The United States and China: A Clash of Visions[1]

Robyn Lim[2] and Richard B. Parker[3]

This essay is no more than an outline sketch in which complicated social and political groupings of hundreds of million of people are abbreviated as "China" and "the United States". Nevertheless, in conditions of uncertainty, even a sketch, if it does not distort reality, can be valuable.

I

The fundamental difference between the United States and China, the difference that will be a major danger to peace in the 21st century, is the difference between the Chinese and American view of relations among nations.

The Chinese vision of a stable and orderly world is one in which nations are arranged in a hierarchy. At the top there is ideally a benevolent hegemon to which other nations defer. For most of its long history, China has been a highly centralized state occupying this hegemonic position. The periods when there was more than one government in China, or when some other nation of combination of nations was powerful enough to threaten China, are seen by the Chinese as unfortunate aberrations. The last two hundred years, when China was dominated by the Western colonial powers and invaded by Japan, is one such aberration. In the Chinese view, China was and should be again the hegemon, if not in the world, at least in East Asia.

Given China's population and cultural sophistication, this is not an unrealis-

---

 We are indebted to David Armstrong, Omar Farouk, Naoki Kamimura, Yulia Mikhailova, Elinor Mondale, Jonas Parker, Roger Reinoos, and John Wild, who made written comments on earlier versions of this essay. A much shorter version appeared as a column in The Japan Times on December 2, 1996.

2. Professor of International Relations, Faculty of Law, Hiroshima Shudo University.

3. Professor of International Transactions, Faculty of Law, Hiroshima Shudo University.

tic view. Time does seem to be on the side of the Chinese. In a few decades, or at least by the end of the 21st century, China will have made up the deficiencies in technology and education that gave the Western powers and Japan their advantage. When China reaches a level of development where its average man and woman is a net contributor to its economy and thus its population (five times that of the US and ten times that of Japan) is a plus rather than a minus, it is hard to imagine that China will not be in a position to be hegemon of the world, or at least hegemon in East Asia. So believe most Chinese.

Some Japanese and Americans doubt that the Chinese are capable of duplicating the achievements of Japan or America on such a mammoth scale. They say that the food and energy needs of such a huge population, to say nothing of the pollution problems, will prevent China from becoming as rich as the United States or Japan. Yet it seems certain that the Chinese, and most of the rest of mankind, are going to try. In so far as future science and technology fail to solve mankind's problems of food, energy, and global pollution, chaos and war become more likely. Considerations of who will be hegemon and what vision of international society will prevail become even more important. Predictions of ecological or other sorts of disaster increase rather than diminish the importance of the questions we discuss here.

A consequence of the Chinese view of relations among nations is that competition to be regional or world hegemon is always a zero sum game. In China's view, if a new great power rises, others must be diminished. China is a rising power with a good chance to be global hegemon. If China were in America's position, as the current benevolent hegemon, it would resist the rise of a serious competitor. Beijing thus takes it as axiomatic that the US seeks to "contain" China in order to prevent it from displacing the US as world hegemon. China misperceives US intentions. Far from trying to keep China down, the US seeks to bring China into a peaceful liberal democratic international order as an equal. The US hopes to achieve for China what it sees itself as having achieved for Germany and Japan, which it sees as rich and democratic, and contributing to international stability and prosperity.

The notion of equality is crucial here. It is an equality based on the American vision of a democratic society. Citizens may differ in wealth and influence, but all are political equals. The American ideal is of a free people, exemplified in the New England town meeting, with each person being self-governing, and participating with fellow citizens in self-government with no supervision from a ruling class. This ideal is mirrored in the American ideal of a liberal democratic international order in which all nations participate in a self-governing international society without supervision by a hegemon or superpower. The American ideal stems from European eighteeth-century beliefs in the perfectibility of man, the long and unprecedented experience of Americans in local self-govenment, and the optimism engendered by America's good fortune in occupying most of a bountiful continent protected by broad oceans.

A key feature of the American ideal is that Americans see as temporary their present position as the world's dominant power. Current American dominance is seen by Americans as only a means of achieving the ideal of a liberal democratic international order, not as a necessary and permanent feature of it. Americans are willing to accept the possibility of another state or combination of states that is larger, more influential, and richer than the United States, so long as those competitors and the international order remain liberal and democratic. The European Union may be the first example of a combination of states that will be more powerful than the United States and yet acceptable to Americans. The American vision is of a permanent liberal democratic order in which a nation does not have to be powerful to be secure.

Canada and the United States have been in this sort of relationship for more than one hundred years. Canada's security against American invasion depends in no way on Canada's military or economic power. Canada makes no attempt to secure an alliance with a distant power in order to "balance" against the United States. Nor does Canada "bandwagon" with the United States, that is, have its independence of action limited by fear of US military force. Canada took in draft-evaders from the United States during the Viet-

nam War and often disagrees with the United States on matters of foreign policy such as Cuba. Canada is often in trade and even territorial disputes (over fishing grounds) with the United States. Both nations take for granted that the United States would never use its overwhelming military power to gain an advantage in those disputes. The United States would never move a destroyer into contested fishing grounds to remind Canada who was boss. Even a hint of a threat of military force by the United States would transform US-Canadian relations. The American vision of a liberal democratic international order extends the Canadian-American example to the rest of the world. In such an order, nations would not have to face the decision whether to balance against or bandwagon with the larger powers near them. The model is a New England civil society in which individual citizens can co-exist with wealthier, more influential fellow citizens as political equals under a rule of law which the town imposes upon itself through an open democratic politics. Families do not have to form alliances with other families or defer to the powerful to enjoy physical security.

The American vision makes a sharp distinction between physical security and economic security. Americans tolerate fierce economic competition between fellow Americans with only a minimal economic safety net for the losers. The justification is that, in the long run, such vigorous economic competition under conditions of physical security benefits everyone, rich and poor, more than any alternative system. Applying this vision to international relations, Americans argue for a free market to handle economic insecurity and a liberal democratic community of nations to deal with physical insecurity.

Over the last fifty years, the United States has done many things condemned by its own model of a liberal democratic order. It has supported many thuggish regimes around the world and has done many thuggish things itself. But, Americans say, they were engaged in mortal combat with a totalitarian state. That struggle is now over and mankind can build a new world order.

Americans see their ideal of a liberal democratic international order as the only way for nations finally to escape the deadly zero sum competition that

has characterized the rise and fall of nations throughout mankind's history. Americans are sincere when they talk not of "containing" China but of "engaging" China and "teaching" China the basic rules of behavior in international society.

From the Chinese point of view, such talk is, at best, naive. They believe that the only escape possible from deadly zero sum competition is for one nation to become the permanent benevolent hegemon. America's notion of a liberal democratic international order is seen by the Chinese as simply the rules of behavior imposed by a hegemonic America. When China becomes the hegemon, its rules will govern. The rules will call not for political equality among nations, but for the other nations of the world to be ranked hierarchically with China as the supervising and benevolent hegemon which must be obeyed if good order is to be maintained. The model comes from Chinese society where the powerful in a well-ordered society are responsible for both the physical and economic security of the weak and the weak in turn owe obedience and respect to the powerful. In the international sphere, the questions of physical and economic security are merged. The hegemon is responsible for both.

A tense peace between these two conflicting visions is possible now only because Americans believe that capitalism and the forces of a free market will convert the Chinese to democracy and to acceptance of the American vision of a liberal democratic international order. If Americans lose that belief, if they believe that China cannot be converted by peaceful means to liberal democracy, then confrontation and cold war are inevitable.

With this view of the fundamental conflict between American and Chinese conceptions of a peaceful, stable world, current tensions between China and the United States become easier to understand. A pattern emerges. *China continually overstimates American hostility to the rise of a powerful China and continually understimates American commitment to a liberal democratic international order.*

For example, China might think it a reasonable interim compromise if the United States were to concede to China dominant influence in East Asia in return for China's accepting American hegemony over the Western Hemisphere and a large influence in Europe. But this is a bargain the United States would never accept, because it runs counter to the American goal of a worldwide liberal democratic order in which there are no large non-democratic nations. The United States has long sought to prevent any non-democratic power from dominating East Asia. (In the 1930s, it was this essential American interest that Japan threatened when it invaded China.) Now that the United States-East Asia economic link drives global economic growth, the United States will be even less willing to tolerate even a temporary, regional hegemony by a non-democratic China.

Another example. Beijing sees Taiwan as a rebel province which must be brought to heel, by force if necessary. The United States would not be opposed to Taiwan's being unified with China if a democratic Taiwan consented to join China, but the United States will be implacably opposed to reunification by force. Hence current American efforts to help ensure that Taiwan can defend itself (although the United States is also warning Taiwan not to overplay its hand). Taiwan has much greater purchase on American support because it has become a democracy.

China is puzzled why Taiwan's peaceful unification with the mainland would be acceptable to the United States, but not unification by force. It is just this failure to understand the Americans that may lead to Chinese miscalculation. China was surprised when the United States responded by sending two aircraft carrier battle groups to the area in March 1996 after China tried to intimidate Taiwan by firing missiles in its vicinity during Taiwan's presidential election campaign. China's leaders understand the calculus of strategic interest very well. But they do not seem to understand the importance the Americans attach to peaceful international change as one of the permanent rules of a worldwide democratic order.

The United States also sees a link, which China refuses to acknowledge,

between the Taiwan issue and a peaceful regional order in the Asia-Pacific. Taiwan's forced reunification with the mainland would intimidate the region's smaller countries into acquiescing to Chinese power. Others, such as Japan, Australia, and Indonesia, would likely combine to resist Chinese domination. The United States would then be drawn into a defensive alliance with these countries against China. A new cold war in Asia would result. The United States believes that it is in the interest of all Asia-Pacific countries, China included, that the unification of Taiwan with the mainland take place with Taiwan's consent.

America is willing to grant China much more but also much less than China realizes. China's failure to understand the United States means that China will continue both to overestimate American resistance to the rise of a powerful China, and underestimate American commitment to a liberal democratic international order.

Prospects are for growing tension between the United States and the non-democratic regime in Beijing. In the view of Americans, the tension can be resolved only by Beijing's acceptance of democracy and a liberal democratic international order. In China's view, the tension can be resolved only by China's becoming the benevolent world hegemon, or at least the benevolent hegemon in East Asia.

The Americans see their task as changing Chinese notions of relations among nations, converting the Chinese to the American vision of a liberal democratic order. The task faced by China, from the Chinese point of view, is to resist those ideas until it has the strength to put the United States in its proper place. Both nations are so large that it is unlikely that the winner will be determined by military conquest. It will in the end be a competition for the hearts and minds of the young. Which society will be seen as the best model for the future by the youth of the world?

The domestic problems of each society take on an important international dimension. The American diplomat and scholar, George Kennan, often made

the point that America's real power was as a society that others wanted to emulate. If America solves its domestic problems of racial division and economic inequality, if it continues to lead the world economically, if it can excite the most imaginative people and provide them scope to realize their dreams, then it can win.

If China is inspired and not paralyzed by its past, and solves its problems of a primitive and corrupt political and legal system (and does so non-democratically—a difficult assignment), and continues its startling economic growth, becoming a model first for the other nations of Asia, then for the rest of the world, then it can win.

The major advantage the United States enjoys is that democracy seems to be the better theory in several "objective" ways. It is the best way of turning old elites out to pasture when they no longer serve the national interest. It allows for more decentralization of policy making and administration, and thus permits quicker adaptation to changing circumstances than more hierarchical societies can manage. It taps into sources of individual and small group energy that are unavailable to more hierarchical societies.

The American vision of the future is also more palatable to the Chinese than the Chinese vision of the future is to Americans. The Chinese vision of the world has Americans (and all other peoples) supervised by a wise and benevolent China. But imagine China if America wins. China would be the world's largest, wealthiest, and most powerful liberal democracy. Japan would have the same relation to China as Canada now does to the United States. The United States would, compared to China, be the equivalent of contemporary France compared to the present United States. Only India might be a nation of equivalent influence and power in a liberal democratic international order.

It is no wonder that China's leaders worry about "peaceful evolution," the danger that the Chinese people, especially the youth, will be won over to liberal democracy. The Chinese hierarchical paradigm has only one success-

ful example outside of China itself—Singapore. And Singapore is only a city state.

China, in order to have a chance to win the long cultural struggle ahead, needs to succeed with Hong Kong. For the first time in history, a leading post-industrial financial center has been placed under an authoritarian regime, For China to win, Hong Kong must not simply survive, it must thrive. Hong Kong is more a test of Chinese economics that of Chinese political ideals. In part this is true because the old Hong Kong was a model of economic vitality, not a political model. More fundamentally, the main appeal of the Chinese model in competition with the American model has always been economic well-being (combined with social order) rather than political freedom. Singapore is a powerful model because of its economic success combined with social orderliness. The Chinese model does not claim to deliver as much individual freedom as its American competitor. A lackluster economic performance in Hong Kong will have more impact on China's attractiveness to the other nations of Asia and to the world than failure to meet American standards of respect for the civil rights of individuals. The next serious test of the Chinese view of the world will be Hong Kong's economy.

II

Given the above, what should United States policy be towards China? The Clinton administration has not yet articulated a coherent China policy to the American people, yet its actions over the past two years indicate that a sound policy is emerging. Such a policy should have at least two components.

First, Americans should guard against an aggressiveness toward China that will alienate the Japanese, the Koreans, and others who must live in China's shadow. China should not be allowed to assume the mantle of peacemaker in comparison with a bellicose United States. American talk of "containing" China gives the Chinese an unearned advantage. The Clinton administration's reluctance to go along with the current enthusiasm for China-bashing in America is a good example of the first part of a coherent policy, as was its successful push in Congress for most favored nation treatment for China.

Second, the Americans must make it clear by word and deed that they can be depended on by countries that wish to balance against China. Although America's long-term goal is an East Asia and a world in which nations need not choose to balance or to bandwagon, the reality in East Asia is that China will for the next few decades present the nations around it with such a choice. The sending of two American carrier groups toward Taiwanese waters when China lobbed missiles near Taiwan in March of 1996 is a good example of the second part of a sound policy.

Fortunately for the United States, the states most likely to balance against China—Japan, Australia, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia—are island nations that can rely on maritime protection. They are most likely to balance in part because they can be defended by American maritime power. Fortunately also, Japan is the most democratic state in Asia, and Taiwan and the Philippines are countries with developing democratic traditions. Indonesia is a good distance away from China and may in the future become more democratic. It is the most powerful state in ASEAN, and the largest Muslim nation in the world, yet can be counted to balance against China unless demonized by the United States. A reunified Korea is likely to be a swing state. Although it would likely be a democracy, it must share a long land border with China, and has always feared Japan.

United States policy should let the Chinese make the mistakes that a non-democratic nationalistic China is likely to make such as the lobbing of the missiles near Taiwan. The United States should respond quietly and effectively, as it did with the carrier groups, in a way that assures the states likely to balance against China that the US will use what power it has to protect them.

Americans need to be realistic about their actual military power. It is mainly naval and air power. It is unlikely that American ground forces will remain in Korea following unification. Without American troops in Korea to protect, keeping American ground forces in Okinawa will be hard to justify politically both in Japan and in the United States. In the long run, the greatest reassurance for the nations willing to balance against China is the

power that America is most likely to have the political will to use, its naval and air power. The possibility of using American ground forces in anything but a defense against a North Korean invasion is an empty threat and America should not make empty threats, especially in East Asia.

American often overestimate their economic power with respect to China. Withdrawing MFN status would have been a costly blunder, destroying any possibility of a peaceful undermining of the power of the current Chinese regime, and alienating virtually all of America's allies. The administration is right to see the best use of America's economic power as one of drawing China into the liberal international trading order. That will not by itself ensure that China will become democratic, but it will help, especially if a strong but quiet security policy leaves China no opportunities to profit from an aggressive nationalism featuring military threats. The current Chinese regime has lost communism as its justification for being. If aggressive nationalism is not a viable option, the regime may be forced back on consent of the governed to legitimate its rule. The American hope that a rising China will become democratic and a willing participant in a liberal democratic international order may be realized.