



THE JAMES A. BAKER III  
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CHINA AND LONG-RANGE ASIA ENERGY SECURITY: AN ANALYSIS  
OF THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL FACTORS  
SHAPING ASIAN ENERGY MARKETS

*SLAYING THE CHINA DRAGON: THE NEW CHINA THREAT SCHOOL*

JOE BARNES  
*RESEARCH FELLOW*  
*JAMES A. BAKER INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY*  
*RICE UNIVERSITY*

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"...China, rapidly becoming the globe's second most powerful nation, will be a predominant force as the world takes shape in the new millennium. As such, it is bound to be no strategic friend of the United States, but a long term adversary."

-Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro,  
*Foreign Affairs.*<sup>1</sup>

"The United States and China are not on a collision course. They have already collided."

-Jacob Heilbrunn,  
*The New Republic.*<sup>2</sup>

"We must contain China."

-Charles Krauthammer,  
*Time.*<sup>3</sup>

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## 1989: The Year the Trouble Began

Since the end of the Cold War, no issue in foreign affairs has so agitated the American political class and policy elite as China. From Democratic candidate Bill Clinton's excoriation of then-President George Bush for "coddling dictators" in 1992 to Republican accusations today that the Clinton Administration has all but betrayed our national security for the sake of campaign contributions, China has emerged as our most politically divisive foreign policy issue. The yearly Congressional review of China's Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status ensures that Sino-American relations remain the near-constant subject of partisan contention, much of it vociferous. The debate within the foreign affairs establishment -- never short of ambitious young intellectuals eager to make their mark or superannuated policy-makers quick to find fault with their successors -- has been perhaps higher in tone but no less heated. Leading foreign affairs journals and more general interest magazines have poured forth a literal avalanche of work on China, embracing all shades of opinion.<sup>4</sup> Not since the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the question of "who lost China?" gave rise to furious recrimination, have our relations with Beijing been the subject of so sharp a domestic debate.

China, of course, loomed large in the American mind long before Mao Tse Tung's seizure of power in 1949. By then China had been the object of American missionary zeal and

commercial ambition for the better part of the century. Our views of the Chinese themselves were admittedly complex, even schizophrenic: Pearl S. Buck's long-suffering heroine O-Lan vied in the American imagination with Sax Rohmer's sinister Fu-Manchu.<sup>5</sup> But much more was at work than cultural fascination. With the Spanish-American War, the United States had become a full-fledged Pacific power. Strategic considerations -- often of the highest order -- began to play an important role in our policy towards to China. Japan's invasion of China, for instance, was the leading cause of deteriorating US-Japanese relations during the 1930s and, eventually, of the 1941-45 Pacific War.

Clearly, however, the Sino-American relationship assumed a new importance and intensity after the Communist takeover. In Korea, after all, Chinese troops fought our own. A decade later, fear of such direct conflict with Beijing constrained the Johnson Administration's freedom of action in Vietnam. President Nixon's approach to China in the early 1970s was surely one of the most stunning coups in American diplomatic history. The strategic partnership he forged with Beijing remained a linchpin in American foreign policy throughout the Ford, Carter and Reagan Administrations. But the periods of enmity and entente, dramatically different as they were, shared in fact a powerful common element: each was driven in large part by our efforts to counter Soviet expansion. When we perceived Beijing as Moscow's partner or surrogate, our policies towards Beijing took on a confrontational guise. When we saw an opportunity, as a result of the falling out between the Soviet Union and China, to make common cause with Beijing against Moscow, we seized it. There was, therefore, a fundamental consistency in American foreign policy towards China, one that found equal expression in exchanges of gunfire on the Korean peninsula and of toasts in the Great Hall of the People alike. This consistency, in turn, drew on a broad intellectual and political consensus in support of containment of communism and in general and of the Soviet Union in particular.<sup>6</sup>

1989 marked another watershed in Sino-American relations. The Tianenman Square incident of that year was, by any standard, an unmitigated public relations disaster of the first order for Beijing in the United States, not least because of the savage contrast it struck with the peaceful revolutions that swept Central and Eastern Europe in succeeding months.

But 1989 was more than just the year of Tianenman Square and the image of a lone protester confronting a tank etched indelibly on the American mind. It was also the year of other famous images, not least those of Germans celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall -- in short, as good a date as any for the end of the Cold War. With or without Tianenman, the 1990s would have witnessed a review of the Sino-American relationship in both Beijing and Washington, if only because that relationship was based in large part on a strategic fact -- the immediate Soviet threat to both countries -- that had passed irretrievably into history. The opposite also holds true. Had the Cold War not been coming to an end, our response to Tianenman would almost certainly have been less severe or, at least, less protracted. Whatever our moral outrage, we would still have required Beijing's support against our prime enemy, Moscow.

Relations between the United States and China since 1989 can be described, charitably, as troubled. George Bush -- former American envoy to Beijing and, as the quip went, our "desk officer for China" -- struggled manfully to maintain the strength of the Beijing-Washington relationship. Given the public and congressional outcry over Tianenman, he enjoyed only mixed success. Bush's decision, for instance, to send a secret mission to Beijing just weeks after the incident caused a storm of protest when it was made public. But there were limits, too, even to Bush's personal commitment to maintaining Sino-American relations on an even keel. In 1992, in the midst of his ultimately unsuccessful reelection campaign, Bush went so far as to authorize the sale of 150 F-16 fighter aircraft to Taiwan, a step that infuriated Beijing.

During Bill Clinton's first term, Washington's relations with Beijing went from bad to worse. The new Administration's effort to make good on its campaign promises by linking human rights to trade led to new heights of acrimony on both sides of the Pacific. Combined with fierce disputes over trade and proliferation, the result was a relationship very nearly in free fall.<sup>7</sup> The nadir was reached in 1995-1996, when China held a number of exercises in the Taiwan Straits with the clear intent of influencing the Taiwanese presidential election.<sup>8</sup> At the height of the crisis, the United States dispatched two aircraft carrier groups to within striking distance of the Straits in a naked display of American military might.

The years since 1996 have seen a slow if marked improvement in Sino-American relations, the result, in part, of a concerted effort by the Clinton Administration to avoid, in its policies towards Beijing, the pitfalls -- some would say pratfalls -- of its first term. Whether this improvement -- symbolized by much-expanded high-level contacts between Beijing and Washington, including reciprocal state visits by Clinton and Chinese leader Jiang Zemin -- can weather the latest storm prompted by accusations of Chinese nuclear espionage against the United States is, however, far from clear.

There are signs, for instance, that Republicans may see the issue of American policy towards China as a potent one politically. This creates the strong possibility that 2000 will see a bizarre inversion of 1992, with a GOP candidate lashing likely Democratic nominee Al Gore for being "soft" on Beijing. There are limits to the extent to a Republican President can pursue harshly anti-Beijing policies. Big business, long a major constituency of and lavish contributor to the GOP, would surely oppose measures that endanger its commercial links to China. But a successful Republican Presidential candidate might well, like Clinton eight years earlier, find himself saddled in office by campaign promises impossible to fulfill without doing severe and perhaps irreparable damage to Sino-American relations.

Looking ahead, one thing is certain: our policy towards Beijing will remain, for the foreseeable future, the object both of intellectual dispute and political wrangling.

## **Policy Nobody Likes**

As Edward Luttwak wryly notes, our China policy since 1989, and especially since Clinton's assumption of the Presidency, displays one remarkably abiding characteristic: nobody much likes it.<sup>9</sup> American businessmen with interests in China detest the tensions caused by our stress on human rights -- a stress which human rights activists, in turn, deride as hollow. Christian fundamentalists bewail our unwillingness to punish China for persecuting their co-religionists on the other side of the Pacific. Trade unions leaders rail against unfair Chinese trade practices, particularly the use of so-called "slave labor." And

foreign policy experts of all stripes are harsh on what they call the intellectual incoherence and day-to-day inconsistency of our overall approach towards Beijing.

That approach, certainly, appears to be a sort of policy-by-default. "Engagement," as it is most commonly called, reduces to a disaggregation of American policy towards China into its component parts. Human rights, export promotion, weapons proliferation, trade disputes, regional conflicts: all have important parts in our bilateral agenda with Beijing. But none -- at least since President Clinton publicly jettisoned human rights as the cornerstone of our policy towards China in 1994 -- has clear precedent over the others. The objective appears to be to keep dialogue open and to avoid an irreparable break between Beijing and Washington. By these not inconsiderable standards, the policy may be judged a qualified success. And, insofar as it manages, however fitfully and imperfectly, to balance the demands of important domestic interests groups, our policy has, at least until now, prevented the formation of a political coalition sufficiently strong and durable to shift American policy towards China onto a decidedly confrontational course.<sup>10</sup>

But our China policy is not pretty. It seems to careen between high-minded homilies about human rights and crass pressure to secure major contracts for American firms; between vague talk of a "strategic partnership" with Beijing and blunt gunboat diplomacy. The result has been private unease and public irritability in Beijing and Washington alike. Our policy appears to be poised, intellectually, between an acceptance of China's rise as a great power and an attempt to limit that rise. There is more than a little truth, then, to the critics' accusations of incoherence and inconsistency.

## **The New Cassandras**

Recently, perhaps the most vocal and certainly the most controversial of those critics have been members of what could be called the New China Threat School. Munro and Bernstein's *The Coming Conflict with China* is perhaps the best-known popular expression of this view.<sup>11</sup> Their work and others like it fall into a traditional genre: the polemic, falling somewhere between alarmist and apocalyptic in tone, warning of an

emerging threat to American power. Difficult as it is to imagine today, just over a decade ago the rise of Japan was being similarly described as an inevitable adversary of the United States. Less than a decade before that, other commentators were bewailing the inability of Western democracies to counter the Soviet threat.<sup>12</sup> Japan, of course, has now been enfeebled by ten years of economic stagnation and political paralysis; last seen, the Western democracies were still thriving while the Soviet Union had slipped into oblivion. But each alarmist theory had its moment at the center of conversation among the sort of experts, small in number but influential in foreign policy, who talk about such things. Whatever their other merits, tracts like Munro and Bernstein's are impressive examples of intellectual entrepreneurship at its most provocative and timely.

Warnings of China's emergence as a great power have, moreover, occurred at a time of immense excitement among observers and theoreticians of international affairs. The decade since the collapse of the Soviet empire has seen the emergence, in fact, of an entire intellectual cottage industry dedicated to describing the post-Cold War system and the United States' role in it. Fukuyama's "end of history," Krauthammer's "unipolar moment," Huntington's "clash of civilizations": these are just a few of entries in what could be called an ongoing contest for what could be called the George F. Kennan Award for Historical Memorability.<sup>13</sup> The "China Threat" school is merely part of a larger field.

But there is more -- much more -- to the calls, implicit or explicit, to "contain" the Chinese threat. Some of the impetus clearly arises from residual Cold War attitudes. With the fall of the Soviet Union, China remains the only important state in the world still adhering, however tenuously, to Marxist-Leninism as a doctrine. Communism was, for over forty years, the avatar of anti-Americanism. Old mind-sets die no easier among politicians or pundits than they do among the general public.

There is, in addition, a suggestion of opportunism to demands for a more confrontational approach to China. An enemy, after all, can be a very useful thing to have from a political point of view, particularly when contrasted with something as conceptually muddled and rhetorically mushy as "engagement." There are those on the American Right who have not forgotten the role that anti-communism played in giving conservatism not just high

purpose but electoral success. The nostalgia for Ronald Reagan's steadfast -- and popular -- opposition to the "evil empire" is palpable in American conservative circles.<sup>14</sup>

This is as true among conservative intellectuals as it is among their ideological soul-mates in the political arena. One of the most extraordinary developments of the last 25 years in the realm of public policy in general and of foreign policy in particular has been the intellectual ascendancy of the Right. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the creation of an apparatus of well-financed think-tanks, provocative journals, impressive scholars and influential pundits. In the foreign policy arena, at least, the end of the Cold War has left much of this apparatus adrift.<sup>15</sup> The Soviet threat gave the intellectual Right not just much of its *raison d'être* but also real access to political power. One need not be conspiratorial or even cynical to grasp the appeal of the China threat theory among those for whom the collapse of the Soviet Union has not just removed a cause, but also influence.<sup>16</sup>

## **Theory, Anyone?**

But the critique of our current policy of engagement and calls for a tougher line toward Beijing clearly go beyond nostalgia or opportunism. It possesses undeniable intellectual weight -- a strength deriving from its close association with a particular view of international relations, realism, that enjoys great prestige among policy-makers and academics alike. This is no place to discuss so sophisticated a theory as realism in detail. Its literature, reaching from Thucydides through Morgenthau to Waltz, is rich and varied.<sup>17</sup> Suffice it to say, at great oversimplification, that realism posits both a view of human nature -- pessimistic -- and a view of interstate relations -- adversarial -- that places the struggle for power at the center of international relations. It stands in stark contrast to its chief theoretical alternative, liberalism, which is no less distinguished in its heritage, tracing its lineage back at least to Kant.<sup>18</sup> Liberalism -- again at gross simplification -- holds a more sanguine view of human nature and a conception of interstate relations that stresses the role of domestic regimes and international institutions in creating common interests and encouraging joint action.<sup>19</sup>

For realists, the logic of eventual American conflict with China is implacable. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the grounds for Sino-American cooperation have been swept away. China's huge population, growing economic power, geographic position and imperial tradition have poised it for claim to great power status. And that claim, realists argue, will inevitably bring it into conflict with the United States, first in the Far East, and then globally.<sup>20</sup> Liberalism, in contrast, suggests a different outcome for China's emergence as a great power. Pointing to China's ongoing economic reforms, its moves, however fitful, towards contested elections at the local level and its increasing integration into international institutions, liberals see growing grounds for Sino-American cooperation.

The issue of China's growing dependency on imported oil highlights the divergence of these theoretical views. Realists focus on that dependency as a potential cause for future Sino-American conflict, as China seeks to project power into vital sea-lanes and create relationships with exporters of the Persian Gulf.<sup>21</sup> From a liberal point of view, in contrast, China's growing dependency on imported oil may actually increase Sino-American cooperation because the two countries will share a common interest in secure sea-lanes and a stable Persian Gulf. The facts are identical; the interpretations are polar opposites.

The purpose of this essay is not to resolve the theoretical conflicts between liberalism and realism, already worried to death by generations of experts. We may rest assured that the dispute will continue to fuel intellectual fires for years, even decades to come, with much heat if scant illumination. But from a purely pragmatic point of view, we should remember that the evidence for either view is at best mixed.

Realists are right, at the end of a century which has seen two world war that left tens of millions dead and a third global conflict, the Cold War, that brought mankind to the brink of a thermonuclear exchange, to bring a certain pessimistic cast of mind to international affairs. They are also correct to point out that the record of the last century in terms of accommodating new great powers -- Germany and Japan -- is cautionary.<sup>22</sup> And they are no less right to dismiss the grander claims of liberals as, on more than rare occasion, as

naÔve, premature, or both. Conflict, as witness the Balkans, Persian Gulf, and Central Africa, remains a staple of international affairs. The democratic revolution that seemed to be sweeping the world in the early 1990s has stalled in places like Russia and hardly touched vast realms in Africa and Asia. And the Far Eastern financial crisis has directed a severe and unexpected blow at the breathless assumptions about the benefits of economic integration. Even if there is a universal and irresistible historical trend towards the acknowledgment of individual autonomy as embodied by liberal democracy and free markets<sup>23</sup>, there is no way of knowing how long this vast process will take to unfold or what particular path it will follow. In the meantime, of course, there is American foreign policy to make.

But, as Owen Harries has pointed out, for all its strengths, realism risks falling into a rigid, mechanistic view of human affairs at variance with the facts of history. In particular, it underestimates the importance of regime type and national leadership in international affairs.<sup>24</sup> Surely the nature and personalities of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia played some role -- and perhaps a decisive one -- in the tragic course of 20th century history. Moreover, the post-Cold War era has evolved in ways difficult to square with a strict realist view of international affairs. Germany, freed in large part from its dependency on the United States, has not attempted to rearm and reassert its dominance in Europe; indeed, Germany has actually cut defense expenditures, elected a leftist government, and moved to surrender additional sovereignty to the European Union. Japan, a more ambiguous case given its concerns about China, has also failed to move decisively away from the United States, as would be predicted by realist theory. Indeed, in 1996, Tokyo further deepened its military alliance with Washington.

As a practical matter, the conduct of American foreign policy has rarely approached the theoretical purity of either realism or liberalism. From Roosevelt's declaration of the Four Freedoms as part of the Anglo-American effort to defeat Hitler's bid to rule Europe to George Bush's invocation of rule of international law in support of a similar effort to block Saddam in the Persian Gulf, American foreign policy has blended both views. This has caused strains at times. In some cases -- notably during the Vietnam War, when our claims to be fighting in defense of democracy proved increasingly unconvincing -- those

strains rose to the level of crisis. But, however uneasy, the mix of liberalism and realism has been an abiding characteristic of American foreign throughout much of our history.

This holds true our policy towards China today. Realists are certainly right in identifying a strong liberal strain in Clinton foreign policy. The emphasis on Sino-American commerce, for instance, is not merely an attempt to please business interests; it also reflects a deeper belief that freer trade serves both as a strong disincentive to military conflict but also, more profoundly, as a solvent of authoritarian rule. The emphasis on human rights is similarly only in part an effort to placate vocal domestic constituencies; it also embodies yet another belief -- that the day of China's ultimate democratization will be hurried by tendering support, however rhetorical, to political reform in Beijing. Finally, our policy towards China is part of a broader Clinton approach -- rather clumsily called "democratic enlargement" -- that unabashedly partakes of the liberal tradition.<sup>25</sup>

Yet even the Clinton Administration's liberalism is hardly absolute. Whether from conviction or expediency, the Administration has supported defense budgets that put American military expenditures at a level equal to next five or six largest in the world combined. The Administration has, in fact, sought an increase in Pentagon spending of \$110 billion over the next 6 years. It has also agreed to the development, in the face of fierce criticism by both Moscow and Beijing, of an anti-ballistic missile system that has long been a pet cause of the political Right. When it comes to China, the Clinton Administration has actually increased American military cooperation with Japan and, when the Taiwan Straits incident arose in 1996, indulged in a display of old-fashioned gunboat diplomacy. The liberal glove contains a realist fist -- even in the hand of Bill Clinton.

## **The (Non) Case for Containment**

Advocates of the China threat school, then, make much of their case on contested theoretical and ambiguous historical grounds. Their criticism, moreover, of current American policy towards Beijing surely exaggerates the role that a liberal view of

international affairs plays in it. But what of their more specific claims of a Chinese threat to American interests in East Asia and more broadly?

One thing must be admitted at the outset: there is much to dislike about the regime in Beijing. China's apologists in the United States -- businessmen and academics alike -- would be wise to admit as much, if only to bolster their own credibility. The facts are undeniable. China's government remains very much a dictatorship, if communist only in name. Beijing's human rights record is, in a word, execrable. And its hypersensitivity on matters of territorial integrity, however understandable from a historical perspective, represents a constant source of potential conflict over Taiwan. There is, in addition, certainly no shortage of statements, official and semi-official, stressing China's adamant opposition to American dominance in the Far East.<sup>26</sup>

But some perspective is useful. Beijing may indeed be authoritarian, but so too are American allies like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Its human rights record, bad as it has been, should be compared to that of two democracies, Turkey and India, whose respective actions against Kurd and Kashmiri separatists have been marked at times by extraordinary brutality. The Taiwan question is, of course, a contentious one. But it also one where the United States has formally accepted China's basic position -- that there is only one China, with Beijing as its capital -- for close to 30 years. Finally, Chinese observers too would have no problem finding any number of statements by American political leaders and foreign policy experts that are inflammatory by any reasonable standard. Calls for the maintenance of America dominance, not just in East Asia, but globally, represent a respectable and indeed influential position in our ongoing foreign policy debate.<sup>27</sup> At a minimum, American observers who insist on the importance of containing China's emerging power should not be surprised if the Chinese, in turn, object.<sup>28</sup> This is not an exercise in "moral equivalency" but a matter of simple common sense.

Those warning of the Chinese threat also exaggerate its current and future economic strength. Though it managed to avoid the worst effects of the East Asian financial crisis that began in 1997, China has seen her growth rate sharply reduced. As Nicholas Lardy

points out, China's economic reforms are woefully incomplete.<sup>29</sup> Property rights are unclear. Rule of law is rudimentary. Prices are not yet fully decontrolled. The fiscal regime is primitive. Inefficient state-owned enterprises remain a drag on the economy in general and the banking system in particular. The latter is, by any reasonable accounting standard, insolvent. Recapitalization of China's banking system will require the dedication of immense resources over the next decade.

Future Chinese economic growth depends, critically, upon moving forward on a broad front of reform. Yet any number of those reforms can cause short-term economic dislocations and, at least potentially, public unrest. The energy sector is a case in point: full liberalization might mean shutting down a part of domestic oil production and discharging several hundred thousand workers. For the government in Beijing, navigating the transition to a more open economy, in the energy sector and elsewhere, is full of immense risk and excruciating choice. The regime has clearly staked much of its claim for legitimacy on its ability to generate jobs and raise living standards in a country that remains, we must never forget, one of immense poverty. China may, indeed, surpass the United States in GDP over the course of the next twenty, thirty or forty years. But such a bald statement obscures both the difficulties confronting China today and the uncertainties facing it in the future.

There has also been undue alarm over China's current and future military capabilities. The subject of her defense expenditures has generated a sub-literature of its own, with estimates of total military spending ranging from \$9 to \$90 billion in 1996.<sup>30</sup> Even at the higher, almost certainly inflated figure, Beijing's defense expenditures are perhaps a third of our own. More moderate estimates put China's expenditures below Japan's. To speak, as some do, of a Chinese massive military build-up is to overstate the case; defense expenditures as a percentage of the total budget may actually have declined from the early 1980s through the mid-1990s.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, recent spending is indeed up, modernization is underway, and a clear emphasis on upgrading China's naval and air forces in particular is apparent.<sup>32</sup> But Beijing is far from dedicating -- at least yet -- the resources necessary to represent a plausible military rival to the United States. She is certainly not even approaching the massive commitment undertaken by the Soviet Union

to stay abreast of the United States in the Cold War.<sup>33</sup> Much of her military materiel is obsolete; many of her personnel are poorly trained. She is at least a decade away from an aircraft carrier, much less the complex and integrated array of vessels, aircraft and communications systems that are the modern carrier group. Despite the purchase, in the 1990s, of advanced fighter aircraft from Russia, her effective air power remains inferior to that of both the United States and Japan. Even a Chinese invasion of a Taiwan undefended by the United States would be an extremely risky proposition, stretching Beijing's capabilities to their limits.

## **A Case of False Historic Analogy: Let Me Count the Ways**

Not all who warn of a looming Chinese threat also call for a policy of containment, at least explicitly. Bernstein and Munro, for instance, eschew the term. But, as Charles Maynes points out, there is a curious inconsistency in their arguments and others like them.<sup>34</sup> If conflict with China, as they say, is inevitable, then surely we should act now to contain her, while she is still relatively poor and weak. Bernstein and Munro, in other words, lack the policy courage of their theoretical convictions.<sup>35</sup> Containment is an obvious -- perhaps even necessary -- logical consequence of any theory positing an inevitable conflict between the United States and China.

"Containment," of course, immediately conjures up our Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. But the analogy could not be more inaccurate or, for that matter, insidious. Even a cursory comparison of the two cases reveals precisely how dramatically the Chinese "threat" of today differs from that of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The first key difference is one already briefly discussed: military capability. The Soviet Union ended World War II with an institution -- the Red Army -- that could lay highly plausible claim to being the most powerful land force in the world. While technologically inferior to United States even in the late 1940s, the Soviet Union was able, by dint of immense human and financial sacrifice, to field conventional forces, especially in Europe, that represented a direct challenge to the United States. This was certainly the view of

American defense planners of the 1950s and 60s who opted for a massive nuclear deterrent at least in part out of fear that the Soviet Union could win a ground war in Europe. China, for all the talk of its military build-up, possesses no such rough parity with the United States. It is years, perhaps even decades, away from being able to challenge American military supremacy even in East Asia.<sup>36</sup>

A second key difference between the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and China today is the question of expansionist intent. The Soviet Union was, in the late 1940s, a truly imperial power. It had just created by force of arms a series of subject states around its borders. Any challenge to Moscow's imperial authority -- whether in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968 -- met with a prompt and ruthless Soviet response. China, in contrast, possesses no such empire. While it has a number of territorial disputes that put it at odds with its neighbors -- the Spratly Islands are a case in point -- Beijing has, since the early 1980s, adopted a conscious policy of conciliation with bordering states.<sup>37</sup> Taiwan, as always, is an exception and a very dangerous one. Even there, Beijing's claim to sovereignty is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from Moscow's efforts after World War II to carve out an empire from formerly independent states in Central and Eastern Europe.

A third important difference is the lack today of any institutional rivalry between the United States and China. The Soviet Union not only challenged the United States directly by virtue of its military force and imperial ambition. It also created a series of institutions -- the Warsaw Pact and COMECON chief among them -- that attempted to create an alternate international architecture to the one forged by the United States in such bodies as NATO, the World Bank, and IMF. China has made no such attempt. The one institutional forum in which it laid claim with some success to leadership -- the Non-Aligned Movement -- has fallen into irrelevancy with the end of the Cold War. Indeed, over recent years China has sought membership in institutions, like the IMF, the WTO and APEC where the United States wields considerable and often decisive influence. Given our influence in such organizations, the idea that the Chinese might attempt, say, to take over the IMF is simply ludicrous. Put crudely, these institutions may be run as a partnerships --but in each the United States remains very much the first among equals.

A fourth critical difference between the Soviet Union of the late 1940s and the China today is the absence of any substantive ideological conflict. The Soviet Union embodied a coherent and, for many around the world, attractive alternative to consumer capitalism and liberal democracy. Communist parties found widespread support not just in the Third World but in Western Europe; even intellectuals in the United States were not immune to Marxist-Leninism's ideological appeal. Today, China offers no such ideological alternative. Beijing's nominal communism is, even at home, widely perceived to be a mere façade. It certainly possesses no appeal outside its borders. Indeed, insofar there is an ideological component to Sino-American relations, it is the extent to which American ideology represents a threat to the Beijing regime. The occasional Chinese campaigns against "Western values," for instance, are symptoms not of ideological strength but weakness. However slowly and unevenly, Chinese society is in fact acquiring characteristics -- above all, a taste for consumer goods and a stress on individuality -- that have long been hallmarks of the West and, especially, the United States.

In sum, the Soviet Union represented a systemic threat to the United States -- an alternative, centered in and supported by Moscow, which provided the intellectual framework, institutional underpinnings, and military means to challenge us. Today, no such alternative exists. China, certainly, offers none. This reflects a truth identified by John Ikenberry, who argues that the end of the Cold War can best be described as a collapse by the Soviet Union and its satellites into the liberal international system developed by the United States and our allies after World War II.<sup>38</sup> That system is, of course, neither universal nor perfect. Certain countries -- failed states in Africa, for instance, or rogue regimes like Iraq -- fall largely outside it. And others -- China and Russia being important cases in point -- have only been partially integrated into it. But that system today faces no real challenge. There is, quite simply, nowhere else to go.

This has important -- and painful -- consequences for China. Both the political legitimacy of its regime and the potential ability of its military to challenge the United States depend on sustained long-term economic growth. But the domestic liberalization and global integration required to achieve growth threaten both that legitimacy and that ability. The difficulties of domestic liberalization, already discussed, pose acute challenges to the

regime in Beijing. But integration into the global economy also presents its own challenges. One -- the ability of economic developments outside China to seriously affect domestic performance -- has been driven home by the East Asian financial crisis. But there is another: the constraint integration imposes on any Chinese effort to challenge the United States. One need not be a liberal true believer to realize that China's dependence on international trade and investment flows raises incalculably the costs of any direct challenge to the United States. Armed conflict in the Taiwan Straits or the South China Sea could exact simply huge economic costs -- costs which the Soviet Union, committed to a policy of autarky within its own bloc, did not have to consider in its policies toward the United States. Unlike the Soviet Union, China must compete with the United States within a system that we largely created and that we continue to dominate.

Energy is an important and emblematic case in point.

Economic growth, domestic liberalization and international integration will, by all counts, lead to an immense increase in China's oil imports.<sup>39</sup> Barring an ability to challenge the US navy decades away by any estimate, China will find her strategic options limited; in particular, her vulnerability to American maritime power will increase, not decrease, with the passage of time. Any threat to East Asian sea-lanes would affect not just delivery of oil to Japan or Taiwan but to China herself. Any effort to challenge American preeminence in the Persian Gulf, similarly, would risk a disruption of supply and a sharp rise in her import bills. The latter point again shows the difference between the China of today and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Moscow, a major oil exporter, actually stood to gain from a certain amount of instability in the Persian Gulf; the precise opposite holds true of China, an oil importer.

## **Conclusion**

China in 1999, therefore, is far from being the threat represented by the Soviet Union of the late 1940s. Policies that pretend as much risk causing great and unnecessary mischief in Sino-American relations. To embark on a containment policy against China now -- even on a rhetorical level -- would prompt a sharp and negative response from Beijing,

creating precisely the atmosphere of resentment and mistrust most likely to lead to conflict. If we go in search of an enemy, we shall surely find one.

But what of the future? Will the China of 2010 or 2020 represent the real threat to the United States that she does not today? Much, clearly, will depend on the precise course that China takes in the years and decades ahead. And here we move into the realm of speculation. Will China evolve into a more democratic polity and open society? Will its regime settle into a centralized dictatorship, shed of residual Marxist-Leninist trappings perhaps, but rich and ambitious enough to flex its regional muscles? Will it, unable to meet the political and, especially, economic aspirations of its people, slip into bellicose nationalism in order to provide governmental legitimacy and national cohesion? Or will it slide further, into fractious regionalism or even civil war? Any of these scenarios is plausible; each has important ramifications for Sino-American relations; each has its supporters among experts. Which and who are right? The honest, if uncomfortable, answer is that we simply do not know.

A comparison with the United States is illuminating. Our constitutional structure dates to 1787. Our legal system, based on English common law, reaches back centuries before. We were last invaded by a foreign power during the War of 1812. Our only civil war ended in 1865. The younger of our two major political parties was founded in 1854. And our economic system, though the subject of some welfarist tinkering at the margins, has been resolutely capitalist from our very beginnings and unabashedly consumerist since at least the 1920s. For all our national fixation on trends, both mega and minor, Americans can be fairly confident that, in 25 years, our constitutional, legal, political and economic systems will be much the same as they are today.

Nothing of the sort can be said about China, past or future. This century alone, it has saw the overthrow of a centuries' old imperial dynasty; endured a twenty-year long civil war between Communist and Nationalist parties; suffered invasion by Japan; experienced imposition of a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship; survived the chaos of Mao's cultural revolution; and, under Deng Xiaoping, witnessed the reversal of 30 years of collectivist economic policy. Given the extraordinary challenges today confronting China and the

painful decisions facing her government, any predictions about China's future are, at very best, tentative.

That is the bad news. The good news is that the United States can afford the luxury of waiting. The contrast with the aftermath of World War II could not be sharper. The containment policy developed then was the creation, we would be wise to recall, not of a theoretical meditation on the nature of international relations but of stark necessity. Huge Soviet armies in Central Europe, a totalitarian regime of proven aggressive intent in Moscow, civil war in Greece, major communist movements in Italy and France, impoverished allies and devastated former enemies alike dependent on our largesse: these were just some of the facts facing the Truman Administration as what is now known as containment took shape. No such challenge, no such necessity, exists when it comes to China today. Our political stability, economic might, military dominance and far-flung web of formal alliances and informal relationships not only give us immense power; they give us, when it comes to China, time.

This is not to suggest that we should take a passive attitude towards China; nor, for that matter, that we may expect our relations with Beijing to be unruffled. Key issues -- the "usual suspects" of post-Cold War China policy: proliferation, human rights, trade -- will remain the cause of dispute, often bitter, between the two countries. Indeed, one issue -- Taiwan -- could, if mismanaged, bring about direct military conflict between the United States and China.<sup>40</sup>

On balance, we have more to gain than to lose by further integrating China into the world economic system. At a minimum, such integration raises the costs of direct conflict with the United States. At a maximum, it may help move China's internal dynamic in directions congruent with our values and consistent with our interests. WTO accession, once the necessary assurances on continued economic reform are obtained, is an important next step in the direction of China's economic integration. So is possible eventual membership in, say, the G-7, when China makes additional steps towards economic and political liberalization. But even as we ease China's full integration into the

international economic system, we must also maintain the military establishment and strategic alliances necessary to counter a Chinese threat if and when it should arise.

In other words, our policy towards China will remain in many ways unsatisfactory -- an uneasy mix of liberal hope and realist fear, an unhappy blend of professed friendship and potential rivalry. But, as Luttwak points out, the inconsistency of such a policy may in point of fact be its strength. It accurately reflects the imponderables associated with China's future. Above all, it keeps our options open.<sup>41</sup>

One thing is certain: the current alarm being sounded about China in Washington is surely exaggerated. A gunboat or two in the Spratly Islands do not represent a challenge to US Naval dominance. A few dozen Chinese missile targeted at the United States do not alter the world's strategic balance. And the idea that a country might seek to steal our military secrets is neither particularly new nor especially shocking.

The calls, implicit or explicit, for a containment policy against China are nothing less than folly. We should recall precisely, exactly, how much our earlier containment policy cost us: a hundred thousand dead Americans in places like Korea and Vietnam, trillions in defense expenditures, constant fear of a nuclear exchange, and the erosion of civil liberties here at home. To embark on a similar policy towards China would surely require more than the beefed-up pacific alliances and bolstered military capabilities that its supporters seem to suggest. Indeed, it would require a well-nigh complete revision of American foreign policy as we know it today.<sup>42</sup>

If, in fact, China's inevitable challenge to the United States is being fueled by access to international markets, we would presumably be wise to constrain that access in any way we can, a step that would require a full reversal of our long-standing support for liberalization of trade and investment. This would mean not just denying China access to American markets but also urging the Europeans and the Japanese to close their own. Any containment policy against China would also dictate a search for powerful allies in an anti-Beijing coalition. India and Russia would clearly be two obvious candidates. Both would undoubtedly demand concessions for their cooperation. In the case of India, we

would likely be asked to accept Delhi's membership in the world's "nuclear club." Any alliance with Russia would similarly entail concessions to Moscow -- commitments, say, to cease NATO expansion and give a green light to a freer Russian hand in Central Asia.

And for what? To counter a threat which has not yet emerged, may not arise, and, even should it occur, will do so slowly. Constant comparisons of Chinese and American military capabilities ten or twenty years hence, for instance, seem to suggest that we will stand idly by during the interim, unable to increase military spending, accelerate development of new weapons, or adjust our strategic doctrines.<sup>43</sup> The call for containment, at one level, is not just based on a conspicuous underestimation of American power. It also derives from what appears to be a near-contempt for our ability, as a nation, to respond flexibly and effectively when and if challenges to that power arise.

Those promoting a hard-line towards China should reread the words of then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams in 1821: "Wherever the standard of freedom or independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her (America's) heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to slay."<sup>44</sup> Adams' statement, made in large part to counter Henry Clay's accusations that he lacked sympathy with the ongoing struggle against Spanish colonial rule in Latin America, can be read as a critique of precisely the sort of idealism that realists by and large repudiate. But it can be read more generally, too, as a call for prudence and modesty -- in short, conservatism -- in the conduct of our international affairs, qualities sorely lacking among those, ironically on the Right, calling for the containment of China. The monster they would have us slay is a Chinese dragon they have created from dubious theory and selective evidence -- one that bears little relationship to the creature, complex in its current circumstances and uncertain in its future prospects, still emerging on the other side of the Pacific.

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## Notes

1 March/April 1997.

2 November 20, 1995.

3 July 31, 1995

4 A sample -- a small sample -- may be found in the bibliography.

5 Buck (1992) and Rohmer (1997).

6 The Truman Administration clearly perceived the Korean conflict -- despite China's intervention in late 1950 -- largely in terms of US-Soviet rivalry. Washington feared that the North Korean invasion was a feint to draw American forces to Northeast Asia while the Russians struck Central Europe. (Hastings, 1987.) At the beginning of the war, the North Korean regime under Kim Il Sung was much more closely allied to the Soviet Union than to the Chinese Communist regime, then less than one year in power. Stalin, for his part, viewed the war largely in terms of US-USSR conflict. (Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, 1993.)

7 To be fair to the Clinton Administration, the election of a Republican House of Representatives in November 1994 also contributed to worsening Sino-American relations. Newt Gingrich, the new Speaker, had long been a strong supporter of Taiwan. So were a number of Republican House freshman elected that year. At one point, Gingrich blithely declared that the Chinese should "just get over it" and accept the reality of Taiwanese independence. See Burstein and de Keijzer (1998).

8 Or, as Nathan and Ross (1997) argue, to influence the post-electoral policies of the winner, incumbent Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui. The Administration's 1995 decision to issue a visa for Lee to visit his alma mater, Cornell University, prompted a sharp response from Beijing, setting the stage in part for the Straits crisis.

9 See Luttwak (1998). He offers an original and incisive look at the quandaries facing American policy-makers as they forge an approach to China. This essay draws heavily upon his arguments.

10 Any such coalition would have to consist of an unlikely combination of left-wing trade unionists and human rights activists on the one hand and right-wing Christian fundamentalists and unreconstructed Cold Warriors on the other. Such a coalition has appeared and, indeed prevailed, on specific issues -- notably to block the Clinton Administration's plan to grant China permanent MFN status in 1997. But it has proven, to date, too fractious effectively to change the overall direction of American policy towards China. See Burstein and de Keijzer (1998).

11 Bernstein and Munro (1997 and 1998). See Maynes (1997) for a highly critical review of their thesis.

12 See, for instance, Friedman and LeBards's *The Coming War with China* (1991) and Revel's *How Democracies Perish* (1983).

13 Fukuyama (1989 and 1992), Krauthammer (1992), Huntington (1996). See Haass (1997) for an admirable summary of these and other theoretical exercises and Maynes (1995) for a critique of a particular subset of them, what he calls the "pessimists." Posen and Ross (1996/7) provide a more extended look at contending recommendations for American grand strategy in the post-Cold War era.

14 See Kristol and Kagan (1996) and, in turn, Harries (1997) for a critique of their views. Kristol and Kagan's title -- "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy"-- says it all.

15 Domestic policy is a somewhat different matter. Here, on matters as varied as school vouchers and social security reform, the intellectual right continues to drive much of our public policy debate.

16 See Hodgson (1996) and Dorrien (1993) for a discussion of the critical role played by anti-communism in fostering the current conservative ascendancy.

17 Waltz (1979) is generally acknowledged as the leading theoretical light of realism. Contemporary liberalism has no counterpart to him. See Kegley (1995) for a recent look at post-Cold War controversies in international relations theory.

18 The term "liberalism," conjuring up a broader political point-of-view, is perhaps unfortunate. In fact, however, foreign policy liberalism is dominant on the Left and realism powerful on the Right. This should come as no surprise. The pessimism that colors realism, for instance, strikes a clear chord with conservatives who view the Left's social egalitarianism as hopelessly overoptimistic and dangerously naive. Nonetheless, care should be taken in ascribing too close a connection between views of foreign policy and broader ideological stance. A sizeable number of what we call conservatives -- notably the most enthusiastic free marketeers among them -- actually subscribe, in whole or in part, to a liberal view of international relations. Former Republican Congressman and Vice-Presidential nominee Jack Kemp is a case in point.

19 At their most rigorous extreme, both realism and liberalism can take on a strange, almost surreal quality. Mersheimer (1990 and 1993) has suggested that the possession nuclear weapons by both Germany and the Ukraine would be a force for stability. Rowan (1996) argues that China will become democratic when it reaches a certain threshold in per capita GDP -- about \$7-8,000 in current US dollars.

20 Oddly enough, America's perhaps most famous practitioner of realism, Henry Kissinger, holds a far less dire view of future Sino-American relations. This may reflect a sentimental attachment on his part to a relationship he did much personally to develop or

simply a pragmatic acceptance of China's inevitable rise. Bernstein and Munro (1998) uncharitably suggest a rather less sympathetic reason: Kissinger's personal financial interest in keeping relations between Washington and Beijing on an even keel.

21 See Calder (1996).

22 Even Harries (1997), otherwise critical of a hard-line approach to China, concedes this point. It is a staple of the realist argument on the need to contain China.

23 At gross oversimplification, this is the central argument of Fukuyama (1989 and, especially, 1992).

24 See Harries (1997).

25 For a discussion of "enlargement" see Brinkley (1997). Its chief tenets --strengthening the community of free market democracies, fostering new democracies and market economies where possible, countering aggression and supporting the liberalization of states hostile to democracy and helping democracy and market economies take root in regions of greatest humanitarian concerns -- are liberal to their core.

26 These statements are discussed at great length in Bernstein and Munro (1998).

27 Kristol and Kagan (1996), for instance, wax eloquent about the benefits of American global hegemony.

28 See Harries (1997/8).

29 Lardy (1998a), an admirably sober and sometimes sobering analysis of the extraordinary economic challenges facing China.

30 See Munro and Bernstein (1998) and Nathan and Ross (1997) for a discussion of this issue from sharply differing perspectives.

31 Nathan and Ross (1997).

32 See Rodman (1998) and Feigenbaum (1999) for illuminating discussions of China's military capabilities.

33 Lampton (1998).

34 Maynes (1997).

35 Their actual recommendations -- they include that we block China's entry into the WTO, withdraw her MFN status, and set a quota on Chinese imports -- would certainly infuriate Beijing and set our two countries on a collision course; whether they would

actually do much materially to reduce China's potential to threaten the United States is an other question altogether. Bernstein and Munro (1998).

36 Feigenbaum (1999).

37 Lampton (1998).

38 Ikenberry (1996).

39 Medlock and Soligo (1999) and Jaffe and Soligo (1999).

40 The current American policy of encouraging confidence building measures and military exchanges is therefore an important one. As Pillsbury (1997) points out, Chinese misperception of US military capabilities and doctrine is a potentially major source of such miscalculation.

41 Luttwak (1998).

42 Luttwak (1998) is eloquent on this point.

43 Harries (1997).