

## China and the U.S.: Competing Geopolitical Strategies

Ever since Richard Nixon went to China on Feb. 21, 1972 to visit Mao Zedong, the world's geopolitical alignments have never been the same. The meeting represented a spectacular shift in geopolitical hostilities of the post-1945 period. The major consequence was that China and the United States ceased to act as though each were the other's primary enemy, and acted as though each were a potential collaborator of the other on the world scene - collaborator, which is less than an ally. Each has been careful to do nothing that would allow for a return to the pre-1972 period which had seen open warfare in Korea and unlimited rhetorical harangue across the world. This cautious, even wary, relationship has continued unabated up to today and has survived intact even during the era of U.S. neo-conservative aggressive foreign policy under George W. Bush.

Initially what brought the two countries together was the desire of each to constrain, even diminish, the power of the Soviet Union. But they soon discovered that each could have important economic benefits out of a less antagonistic relationship. And each had long-term visions which they thought might be served by this curious bilateral arrangement. The U.S. sought to tame China, to bring it out of its Maoist cocoon and into the market whirl of the capitalist world-economy. China sought to buy technology, trade, and above all time in which to strengthen its economy and its military, and enable it to become a superpower. To some extent, each has been served well thus far in terms of what it sought to achieve.

But as we move forward into the twenty-first century, it is becoming clear that each is pursuing a quite different geopolitical strategy in its semi-friendly but intense competition with the other. Any major power in the interstate system has four different cards to play in its search for power and preeminence: the economic, the political, the military, and the cultural-ideological cards. But of course the cards each has to play are not equally strong, and the choice in foreign policy is always which one or ones to emphasize.

The United States is a declining hegemonic power. Its economic card has been on the decline for almost forty years. Bush's incredible expansion of national debt has made the U.S. economic situation far worse than it was even five years ago. U.S. manufacturing is for the most part a doomed export and now we learn that Brazil may displace the U.S. as an agricultural exporter - one of the last advantages in production of the U.S. on the world economic scene. The declining economic strength of the U.S. has diminished its political strength, particularly but not only in Europe, and Bush's Iraq fiasco has intensified the negative feelings considerably. As for the cultural-ideological strength of the U.S., the collapse of the Soviet Union undid the major argument which it had been using to rally support around the world. And the efforts of the U.S. to use the "war against terrorism" as an ideological substitute has fallen very flat.

So, the U.S. has had to fall back on the only strong card it has left - the military card. However, even here the U.S. is doing less well than one might have expected. It has shown in Iraq, once again, that it is basically incapable of dealing with a nationalist insurgency. Still, the U.S. retains an incredible edge in military hardware, and it is pouring an immense proportion of its national wealth into maintaining and expanding this edge.

The key to U.S. military superiority remains nuclear weapons, which explains why the U.S. continues an almost hysterical concern with nuclear proliferation. It is however becoming clear, even to the Bush administration, that the U.S. is isn't going to be able to stop a series of

countries from obtaining nuclear weapons. North Korea and Iran may head the list, but there is a long list quietly (or not so quietly) starting to jump on the bandwagon. When the U.S. can't get even Great Britain to align itself on its struggle to keep Iran in line, it is in bad shape politically.

This doesn't mean that the U.S. is abandoning the effort to maintain an unquestioned military lead. It is moving full speed ahead in developing itself the so-called mini-nukes. These mini-nukes are actually reasonably powerful. They have about the power of the bombs that were used over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They have, however, two features that are different: they can burrow deep into the ground (and therefore of enemy shelters), and they cause less collateral damage, which supposedly will make them less politically objectionable. The U.S. is proceeding with their production at Los Alamos, and will probably be testing them soon. These mini-nukes are not meant as a deterrent but for actual pre-emptive use. If the U.S. does succeed in making viable mini-nukes, we may expect a new worldwide arms race to try to counter this U.S. advantage.

Meanwhile, China is on a different tack. It is to be sure intent on strengthening its military apparatus. But it will be a while before China can in any sense be a peer to the U.S. on this front. China also maintains a low political profile on the world scene. It consists mainly of cultivating better relations with just about everyone. But China is certainly not yet ready today to be a major political player. Furthermore, China's ideological stance is, to say the least, confusing. It is a "market socialist state" - the meaning of which no one is totally sure. It sometimes remembers its position of the old days of the Bandung conference, as a leader of the Third World, but most of the time, it is relatively quiet on North-South issues.

China's main card today is the economic card. It is a rising economic power. How powerful it might come to be is as yet unsure. But it is patiently expanding its role. A Chinese firm has just bought out IBM's personal computer division and is now the third largest firm in the world. China is a mainstay of the U.S. dollar by investing in U.S. treasury bonds. This gives China more economic control over the U.S. than vice versa, since a withdrawal of these investments or even a rapid lessening of their extent could wreak economic havoc on the U.S. China has cultivated excellent relationships with Iran, which enhances its needed access to petroleum.

And most interesting of all, on November 29, 2004, China signed a deal with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that is being hailed as "historic" and which moves towards establishing a trade bloc that rivals those of the U.S. and the European Union. This agreement creates a market zone of two billion people, and it will be accompanied by new road and rail links between China and Southeast Asia. What China needs to do to complete this solid base is to come to an economic arrangement with Japan. This is an objective that is complicated by long-standing political and military concerns on both sides. But it seems economically so advantageous to both China and Japan in the long run that it is hard to see that it will not come to pass.

The U.S. emphasis on the military card has the flavor of desperation. China's emphasis on building slowly its economic base seems by contrast an act of patience. Perhaps this is the story of the tortoise and the hare.

by Immanuel Wallerstein