Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005).

its strength.<sup>2</sup> As early as 1997, Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro in their book *The Coming Conflict with China* argued that war between China and the United States was a distinct possibility. In 2005, Robert D. Kaplan contended that whether or not there will be a Sino-American war is no longer a question. The only question, he wrote, is how the United States should fight China.<sup>3</sup> John Mearsheimer warned that “The United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war.”<sup>4</sup> Fareed Zakaria goes further, saying that “When a new power rises it inevitably disturbs the balance of power.”<sup>5</sup> Susan L. Shirk, former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia, suggests that “China needs to reassure the United States that China’s rise is not a threat and will not challenge America’s dominant position.”<sup>6</sup>

China is rising, I maintain, but China’s rise does not necessarily threaten the United States. The typical power transition is not inevitable, because “not all power transitions generate war or overturn the old order.”<sup>7</sup> Whether or not China will threaten the United States will be determined not by China’s economic strength but by the essence of China’s political system. An economically strong China is not a threat, but the collapse of China would inevitably disturb the global peace, especially for developed countries. In March 2007, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao said that Washington should not fear China’s growing defense spending, should not fear that Beijing’s overseas investments will

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2. Jeffrey A. Bader, John L. Thornton, and Richard C. Bush III, “Confronting the China Challenge,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 20, 2007, online at [www.brookings.edu/opinions/2006/0420china\\_bader.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2006/0420china_bader.aspx).

3. Robert D. Kaplan, “How We Would Fight China,” *Atlantic Monthly*, April 28, 2005, online at [www.theatlantic.com/doc/200506/kaplan](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200506/kaplan).

4. Quoted in John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, No. 1 (January-February, 2008), pp. 23-37, online at [www.foreignaffairs.org/20080101faessay87102/g-john-ikenberry/the-rise-of-china-and-the-future-of-the-west.html](http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080101faessay87102/g-john-ikenberry/the-rise-of-china-and-the-future-of-the-west.html).

5. Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of a Fierce Yet Fragile Superpower,” *Newsweek*, December 31, 2007-January 7, 2008, online at [www.newsweek.com/id/81588](http://www.newsweek.com/id/81588).

6. Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 9.

7. Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West.”

destabilize the dollar, and should not even fear the successful anti-satellite missile test that the military undertook in January 2007.<sup>8</sup>

In order to see if China's rise threatens the United States, it is necessary to analyze the basic arguments of the China threat theory.

### **Is China a Threat?**

The first argument has to do with China's economy. Without a doubt, China has become a great competitor of the United States in the economic arena. China's challenge is not only real, but serious. However, several factors must be considered when we discuss the development of the Chinese economy. First of all, new statistical analyses have raised questions about the actual size of the Chinese economy. In 2007, the World Bank reported that China's economy was nearly 40 percent smaller than previously determined. The new data are widely considered more reliable and accurate than previous estimates.

Second, the U.S. economy is currently about eight times the size of China's. Obviously, China will need a long time to surpass the United States. In addition, China has a population of 1.3 billion. When China's GDP is divided by 1.3 billion, it decreases in value. China's per capita GDP surpassed \$1,000 in 2003 and reached \$1,714 in 2005, but China will not become moderately prosperous even by 2020.<sup>9</sup> In 2007, its per capita GDP was only \$2,000, compared to \$42,000 in the United States. China's per capita income is only one-nineteenth that of the United States.<sup>10</sup> At present, China does not rank among the 100 richest nations on a per-capita basis. Of its 1.3 billion population, about 900 million Chinese people live in rural areas, 400 million people live

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8. "China Maps Slow Path to Democracy," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 2007.

9. John O'Neil, "China's President Ends U.S. Visit with Yale Speech," *New York Times*, April 21, 2006.

10. C. Fred Bergsten, Bates Gill, Nicholas R. Lardy, and Derek Mitchell, *China, The Balance Sheet: What the World Needs to Know Now About the Emerging Superpower* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), p. 4.

on less than \$2 a day, and 200 million people live on less than a dollar a day.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, China is still a developing country and will not become a superpower overnight. It will take at least twenty-five years or longer for China to become a regional power, giving the United States sufficient time to comprehend the implications of China's rise before China reaches that point. Thus, there is no solid foundation to the claim that China's economic development threatens Western societies.

Third, China's rise is actually within the Western-oriented system. This Western-oriented system is the product of farsighted U.S. leadership and the best social and political system in the world, so it is very solid and difficult to overthrow. Germany, Italy, and Japan merged into the democratic system after two bloody world wars; the former Soviet Union and East European socialist campus collapsed in the 1990s after the cold war.<sup>12</sup>

The Western-oriented system is valuable to China, because this system is open and benefits China's market economy. The most farsighted Chinese leaders understand that globalization has changed the game and realize that "no major state can modernize without integrating into the globalized capitalist system."<sup>13</sup> In fact, the Western-oriented system is already starting to facilitate China's development. China is working with this system instead of seeking to overthrow it.<sup>14</sup> Since the reform movement began, the Chinese government has carried out a market economy, and it has become very competitive. A poll of twenty countries conducted by the international polling firm GlobeScan found that the highest level of support for the free enterprise system is in China, with 74 percent of respondents agreeing that the market economy is the best economic system. Others that were nearly as enthusiastic were in the Philippines (73 percent), the United States (71 percent), and India (70 percent). France was the one country where most did not agree with this proposition. Only 36 percent of the French people agreed that the free market economy is the best sys-

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11. Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" *U.S. Department of State*, at [www.state.gov/s/d/rem/53682.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/d/rem/53682.htm).

12. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West."

13. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?"

14. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West."

tem, while 50 percent disagreed.<sup>15</sup> These data suggest that support for China's market economy has deep roots in Chinese society.

The market economy is closely related to capitalism and will ultimately lead China to enter into the capitalist-based market. John Ikenberry notes that the road to the East runs through the West; thus, China's road to world power runs through the West. China can rise up only through this system. If the United States wants to preserve its leadership of the world, Washington has to strengthen the Western-oriented system and bring China further into the system. If China continues to follow the existing global order and integrate into the Western-oriented system, the United States and other Western societies can get along with China and the U.S. leadership will remain strong, even though the U.S. global economic position may be weakening.<sup>16</sup>

The second argument within the China threat theory has to do with the motivation behind China's rise. Many Americans think that China is seeking to become at least a regional superpower and seems ready to challenge the goal of Washington's foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> They think China is trying to drive the United States out of Asia by a combination of military, diplomatic, and economic pressure.<sup>18</sup> According to a 2004 Pentagon report, China has the world's second-largest defense budget. China's military expenditures have reached between \$50 and 70 billion, and it is that level of spending that worries the Pentagon's threat analysis. China's rapid military modernization raises questions about the purposes of this buildup.

In addition, American officials have confirmed that China has deployed a long-range missile program which can carry twenty-one nuclear missiles that can reach U.S. cities. If one Chinese missile hit the United States, many would be paralyzed. Bill Gertz, in his book *The China Threat: How the People's Republic Targets America*, revealed the supposedly inside story that China could attack the

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15. "20-Nation Poll Finds Strong Global Consensus: Support for Free Market System," at [www.globescan.com/news\\_archives/pipa\\_market.html](http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/pipa_market.html).

16. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West."

17. Michael Elliott, "The Chinese Century," *Time*, January 22, 2007, p. 1.

18. Max Boot, "Project for a New Chinese Century," *The Weekly Standard*, October 10, 2005, online at [www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/149ugqi.asp](http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/149ugqi.asp).

United States with nuclear weapons if U.S. forces should defend Taiwan in a regional conflict.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, China is turning commercial might into real political muscle as it tries to challenge Western governments. There is no guarantee that China's growing power will translate into peace, Gertz and others argue. The conventional wisdom that the war on terrorism united the United States and China against a common enemy is only a rosy scenario, according to Max Boot—a scenario that is being undermined almost daily by Beijing's actions.<sup>20</sup>

From a different perspective, first of all, China is not strong enough to challenge U.S. military power.<sup>21</sup> China spends only one-eighth of the U.S. military budget. Although China has a nuclear-weapons capability and a large ground force—and thus is much stronger and more secure than at any time in the recent past—the Chinese army is still ill-equipped. China does not have a large navy. Its air force does not have any long-range bombers. China does not even have one aircraft carrier. Although China will most likely have more submarines than the United States by the end of this decade, they will still lag behind in overall naval capability.<sup>22</sup> In light of all of this, China has a long way to go if it wants to become the military hegemon in the Pacific and ultimately overtake the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.

Second, despite widespread fears about the motivation of China's rise, the Chinese government remains committed to a peaceful rise.<sup>23</sup> The government does not believe that its future depends on overturning the fundamental order of the international system.<sup>24</sup> In response to Westerners' concerns, the Chinese

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19. See Bill Gertz, *The China Threat: How the People's Republic Targets America* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 2000).

20. Boot, "Project for a New Chinese Century."

21. Trudy Kuehner, "Understanding China: A History Institute Report," *The Newsletter of RPRI's Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education*, vol. 12, No. 1 (March, 2007).

22. David Lague, "Chinese Submarine Fleet Is Growing," *New York Times*, February 25, 2008.

23. Zheng Bijian, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, No. 5 (September-October, 2005), pp. 18-24, online at [www.foreignaffairs.org/20050901faessay84502/zheng-bijian/china-s-peaceful-rise-to-great-power-status.html](http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20050901faessay84502/zheng-bijian/china-s-peaceful-rise-to-great-power-status.html).

24. Robert Novak, "Is China a Threat?" *realclearpolitics.com*, October 27, 2005,

government has quietly modified the term "peaceful rise" or "peaceful ascension"; it now speaks of "peaceful development."<sup>25</sup> Practically speaking, China really needs a peaceful international environment, as its leaders have frequently said.

In order for the Communist Party of China (CCP) to survive into the twenty-first century, it has realized that China must make peace with the international society and develop a harmonious society at home. The Sixth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the CPC passed the "Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on Major Issues Regarding the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society" in October 2006, placing "building a harmonious society" atop its work agenda. China has tried to make peace with neighboring countries and cooperate with Western governments on a broad range of issues. Theoretically, the global village is an international family. If every member of the family becomes strong, the international family becomes stronger. Every nation has its own national interests, so real conflicts between different nations are inevitable. Even now, there are intensive competitions among the democratic societies. Because China is a non-democratic country, China's rise unavoidably causes other countries to worry.

Third, there are many common interests between China and the United States.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, China-U.S. relations are critical not only to both countries but also to the entire international community. David M. Lampton notes that "there is no global issue that can be effectively tackled without Sino-American cooperation."<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, it is one of the greatest challenges for the United States to coexist with China in the new century.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, they share many opportunities for mutual benefit. Economically, the Chinese economy heavily relies on Western expertise, Chinese foreign trade largely depends on for-

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online at [www.realclearpolitics.com/Commentary/com-10\\_27\\_05\\_RN.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/Commentary/com-10_27_05_RN.html).

25. Robert Harmann, "China Rising: Back to the Future," *Asia Times*, March 16, 2007, online at [www.atimes.com/atimes/China/IC16Ad01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/IC16Ad01.html).

26. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?"

27. David M. Lampton, "The United States and China: Competitors, Partners, or Both," online at [www.comw.org/cmp/fulltext/uspolicy.html](http://www.comw.org/cmp/fulltext/uspolicy.html).

28. John S. Gregory, *The West and China since 1500* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 1.

eign-invested companies, and about 60 percent of China's total exports are produced by foreign-funded enterprises. All of this makes China sensitive to the ups and downs of the international economy, and in particular that of the U.S. economy. If the U.S. economy has troubles, it hurts China's economic growth. In turn, China is the largest market of the United States. Sara Bongiorno has recounted the story of how her family wanted to spend a year without buying anything made in China. In fact, Bongiorno discovered it was not only difficult but also not worthwhile to do so, because she found that there are vast consumer areas that are nearly all Chinese-dominated. Thus, it is really difficult to exclude China from economic globalization.<sup>29</sup>

Politically, China and Western societies need to work closely together in order to maintain the global peace. In fact, China has successfully worked with Western governments on several key international issues. China hosted the Six Party Talks. As a result, North Korea agreed to disable its nuclear programs by the end of 2007.<sup>30</sup> China took tough actions on Iran's nuclear program, showing the seriousness of China's commitment to nonproliferation. The United States and China also share common interests in energy, global warming, human rights, anti-corruption, social welfare, the role of nongovernmental organizations, AIDS and other disease prevention, United Nations reform, and counterterrorism. China and the United States recently signed an agreement to open a military hot line between their defense departments.

Fourth, a hostile U.S. relationship with China would damage both countries' interests and make it impossible for them to work jointly on global issues. As early as 60 years ago, an Australian ambassador warned the United States that it was very dangerous to be hostile to China and suggested that it keep China as a friend, because China might easily become a very powerful military nation in 50 years. Likewise, John Ikenberry advised that the United States cannot stop China's rise.<sup>31</sup> If the United States tries

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29. See Sara Bongiorno, *A Year Without "Made in China": One Family's True Life Adventure in the Global Economy* (Medford, N.J.: Wiley, 2007).

30. Laura MacInnis, "N. Korea Agrees to Disable Nuclear Program in 2007," *Reuters*, September 2, 2007, online at <http://acapella.harmony-central.com/archive/index.php/t-1733467.html>.

31. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West."

to keep China weak, it would increase China's domestic instability, which would negatively affect global peace and development. The most important thing for the United States to do is not to block China from becoming a powerful country, but to understand China and learn to live with a rising China. In the meantime, the United States should urge the Chinese government to become a responsible, accountable, and democratic stakeholder.<sup>32</sup> If China moves in that direction, the United States can focus on shared interests such as fighting terrorism and promoting world peace.

According to the Chinese government, "China's relationship with the United States is a top priority."<sup>33</sup> Hu Jintao has promised that China will develop friendly relations with Washington. China and the United States must become not only stakeholders, but also partners in constructive cooperation. When Hu Jintao visited the White House in 2006, President George W. Bush deliberately used the word "stakeholder" to describe the relationship between the two countries and pointed out that "as stakeholders in the international system, our two nations share many strategic interests."<sup>34</sup> Objectively, since China-U.S. relations were normalized in the 1970s, the two countries have gone through several crises, including the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989, the Taiwan Strait missile crisis in 1996, the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the spy plane incident over Hainan Island in 2001. Through all these difficult times, the Chinese government has realized that the diplomatic approach is the best way to reduce the risk of international conflict that could lead to domestic disorder. Since the end of the 1990s, the Chinese government has tried to avoid public confrontation with Washington, in order to convince the United States that China is not a threat but a contributor to the global peace.

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32. Glenn Kessler, "U.S., China Stand Together but Are Not Equal," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2006.

33. Peter Baker and Glenn Kessler, "Bush, Hu Produce Summit of Symbols Protester Screams at Chinese President," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2006.

34. John O'Neil, "China's President Ends U.S. Visit with Yale Speech," *New York Times*, April 21, 2006.

### China's Soft Power

The third argument of the China threat theory has to do with soft power. China has expanded its soft power to the West, providing scholarships for students to go to China to study, financially aiding many countries, and playing critical roles inside many international organizations. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, attended the Group of Seven major industrial nation meetings, and hosted the Olympic Games in 2008. China may be invited to join the International Monetary Fund. Joshua Kurlantzick in his new book, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, observes that China is emphasizing soft-power strategies, because it sees this as a U.S. weak point. Since the Iraq war began in 2003, the United States has suffered a serious setback in terms of soft power. Driving China forward in its emphasis on employing soft power is not only a desire to advance its particular brand of political philosophy, but a deeper desire to rebuild national credibility greatly tarnished over the past 150 years.

China is gaining in soft power but is still learning how to conduct itself on the world stage. It will inevitably make its own mistakes.<sup>35</sup> The term soft power has a broad meaning. According to Joseph S. Nye, "soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies."<sup>36</sup> Soft power includes various aspects, but two things are very basic. The first is education. China's educational system is far behind the level of the developed countries. Chinese government spending for education is less than four percent of GNP, while the world average is 5.1 percent.<sup>37</sup> Based on the total educational investment, each Chinese person spends only 32 yuan (about \$4) per year for education.

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35. Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 23.

36. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), p. 12.

37. Stanley Rosen, "Education and Economic Reform," in Christopher Hudson, ed., *The China Handbook* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), p. 250.

Another basic aspect of soft power is cultural influence around the world. There is no doubt that the CCP is trying to expand Chinese cultural influence around the world by setting up Confucius Institutes that teach Western people about traditional Chinese culture in an attempt to change the value standards of Western people.<sup>38</sup> However, the overwhelming evidence suggests that Chinese traditional culture is waning on the mainland. It is becoming unpopular. Beijing Opera, a national treasure with a history of 200 years, was the most popular form of entertainment and was favored by the Chinese people from all ranks of Chinese society. Every city used to have at least one Beijing Opera troupe. However, Beijing Opera is now out of business in many cities. Even in Beijing itself, Beijing opera is performed only at two small theaters. Interestingly enough, the majority of people in the audience are foreigners, more precisely, white people. Old people make up the majority of the Chinese audience. Young Chinese are much more enthusiastic about rock and popular music. Obviously, while the Chinese economy has become strong, Chinese traditional culture has become weak.

It should be noted that contemporary Chinese society is thoroughly enmeshed in the era of globalization. World culture is transnational. Western culture, including material and ideological cultures, is everywhere in China: McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wal-Mart, Nike, Reebok, Holiday Inn, Ramada Inn, Hilton, and the Grand Hyatt. There are more than 200 five-star hotels in China, and two-thirds of them are foreign-invested. CNN and many other Western television stations are broadcasting in China. Western print media, such as the *Financial Times*, are allowed to print in China. Japan's Sony Company established the first joint-venture TV station in November 2004.

Chinese youth are particularly attracted to Western culture, American culture most of all. This includes individual rights, material abundance, advanced technology, and popular culture. According to one investigation, the most popular key words on the Internet are closely associated with Western culture, such as stock, the United States, American music, the NBA (National Basketball Association), chat room, game, dog, coffee, hair styles, makeup, and women's health, to name a few. Many Chinese

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38. Kuehner, "Understanding China."

movie theaters show only American films. When the Rolling Stones visited Shanghai in April 2006, the 8,500-seat Shanghai Grand Stage was filled each day they performed, although tickets were very expensive in terms of Chinese income.<sup>39</sup>

It is understandable that China's public media sometimes still shows discomfort with U.S. global predominance and hopes the government shows its strong side and stands up to the United States. It is not easy for the Chinese government to balance the national interests and public opinion. In order to avoid a disastrous war between China and the United States, it is very important to build up a relationship of trust between the two countries. Generally speaking, the Chinese people understand the United States more than American people understand the Chinese. According to one survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Asia Society in 2006, Chinese people trust Americans more than the American people trust China.<sup>40</sup> In the United States, "Congressional staffers hold a much lower opinion of China than the other samples. The general public with a higher income are more likely to hold a negative opinion of China than those in the lower income bracket. Caucasian Americans are also more likely to hold an unfavorable opinion than Hispanic and African Americans."<sup>41</sup> Thus, the United States should make greater efforts to understand China's historic social and political transformation and its significant consequences.

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39. Tickets ranged from 300 yuan (over \$37) to 1,800 yuan for each ticket. Asia Pulse, "Rolling Stones to Rock Shanghai," *Asia Times*, March 15, 2006.

40. Jim Lobe, "Greater China: Two Countries, One Survey," *Asia Times*, December 12, 2007, online at [www.survey.committee100.org/2007/press/AsiaTimes\\_121107.pdf](http://www.survey.committee100.org/2007/press/AsiaTimes_121107.pdf).

41. Committee of 100, "2007 Survey: Hope & Fear: American and Chinese Attitudes toward Each Other, Parallel Survey on Issues Concerning U.S.-China Relations," online at [www.survey.committee100.org/2007/files/C100SurveyFullReport.pdf](http://www.survey.committee100.org/2007/files/C100SurveyFullReport.pdf).