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**Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics**

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THE UNITED States and the People’s Republic of China are locked in a quiet but increasingly intense struggle for power and influence, not only in Asia, but around the world. And in spite of what many earnest and well-intentioned commentators seem to believe, the nascent Sino-American rivalry is not merely the result of misperceptions or mistaken policies; it is driven instead by forces that are deeply rooted in the shifting structure of the international system and in the very different domestic political regimes of the two Pacific powers.

Throughout history, relations between dominant and rising states have been uneasy—and often violent. Established powers tend to regard themselves as the defenders of an international order that they helped to create and from which they continue to benefit; rising powers feel constrained, even cheated, by the status quo and struggle against it to take what they think is rightfully theirs. Indeed, this story line, with its Shakespearean overtones of youth and age, vigor and decline, is among the oldest in recorded history. As far back as the fifth century BC the great Greek historian Thucydides began his study of the Peloponnesian War with the deceptively simple observation that the war’s deepest, truest cause was “the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.”

The fact that the U.S.-China relationship is competitive, then, is simply no surprise. But these countries are not just any two great powers: Since the end of the Cold War the United States has been the richest and most powerful nation in the world; China is, by contrast, the state whose capabilities have been growing most rapidly. America is still “number one,” but China is fast gaining ground. The stakes are about as high as they can get, and the potential for conflict particularly fraught.

At least insofar as the dominant powers are concerned, rising states tend to be troublemakers. As a nation’s capabilities grow, its leaders generally define their interests more expansively and seek a greater degree of influence over what is going on around them. This means that those in ascendance typically attempt not only to secure their borders but also to reach out beyond them, taking steps to ensure access to markets, materials and transportation routes; to protect their citizens far from home; to defend their foreign friends and allies; to promulgate their religious or ideological beliefs; and, in general, to have what they consider to be their rightful say in the affairs of their region and of the wider world.

As they begin to assert themselves, ascendant states typically feel impelled to challenge territorial boundaries, international institutions and hierarchies of prestige that were put in place when they were still relatively weak. Like Japan in the late nineteenth century, or Germany at the turn of the twentieth, rising powers want their place in the sun. This, of course, is what brings them into conflict with the established great powers—the so-called status quo states—who are the architects, principal beneficiaries and main defenders of any existing international system.

The resulting clash of interests between the two sides has seldom been resolved peacefully. Recognizing the growing threat to their position, dominant powers (or a coalition of status quo states) have occasionally tried to attack and destroy a competitor before it can grow strong enough to become a threat. Others—hoping to avoid war—have taken the opposite approach: attempting to appease potential challengers, they look for ways to satisfy their demands and ambitions and seek to incorporate them peacefully into the existing international order.

But however sincere, these efforts have almost always ended in failure. Sometimes the reason clearly lies in the demands of the rising state. As was true of Adolf Hitler’s Germany, an aggressor may have ambitions that are so extensive as to be impossible for the status quo powers to satisfy without effectively consigning themselves to servitude or committing national suicide. Even when the demands being made of them are less onerous, the dominant states are often either reluctant to make concessions, thereby fueling the frustrations and resentments of the rising power, or too eager to do so, feeding its ambitions and triggering a spiral of escalating demands. Successful policies of appeasement are conceivable in theory but in practice have proven devilishly difficult to implement. This is why periods of transition, when a new, ascending power begins to overtake the previously dominant state, have so often been marked by war.

WHILE THEY are careful not to say so directly, China’s current rulers seem intent on establishing their country as the preponderant power in East Asia, and perhaps in Asia writ large. The goal is to make China the strongest and most influential nation in its neighborhood: a country capable of deterring attacks and threats; resolving disputes over territory and resources according to its preferences; coercing or persuading others to accede to its wishes on issues ranging from trade and investment to alliance and third-party basing arrangements to the treatment of ethnic Chinese populations; and, at least in some cases, affecting the character and composition of their governments. Beijing may not seek conquest or direct physical control over its surroundings, but, despite repeated claims to the contrary, it does seek a form of regional hegemony.

Such ambitions hardly make China unique. Throughout history, there has been a strong correlation between the rapid growth of a state’s wealth and potential power, the geographic scope of its interests, the intensity and variety of the perceived threats to those interests, and the desire to expand military capabilities and exert greater influence in order to defend them. Growth tends to encourage expansion, which leads to insecurity, which feeds the desire for more power. This pattern is well established in the modern age. Looking back over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Samuel Huntington finds that

every other major power, Britain and France, Germany and Japan, the United States and the Soviet Union, has engaged in outward expansion, assertion, and imperialism coincidental with or immediately following the years in which it went through rapid industrialization and economic growth.

As for China, Huntington concludes, “no reason exists to think that the acquisition of economic and military power will not have comparable effects” on its policies.

Of course the past behavior of other states is suggestive, but it is hardly a definitive guide to the future. Just because other powers have acted in certain ways does not necessarily mean that China will do the same. Perhaps, in a world of global markets and nuclear weapons, the fears and ambitions that motivated previous rising powers are no longer as potent. Perhaps China’s leaders have learned from history that overly assertive rising powers typically stir resentment and opposition.

But China is not just any rising power, and its history provides an additional reason for believing that it will seek some form of regional preponderance. It is a nation with a long and proud past as the leading center of East Asian civilization and a more recent and less glorious experience of domination and humiliation at the hands of foreign invaders. As a number of historians have recently pointed out, China is not so much “rising” as it is *returning* to the position of regional preeminence that it once held and which its leaders and many of its people still regard as natural and appropriate. The desire to reestablish a Sino-centric system would be consistent with what journalist Martin Jacques describes as

an overwhelming assumption on the part of the Chinese that their natural position lies at the epicentre of East Asia, that their civilization has no equals in the region, and that their rightful position, as bestowed by history, will at some point be restored in the future.

Conservative scholar Yan Xuetong puts the matter succinctly: the Chinese people are proud of their country’s glorious past and believe its fall from preeminence to be “a historical mistake which they should correct.” If anything, the “century of humiliation” during which China was weak and vulnerable adds urgency to its pursuit of power. For a nation with China’s history, regaining a position of unchallengeable strength is not seen as simply a matter of pride but rather as an essential precondition for continued growth, security and, quite possibly, survival.

DEEP-SEATED patterns of power politics are thus driving the United States and China toward mistrust and competition, if not necessarily toward open conflict. But this is not all there is to the story. In contrast to what some realists claim, ideology matters at least as much as power in determining the course of relations among nations. The fact that America is a liberal democracy while China remains under authoritarian rule is a significant additional impetus for rivalry, an obstacle to stable, cooperative relations, and a source of mutual hostility and mistrust in its own right.

Relations between democracies and nondemocracies are always conducted in what political theorist Michael Doyle describes as an “atmosphere of suspicion,” in part because of “the perception by liberal states that nonliberal states are in a permanent state of aggression against their own people.” Democracies, in short, regard nondemocracies as less than legitimate because they do not enjoy the freely given consent of their own people. In their heart of hearts, most self-governing citizens simply do not believe that all states are created equal or that they are entitled to the same degree of respect regardless of how they are ruled.

Seen in this light, disputes between the United States and China over such issues as censorship and religious freedom are not just superficial irritants that can be dissolved or wished away. They are instead symptomatic of much deeper difficulties. To most Americans, China’s human-rights violations are not only intrinsically wrong, they are also powerful indicators of the morally distasteful nature of the Beijing regime. While the United States may be able to do business with such a government on at least some issues, the possibility of a warm, trusting and stable relationship is remote to say the least.

Democracies also tend to regard nondemocracies as inherently untrustworthy and dangerously prone to external aggression. Because of the secrecy in which their operations are cloaked, the intentions, and often the full extent of the military capabilities of nondemocratic states, are difficult to discern. In recent years, U.S. officials have pressed their Chinese counterparts to be more “transparent” about defense programs, but there is little expectation that these pleas will be answered in any meaningful way. And even if Beijing were to suddenly unleash a flood of facts and figures, American analysts would regard them with profound skepticism, scrutinizing the data for signs of deception and disinformation. And they would be right to do so; the centralized, tightly controlled Chinese government is far better situated to carry off such schemes than its open, divided and leaky American counterpart.

Their capacity for secrecy also makes it easier for nondemocracies to use force without warning. Since 1949, China’s rulers have shown a particular penchant for deception and surprise attacks. (Think of Beijing’s entry into the Korean War in December 1950, or its attack on India in October 1962.) This tendency may have deep roots in Chinese strategic culture extending back to Sun Tzu, but it is also entirely consistent with the character of its current domestic regime. Indeed, for most American analysts, the authoritarian nature of China’s government is a far greater concern than its culture. If China were a democracy, the deep social and cultural foundations of its strategic and political behavior might be little changed, but American military planners would be much less worried that it might someday attempt a lightning strike on U.S. forces and bases in the western Pacific.

Such fears of aggression are heightened by an awareness that anxiety over a lack of legitimacy at home can cause nondemocratic governments to try to deflect popular frustration and discontent toward external enemies. Some Western observers worry, for example, that if China’s economy falters its rulers will try to blame foreigners and even manufacture crises with Taiwan, Japan or the United States in order to rally their people and redirect the population’s anger. Whatever Beijing’s intent, such confrontations could easily spiral out of control. Democratic leaders are hardly immune to the temptation of foreign adventures. However, because the stakes for them are so much lower (being voted out of office rather than being overthrown and imprisoned, or worse), they are less likely to take extreme risks to retain their hold on power.

But the mistrust between Washington and Beijing is not a one-way street—and with good reason. China’s current rulers do not see themselves as they once did, as the leaders of a global revolutionary movement, yet they do believe that they are engaged in an ideological struggle, albeit one in which, until very recently, they have been almost entirely on the defensive. While they regard Washington’s professions of concern for human rights and individual liberties as cynical and opportunistic, China’s leaders do not doubt that the United States is motivated by genuine ideological fervor. As seen from Beijing, Washington is a dangerous, crusading, liberal, quasi-imperialist power that will not rest until it imposes its views and its way of life on the entire planet. Anyone who does not grasp this need only read the speeches of U.S. officials, with their promises to enlarge the sphere of democracy and rid the world of tyranny.

In fact, because ideology inclines the United States to be more suspicious and hostile toward China than it would be for strategic reasons alone, it also tends to reinforce Washington’s willingness to help other democracies that feel threatened by Chinese power, even if this is not what a pure realpolitik calculation of its interests might seem to demand. Thus the persistence—indeed the deepening—of American support for Taiwan during the 1990s cannot be explained without reference to the fact that the island was evolving from an authoritarian bastion of anti-Communism to a liberal democracy. Severing the last U.S. ties to Taipei would remove a major source of friction with China and a potential cause of war. Such a move might even be conceivable if Taiwan still appeared to many Americans as it did in the 1970s, as an oppressive, corrupt dictatorship. But the fact that Taiwan is now seen as a genuine (if flawed) democracy will make it extremely difficult for Washington to ever willingly cut it adrift.

Having watched America topple the Soviet Union through a combination of confrontation and subversion, since the end of the Cold War China’s strategists have feared that Washington intends to do the same to them. This belief colors Beijing’s perceptions of virtually every aspect of U.S. policy toward it, from enthusiasm for economic engagement to efforts to encourage the development of China’s legal system. It also shapes the leadership’s assessments of America’s activities across Asia, which Beijing believes are aimed at encircling it with pro-U.S. democracies, and informs China’s own policies to counter that influence.

As China emerges onto the world stage it is becoming a source of inspiration and material support for embattled authoritarians in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America as well as Asia—antidemocratic holdouts who looked to be headed for the garbage heap of history after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Americans may have long believed that growth requires freedom of choice in the economic realm (which is presumed to lead ineluctably to the expansion of political liberties), but, at least for now, the mainland has successfully blended authoritarian rule with market-driven economics.

If it comes to be seen as offering an alternative model for development, China’s continued growth under authoritarian rule could complicate and slow America’s long-standing efforts to promote the spread of liberal political institutions around the world.

Fear that the United States has regime change on the brain is also playing an increasing role in the crafting of China’s policies toward countries in other parts of the world. If the United States can pressure and perhaps depose the current leaders of Venezuela, Zimbabwe and Iran, it may be emboldened in its efforts to do something similar to China. By helping those regimes survive, Beijing wins friends and allies for future struggles, weakens the perception that democracy is on the march and deflects some of America’s prodigious energies away from itself. Washington’s efforts to isolate, coerce and possibly undermine dictatorial “rogue” states (such as Iran and North Korea) have already been complicated, if not defeated, by Beijing’s willingness to engage with them. At the same time, of course, China’s actions also heighten concern in Washington about its motivations and intentions, thereby adding more fuel to the competitive fire.

IT MAY well be that any rising power in Beijing’s geopolitical position would seek substantial influence in its own immediate neighborhood. It may also be true that, in light of its history, and regardless of how it is ruled, China will be especially concerned with asserting itself and being acknowledged by its neighbors as the first among equals. But it is the character of the nation’s domestic political system that will ultimately be decisive in determining precisely how it defines its external objectives and how it goes about pursuing them.

As Ross Terrill of Harvard’s Fairbank Center points out, when we speak of “China’s” intentions or strategy, we are really talking about the aims and plans of today’s top leaders or, as he describes them, “the nine male engineers who make up the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party.” Everything we know of these men suggests that they are motivated above all else by their belief in the necessity of preserving CCP rule. This is, in one sense, a matter of unadulterated self-interest. Today’s leaders and their families enjoy privileges and opportunities that are denied others in Chinese society and which flow directly from their proximity to the sources of political power. The end of the Communist Party’s decades-long reign would have immediate, painful and perhaps even fatal consequences for those at the top of the system. Rising stars who hope one day to occupy these positions and even junior officials with more modest ambitions will presumably make similar calculations. This convergence of personal interests and a sense of shared destiny give the party-state a cohesion that it would otherwise lack. Party members know that if they do not hang together they may very well hang separately—and this knowledge informs their thinking on every issue they face.

But the motivation to continue CCP rule is not rooted solely in self-interest. The leadership is deeply sincere in its belief in the party’s past achievements and future indispensability. It was the CCP, after all, that rescued China from foreign invaders, delivered it from a century of oppression and humiliation, and lifted it back into the ranks of the world’s great powers. In the eyes of its leaders, and some portion of the Chinese people, these accomplishments in themselves give the CCP unique moral authority and legitimize its rule.

Looking forward, party officials believe that they are all that stands between continued stability, prosperity, progress and an unstoppable ascent to greatness on the one hand and a return to chaos and weakness on the other. An analysis of the leaked secret personnel files of the current “fourth generation” of Chinese leaders (with Mao Tse-tung, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin leading the first three) by Sinologists Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley concludes that, on this question, there is no evidence of dissension or doubt. President Hu Jintao, his colleagues and their likely successors are aware of the numerous internal and external challenges they face, but they are confident that they, and they alone, can find the solutions that will be needed to keep their country moving forward and enable it to achieve its destiny. Indeed, they believe that it is precisely the magnitude and complexity of the problems confronting China that makes their continued rule essential.

The party’s desire to retain power shapes every aspect of national policy. When it comes to external affairs, it means that Beijing’s ultimate aim is to “make the world safe for authoritarianism,” or at least for continued one-party rule in China. Over the last several decades this focus on regime security has led, first of all, to an emphasis on preserving the international conditions necessary for continued economic growth. The party’s ability to orchestrate rapid improvements in incomes and personal welfare is its most tangible accomplishment of the past thirty years and the source of its strongest claim to the gratitude and loyalty of the Chinese people. Economic growth, my Princeton colleague Thomas Christensen argues, “provides satisfaction and distraction to the population, and, therefore garners domestic support for the Party (or at least reduces active opposition to the Party).” Growth also generates revenues that the regime can use to “buy off opposition and to channel funds to poorer regions and ethnic minority areas to try to prevent violent uprisings.”

As China has grown richer and stronger, the regime’s pursuit of security has also led it to seek an increasing measure of control over the world outside its borders. This outward push has both offensive and defensive motivations. As the steward of national greatness, the party has the responsibility of returning China to its rightful place at the center of Asia. The visible deference of others will provide evidence of the regime’s success in this regard and will help to reinforce its legitimacy at home. Especially if economic growth should falter, “standing up” to traditional enemies and resolving the Taiwan issue and other disputes on Beijing’s terms are likely to become increasingly important parts of the CCP’s strategy for retaining its hold on power. China’s leaders believe that the stronger their country appears abroad, the stronger their regime will be at home.

Conversely, the appearance of weakness or the widespread perception that the nation has been defeated or humiliated could be extremely dangerous to the party’s prospects for continued rule. Underlying concerns about its legitimacy make the regime more sensitive to slights and setbacks, and even more determined to deter challenges and to avoid defeat, than it might otherwise be. The best insurance against such risks is for China to accumulate an overwhelming preponderance of power in its neighborhood.

Moreover, the CCP’s hypersensitivity to what it sees as “separatism” is a direct result of its belief that it must retain tight central control in all places and at all times. Pleas for greater autonomy from Tibet or Xinjiang are thus seen as deadly threats to national unity and hence to continued Communist Party rule. The regime believes that if it loosens its grip, even a little, the entire country will spring apart. China’s leaders see the need to develop sufficient strength to deter its neighbors from providing aid and comfort to separatist groups and will build the capabilities to intervene directly to stop them, should that become necessary.

Even as it grows stronger and, in certain respects, more self-confident, the CCP continues to dread ideological contamination. Pliant, like-minded states along its borders are far more likely to help Beijing deal with this danger than flourishing liberal democracies with strong ties to the West. The desire to forestall “peaceful evolution” at home gives the regime another compelling reason to want to shape the political development of its neighbors.

To sum up: China’s current rulers do not seek preponderance solely because they are the leaders of a rising great power or simply because they are Chinese. Their desire for dominance and control is in large measure a by-product of the type of political system over which they preside. A strong liberal-democratic China would certainly seek a leading role in its region and perhaps an effective veto over developments that it saw as inimical to its interests. But it would also be less fearful of internal instability, less threatened by the presence of democratic neighbors, and less prone to seek validation at home through the domination and subordination of others.

THOUGH NOT everyone is convinced, it is likely that a more democratic China would ultimately create a more peaceful, less war-prone environment in Asia. In the view of some realists, domestic reforms will only make Beijing richer, stronger and hence a more potent competitor without deflecting it from its desire to dominate East Asia and settle scores with some of its neighbors. It is undoubtedly true that even if, in the long run, China becomes a stable, peaceful democracy, its passage will prove rocky. The opening of the nation’s political system to dissent and debate is likely to introduce an element of instability into its foreign policy as new voices are heard and aspiring leaders vie for popular support. As one observer, economist David Hale, ruefully points out: “An



authoritarian China has been highly predictable. A more open and democratic China could produce new uncertainties about both domestic policy and international relations.”

Nationalism, perhaps in its most virulent and aggressive form, is one factor likely to play a prominent role in shaping the foreign policy of a liberalizing Middle Kingdom. Thanks to the spread of the Internet and the relaxation of restraints on at least some forms of “patriotic” political expression, the current regime already finds itself subject to criticism whenever it takes what some “netizens” regard as an overly accommodating stance toward Japan, Taiwan or the United States. Beijing has sought at times to stir up patriotic sentiment, but, fearful that anger at foreigners could all too easily be turned against the party, the regime has also gone to great lengths to keep popular passions in check. A democratically elected government might be far less inhibited. U.S.-based political scientist Fei-Ling Wang argues that a post-Communist regime would actually be more forceful in asserting its sovereignty over Taiwan, Tibet and the South China Sea. As he explains:

A “democratic” regime in Beijing, free from the debilitating concerns for its own survival but likely driven by popular emotions, could make the rising Chinese power a much more assertive, impatient, belligerent, even aggressive force, at least during the unstable period of fast ascendance to the ranks of a world-class power.

The last proviso is key. Even those who are most confident of the long-term pacifying effects of democratization recognize the possibility of a turbulent transition. In his book *China’s Democratic Future*, Bruce Gilley acknowledges that democratic revolutions in other countries have often led to bursts of external aggression and he notes that, since the start of the twentieth century, pro-democracy movements in China have also been highly nationalistic. Despite these precedents, Gilley predicts that, after an interval of perhaps a decade, a transformed nation will settle into more stable and cooperative relationships with the United States as well as with its democratic neighbors.

Such an outcome is by no means certain, of course, and would be contingent upon events and interactions that are difficult to anticipate and even harder to control. If initial frictions between a fledgling democracy and its better established counterparts are mishandled, resulting in actual armed conflict, history could spin off in very different and far less promising directions than if they are successfully resolved. Assuming the transition can be navigated without disaster, however, there are good reasons to believe that relations will improve with the passage of time. One Chinese advocate of political reform, Liu Junning, summarizes the prospects well. Whereas a “nationalistic and authoritarian China will be an emerging threat,” a liberal, democratic China will ultimately prove “a constructive partner.”

This expectation is rooted in more than mere wishful thinking. As the values and institutions of liberal democracy become more firmly entrenched, there will begin to be open and politically meaningful debate and real competition over national goals and the allocation of national resources. Aspiring leaders and opinion makers preoccupied with prestige, honor, power and score settling will have to compete with others who emphasize the virtues of international stability, cooperation, reconciliation and the promotion of social welfare. The demands of the military and its industrial allies will be counterbalanced, at least to some degree, by groups who favor spending more on education, health care and the elderly. The assertive, hypernationalist version of China’s history and its grievances will be challenged by accounts that acknowledge the culpability of the Communist regime in repressing minorities and refusing to seek compromise on questions of sovereignty. A leadership obsessed with its own survival and with countering perceived threats from foreign powers will be replaced by a government secure in its legitimacy and with no cause to fear that the world’s democracies are seeking to encircle and overthrow it.

A democratic China would find it easier to get along with Japan, India and South Korea, among others. The trust and mutual respect that eventually grows up between democracies, and the diminished fear that one will use force against another, should increase the odds of attaining negotiated settlements of outstanding disputes over borders, offshore islands and resources. A democratic government in Beijing would also stand a better chance of achieving a mutually acceptable resolution to its sixty-year standoff with Taiwan. In contrast to today’s CCP rulers, a popularly elected mainland regime would have less to gain from keeping this conflict alive, it would be more likely to show respect for the preferences of another democratic government, and it would be more attractive to the Taiwanese people as a partner in some kind of federated arrangement that would satisfy the desires and ease the fears of both sides.

For as long as China continues to be governed as it is today, its growing strength will pose a deepening challenge to American interests. If they want to deter aggression, discourage coercion and preserve a plural, open order, Washington and its friends and allies are going to have to work harder, and to cooperate more closely, in order to maintain a favorable balance of regional power. In the long run, the United States can learn to live with a democratic China as the dominant power in East Asia, much as Great Britain came to accept America as the preponderant power in the Western Hemisphere. Until that day, Washington and Beijing are going to remain locked in an increasingly intense struggle for mastery in Asia.

# Andrew Nathan Responds

## The Great Debate

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June 22, 2011

#### [Debating a Democratic China](http://nationalinterest.org/greatdebate/debating-democratic-china-5509)

* [Aaron Friedberg's Position](http://nationalinterest.org/greatdebate/hegemony-chinese-characteristics-5513)
* [Andrew Nathan Responds](http://nationalinterest.org/greatdebate/reality-trumps-ideology-beijing-5511)
* [Minxin Pei Responds](http://nationalinterest.org/greatdebate/peace-democracy-nightmares-5512)

China is not one of those regimes, like Iran, whose commitment to a world-changing ideology causes it to pursue foreign policies that are damaging to its own security. Instead, the Middle Kingdom of today is a realist power, concerned with regime survival, territorial integrity, and protecting access to resources and markets.

This means that a change of regime in China is unlikely to bring a fundamental change in the country’s foreign-policy objectives. Democratic rulers in Beijing would still want to preserve control over Tibet and Xinjiang and assert Chinese authority over Taiwan because these territories have fundamental strategic importance for the defense of China. A democratic leadership would also want to press its claims to valuable strategic and economic assets in the East China and South China Seas; build up its navy so that it can participate in the defense of the sea-lanes that are crucial to the country’s prosperity; project influence in crucial neighboring regions like Central Asia, Korea and Southeast Asia; maintain the military capability to deter attacks; exercise influence in the far-flung territories where it acquires resources and sells goods; and in general, pursue much the same national-security agenda as the authoritarian regime follows today. Indeed, [as Friedberg points out](http://nationalinterest.org/article/hegemony-chinese-characteristics-5439%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), a democratic China may be in some respects even a little harder to deal with than the current regime because of its responsiveness to public opinion, which is likely to be nationalistic.

The big difference between today’s China and a democratic China would not be in the security imperatives that geography imposes on anyone who rules this piece of territory but in one of the key threats that the government now faces: the Western challenge to the existence of the regime. It is not only that current Chinese leaders believe that the United States intends to “topple [their regime] through a combination of confrontation and subversion.” It is also that, as Friedberg says, “[American] ideology inclines the United States to be more suspicious and hostile toward China than it would be for strategic reasons alone.” He puts the point even more clearly in his forthcoming book, A Contest for Supremacy, from which his essay is drawn: “Stripped of diplomatic niceties, the ultimate aim of the American strategy [toward China] is to hasten a revolution, albeit a peaceful one, that will sweep away China’s one-party authoritarian state and leave a liberal democracy in its place.”

That being so, it is natural that the Chinese leaders behave suspiciously. After all, regime security is part of the security agenda of any government—even of illegitimate regimes. As long as the West wants to change the Chinese political system, Beijing’s rulers will, as Friedberg says, quite rationally “believe that they are engaged in an ideological struggle, albeit one in which, until very recently, they have been almost entirely on the defensive.”

I therefore agree with Friedberg’s conclusion that a more democratic China would have a more trusting relationship with the United States and would contribute to a more peaceful Asia, but for what I think are different reasons. The improvement in relations would not come about because China would change its security agenda, but because Washington would have achieved its goal—call it strategic or call it ideological—of regime change in Beijing. That may make the issues of Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Korea, Iran, China-Japan relations, the naval balance, trade deficits, currency manipulation and others easier to handle. But it will not change Beijing’s interests in these issues.

# Minxin Pei Responds

## The Great Debate

[Minxin Pei](http://nationalinterest.org/profile/minxin-pei)

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June 22, 2011

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The question whether a democratized China would be a more peaceful great power has been raised before. In the current issue of The National Interest, professor [Aaron Friedberg’s essay](http://nationalinterest.org/article/hegemony-chinese-characteristics-5439%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) discusses this question so exhaustively that there is very little to add. However, an analysis of how domestic politics would change in China if it became a democracy reveals why a Beijing ruled by the people would not be a threat to its neighbors or the West.

One of the most important changes democratization would bring to China is a new civil-military relationship. This issue has not received adequate attention in discussions about how civilian control of the military influences a country’s external behavior. In the case of China, it is a critical factor. As we all know, at the moment, the Chinese military is under the control of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is not a national army, which would be politically neutral and loyal to the Chinese state not to a particular political party. The mission statement of the People’s Liberation Army is revealing: its top priority is to defend the political monopoly of the CCP. Understandably, the CCP has made it abundantly clear that it will not allow the military to become a national army. If China became democratic, the Chinese armed forces would be much less subject to political manipulation and more loyal to national interests. This fundamental change alone would reduce the likelihood of conflict between China and its neighbors.

A democratic China would also have real political checks and balances. Opposition parties and civil society in a liberal democracy play an important part in constraining the freedom of action of the ruling party in national-security policy. At the moment, the CCP’s national-security policy is completely unchallenged. But that would change if China had well-organized opposition parties and strong nongovernmental organizations that could force the leadership to justify and seek public support for its agenda.

The military establishment itself would be placed under greater scrutiny in a competitive political system as well. Opposition parties and NGOs would raise questions about defense expenditures and force the military to be more transparent regarding its doctrine and capabilities.

Democratic institutions would also make the national-security-policy-making process more open and accessible to different interest groups. As a result, advocates for peace and cooperation would have the ability to rally public opinion and influence policy. Taken together, these institutional checks and balances would make the ruling party and the military more accountable.

No doubt, democratization in China would bring an enormous expansion of press freedoms and would fundamentally change the political dynamics of public discourse on national-security issues. At the moment, the lack of freedom of the press makes it very difficult for the Chinese public to gain a well-informed view of issues critical to the country’s national security. Take the Taiwan question, for example. The mainland’s official press coverage of Taiwan is so distorted that it is impossible for ordinary Chinese people to have a decent understanding of the history of the matter, its complexity and the risks of a military conflict. If China were a liberal democracy, press freedom would allow far more open and objective discussion of foreign-policy issues. Hawkish views would be countered by more moderate voices. Nationalist sentiments would be constrained by more cosmopolitan perspectives. And dangers of an aggressive foreign policy would be readily apparent.

The only caveat about the prospect of a more peaceful democratic China is that the process of democratization within the country could be violent. The research on the connection between democratization and war shows that transitions to democracy are likely to lead to conflict. In the Chinese case, such risks are highest in two ethnic-minority areas, Tibet and Xinjiang. Depending on the transition scenario, a collapse of CCP rule inside China could very likely inspire the hard-core secessionists in these two restive regions to declare independence. Under this scenario, Taiwan could follow suit. Such developments are almost certain to elicit a military response from Beijing, regardless of whether the democrats or the autocrats are in power.

However, should China’s democratic transition unfold in a gradual, managed and peaceful way, these nightmarish scenarios may be avoided. Such a transition is more likely if the CCP takes the initiative to start the democratization process from a position of strength. Unfortunately, at the moment the CCP shows no sign of doing so. That means Washington can do little besides wait to see whether history will vindicate the application of the democratic-peace theory in the Chinese case.

China 2025: Keynote I: China’s Rise: Strategic Implications for Asia

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| Speaker: | [Aaron L. Friedberg](http://www.cfr.org/experts/world/aaron-l-friedberg/b1561), Professor, Politics And International Affairs, Princeton University |
| Presider: | [Simon Tay](http://www.cfr.org/experts/world/simon-tay/b15722), Bernard Schwarz Fellow, Asia Society |

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<http://www.cfr.org/china/china-2025-keynote-chinas-rise-strategic-implications-asia-video/p20543>

SIMON TAY: Good morning everyone. I'm Simon Tay. It is my pleasure to be here, and thank you very much Liz and Randy for inviting me.

I want to say a few words before I introduce the speaker Aaron Friedberg. First, I want to say that my perspective -- I'm very honored to be here, but my perspective is a bit different from others. I'm from Southeast Asia, I'm a Singaporean Chinese. But really, I look mainly at ASEAN. Therefore, to be here at largely a U.S.-China discussion, I think, about the future of China is an interesting perspective.

It seems to me that sometimes we fluctuate. I've been at Shangri-La Dialogues in Singapore where the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has also been and come to the table and talked about defense spending by China, even though this country spends more money than China does. On the other hand, the last time I was in Washington, D.C. was just the week before the start of G-2 financial insurgency meeting, which I thought was a very interesting and different approach -- though started at the end of the Bush administration -- an interesting approach by the Obama administration.

I've also recently been in Beijing where officials said to me - very interesting - "President Obama. He seems to be very nice to us -- when is he going to get tough?" So, I think that this relationship -- the view of America about the strategic implications of China's rise or China's future will be very interesting.

The speaker, Aaron Friedberg, is the right man to get us off on the discussion to look at the future of this strategic question. Both a scholar at Princeton, but also with experience in administration, Aaron Friedberg I think will give us a great insight into his views.

For myself sitting in ASEAN, I would say the last decade has been marked by a great effort by China to move from a situation where we were alarmed by them to one where in many papers we were charmed by them. However, I think in the last few years, this question of charm has again shifted somewhat. Rather, there is a question mark among Asians about the future of China's rise; and therefore, I listen with great attention just like the rest of you.

Aaron, please.

AARON L. FRIEDBERG: Thank you very much Professor Tay. Let me say I'm delighted and honored to be here, to have been asked to participate in an event with so many distinguished participants and such an impressive audience. I want to thank, as others have, Randy and Liz for inviting me to take part.

As its title suggests, the purpose of this conference -- at least as I understand it, is to look forward roughly 15 years into the future. And needless to say, this is impossible to do; certainly with any assurance. We simply don't have theories or models or crystal balls powerful enough to allow prognostication about anything as complex, as massive, as diverse and as rapidly changing as China, to say nothing of Asia writ large. So the best I think we can do is to try to identify some of the factors that we believe or have reason to believe will be most important in shaping the course of events and to speculate about how they may interact with one another.

As regards the future of Asia, I would put, at the top of my list, the issues discussed by the previous panel. What happens in China, whether it continues to grow in wealth and power, and if so, at what pace? And whether it continues to be ruled by a one-party regime or evolves towards something different -- perhaps something more democratic, will go a long way towards shaping the future of the region and indeed, the rest of the world.

A close second and a closely-related factor, in my view, is the character of the relationship between the United States and China. If tensions between these two Pacific powers grow, all of Asia and perhaps other regions as well could be divided into something that might resemble a new Cold War. On the other hand, a deepening U.S.-China entente would bring with it increased possibilities for sustained global economic growth, the peaceful resolution of outstanding regional disputes and the successful management of pressing global problems.

At present, I think it's fair to say that the Sino-American relationship is profoundly mixed. It contains important elements of both competition and cooperation. Contrary to what is often suggested, I think the competitive aspects of the relationship are in fact deeply rooted. They're not merely the result of misperceptions or misunderstandings or policy errors, although these do contribute on both sides. They are instead, I believe, the product of two fundamental features of the contemporary international system.

The first is the rapidly-changing distribution of power. Throughout history, relations between established powers and fast-growing potential challengers have always been fraught with tension, suspicion and often open rivalry. Dominant powers are generally reluctant to surrender their privileges while rising powers are drawn to challenge existing hierarchies of influence and prestige that were put in place when they were relatively weak. Now, none of this means that a Sino-American conflict is inevitable, but I think it does help to explain the presence of a strong impulse towards rivalry between the two countries.

The second factor is ideology. In the case of the United States and China, the effects of this impulse due to the structure of power, are amplified by the differences in the character of the two domestic political regimes. I could go on at length about this, but I think it's fair to say that the American people, the U.S. government are not inclined to fully trust a government that they see as secretive, repressive and undemocratic. And in my view, they are right to do so. And China's current leaders suspect that the ultimate aim of American policy is to see them displaced from power albeit by peaceful means. And in a sense, they are right too.

It's hard enough for a rising and a dominant power to manage their relationship peacefully; and the ideological gap that separates the United States and China, at least for now, makes the task far more difficult. If over the next 15 years China continues to become wealthier and more powerful, but its regime remains essentially unchanged; in other words, if it continues along the trajectory that its currently following -- and it very well may not -- the competitive aspects of the relationship are going to grow more prominent. And the cooperative elements, although they will remain, as a whole will be a smaller part and perhaps a less significant part of the overall relationship.

China, in addition to everything else, presents the United States with an unfamiliar intellectual challenge. For the better part of the 20th Century, and certainly during its second half, Americans have had the luxury of dividing the world up at least in their minds into two camps. On the one hand, friends, mostly fellow democracies who were our allies, and also our major trading partners, and on the other hand foes, mostly non-democracies with whom we talked little and traded less.

At this point, China is neither friend or foe or rather, in certain respects, it's both. It is an emerging strategic rival with an authoritarian regime that happens also to be one of our most important commercial partners and diplomatic interlocutors. And this unfamiliar condition, I think, creates a kind of cognitive dissonance which individuals tend to resolve by focusing on only one aspect of the picture or the other. And I would say, overall, our political and commercial elites in this country have tended to focus on the cooperative elements of the relationship and to downplay or to ignore the competitive.

Despite this difficulty, since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government as a whole has managed to develop a reasonably coherent strategy for dealing with China. This didn't emerge from some rational, comprehensive process of analysis and planning, it is nowhere codified in a single document like NSC68; rather, it has evolved and grown organically over time.

And this strategy consists of two elements -- one, most obviously engagement, economic, diplomatic, societal at every level attempts to engage with China. But also, at the same time, balancing or hedging -- the previous administration used that term, what Chinese observers sometimes refer to as containment. Maintaining U.S. forces, U.S. bases, U.S. alliances, and quasi alliance relationships sufficient to ensure a favorable balance of power even as China's capabilities grow.

And although policymakers certainly don't use these words to describe them, I think that the U.S. strategy for dealing with China has essentially two goals. The first is, for lack of a better term, to tame it, to encourage it to adjust its objectives, its policies so that they coincide more closely with our own; making China a responsible stakeholder in the current international system. The second goal, in the long run, is to encourage China's political transformation, albeit by indirect means -- to promote its eventual transition from one-party, authoritarian rule to liberal democracy.

And American presidents used to be more candid or perhaps less diplomatic in blurting this out every so often in front of Chinese counterparts. And I think we were somewhat surprised to find that they didn't like to hear this. Obviously, it implied that they would be put out of a job. But I think that remains at root an important objective of U.S. policy.

The implicit U.S. long-term vision for Asia, again largely unarticulated, I don't want to claim that this is something cast in stone; but I think it's rather like the U.S. vision for Europe after the Cold War -- Asia whole and free, a region filled with democracies, tied together by trade and political institutions, fully integrated into an open international system; and with the United States retaining a significant presence and continuing to play a vital role. This mixed strategy that I've described has proven to be quite durable. It has survived several domestic political transitions in this country, from Bush One to Clinton, to Bush Two, and now, I think, to Obama. I don't expect that there will be major shifts.

And it's also proven resilient in the face of a number of crises and confrontations between China and the United States.

Not surprisingly, China's current leaders appear to have a very different vision for Asia; and a distinctive set of goals for their relationship with the United States. First and foremost, China's present rulers want to ensure the Communist Party's continuance in power. They see it as essential not only to their own wellbeing and that of their children and extended families, but I think to one degree or another they sincerely believe it is essential to the stability and the security of their country.

The second related objective is to see China emerge eventually as the preponderant power in Asia, certainly in East Asia. I think the current leadership, and not only the current leadership, see this as their country's rightful place historically. The pursuit of these goals also bolsters the legitimacy of their rule - making them the flag bearers and defenders of Chinese national pride. And its eventual achievement, if they can achieve it, will further enhance the security of the regime by enabling it better to block or minimize potential threats - including cross border support for Chinese separatists, and the potential contaminating presence of a prosperous democracy along China's immediate land frontiers.

And it will help -- although it won't solve the problem for them, to prevent others from developing capabilities to interdict flows of vital materials and especially energy.

Acquiring a position of reasonable preponderance means by definition a relative diminution in America's role. Whether it requires the complete removal of U.S. forces and the dissolution of U.S. allies or alliances along China's maritime periphery or merely a reduction in their size and significance is likely to become a topic of increasing debate among Chinese strategists. There is some indication that this debate is already under way.

Beijing's vision -- and again, I'm referring to the current leadership only, their vision for Asia is of a region safe for the continuation of CCP rule, with China stronger than any other regional power. Possible counter-veiling coalitions of regional powers precluded or broken up; Cold War alliances weakened or dissolved; a new set of regional economic and political structures to replace the old, which are centered on China rather than the United States; and outside powers, non-Asian powers, in other words the United States, pushed to the margins or out of the region all together.

Now of course, it's one thing to have such a vision, quite another actually to achieve it. Chinese analysts sometimes describe the United States as pursuing what they call a two-handed strategy towards their country. Engagement, which they see as actually intended to undermine their rule and what they refer to as containment, which they believe is meant to check their rise.

But they have also devised a two-handed strategy of their own for dealing with the United States.

On the one hand, hold the Americans as close as possible -- cultivate economic ties, these are good for China, they may help to constrain the United States from responding too vigorously to the ongoing erosion in its position. And if there are imbalances of certain sorts, they could provide China with some diplomatic leverage. Cooperate wherever possible on issues of mutual concern; and at a minimum, maintain the appearance or the promise of cooperation in areas of particular interest to the United States. At the same time, work quietly but assiduously to weaken the foundations of the American position in Asia. I think to a large extent, obviously not entirely, the future of the region is going to be determined or shaped in large measure by the outcome of the collision between these two contending visions and opposing strategies.

So where do things stand now and where do they appear to be going? In the interest of time, I'm going to just say a few words about the American perspective or an American perspective -- my perspective. But it would be very interesting to look at the other side of the equation and ask how things appear from Beijing. Regarding the engagement portion of our mixed strategy, as we've heard, despite three decades of rapid growth and increasingly close interaction at all levels with the outside world, China shows few signs of movement towards meaningful political reform. To the contrary, much of the best recent scholarship on China, especially that of my former Princeton colleague and friend Minxin Pei, has emphasized the surprising resilience and adaptability of the CCP regime.

Its ability -- again as we heard earlier, to deflect or diffuse serious challenges to its monopoly of domestic political power. This could change and perhaps quite subtly, but it shows few signs of doing so at present. What about U.S. efforts to tame China, again for lack of a better term? There is no doubt that there is far more dialogue on a far wider range of issues than was true 20 years ago. And there is clear evidence of meaningful cooperation on at least some of these issues. But the notion that engagement has altered the current regime's objectives or brought them completely into alignment with our own, I think is wide of the mark.

In the case of some of the most widely touted instances of Sino-American cooperation, despite a great deal of enthusiastic rhetoric emanating from Washington, there is much less than meets the eye. And I'm thinking here particularly of the seemingly endless standoff with North Korea where the Chinese have been very helpful in setting the table, and we've praised them repeatedly for doing so; but have refused to participate in serving the meal, if you like, and actually solving the problem.

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been several attempts to find a sort of moral equivalent for the Cold War -- a threat or a challenge that would force the United States and China together as the Soviet Union did in the 1970s and 1980s. After 9/11, that was supposed to be terrorism and proliferation; today, I think increasingly it's perceived to be the danger of climate change. There is every reason to hope and to work for such cooperation mind you, but there is reason also to be skeptical that its pursuit will fundamentally transform the Sino-American relationship. All of that, in my view, points to the continuing importance of working to preserve a favorable balance of power in Asia even as China's strength continues to grow.

The United States and its allies start with some considerable advantages in this regard. The U.S. has an array of security partners who share its interests in maintaining a balance, including traditional allies like Japan, Australia and South Korea; new or relatively new quasi allies like Singapore and India; and possibly over the next 15 years, other partners as well, including Indonesia, conceivably even Vietnam.

We also continue to enjoy a significant edge in military capabilities, especially in our ability to project military power into the region. But in my view, we cannot afford to take these advantages for granted or to assume that they will persist indefinitely without substantial effort. All of the partnerships that I've mentioned are going to require careful tending over the next 15 years and beyond. And some of the most important among them may turn out to be quite difficult - including the relationship with Japan and, for various reasons, the relationship with India as well.

In addition, we and our allies are going to have to expend significant resources in order to counter and offset China's rapid and continuing military buildup; and this will not be easy. We are going to continue to be preoccupied in this country for some time to come with the problem of terrorism, and the stability of the Middle East and Southwest Asia. We now have the lingering after-effects of the financial crisis which will impose strong downward pressures on defense budgets. And as is true today, there will be sincere and to a degree, in my view, appropriate concerns that if we react too vigorously, we will endanger the cooperative aspects of our relationship with China.

My concern is that if we don't respond in a prudent and measured way, by 2025 Asia is going to look a lot less like we envision it and would like it to be, and much more like what China's present rulers hope that it will become. Thank you. (Applause.)

TAY: Well thank you Aaron. That was a very interesting summary of, to my mind, a provocative position. And you focus mainly on Asia rather than the possible global competition. Could I lead off with the first question and then open it to the floor. You focus a lot on the harder political and military aspects of a strategic competition. Could I ask -- in thinking about the economic underpinnings, and particularly, in the context of the crisis, we see China continuing to grow. We see China continuing to enmesh roughly Asia economic ties. There are concerns that with their own domestic issues, America will give less attention and also have less ability to continue to be interdependent with the region economically.

FRIEDBERG: Well, I share those concerns. And I would add to that, that there is an additional potential problem at least, which could originate in the United States; and that is the possibility of a return to protectionism, or the refusal to move forward, the inability to move forward, for example, on a free trade agreement with South Korea. I do think that it is in China's interest for other countries in the region to have it as their major trading partner. And I don't think there is anything necessarily wrong with that from the point of view of the United States. But I think in order to counterbalance the effects of that natural attraction, because of China's increasing mass and economic importance, it's also very important that the United States remain open and competitive so that others in the region have partnerships in the West and continue to have strong interests in trading and investing in the United States and vice versa. But I don't think that's a sure thing.

TAY: It is not a sure thing.

A question or comment anyone?

Elizabeth Economy, further?

ELIZABETH C. ECONOMY: Thanks very much. And thanks for a great presentation Aaron.

I guess what I'm wondering is from your perspective and maybe Simon you want to weigh in on this as well. How do the people in Southeast and East Asia look at the United States and China in what's going on? Do people in Southeast Asia -- the leaders have a preference for whether it's the United States that's so deeply engaged, or whether it's China? Is it going to make much of a difference to them looking forward?

FRIEDBERG: Well, I think there is a lot of variety, as you go throughout Asia, Northeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia, around to South Asia, so it's hard to generalize. I was interested to hear Professor Tay's comment about attitudes in Southeast Asia because that conforms to my own perception, which of course is not based on nearly the kind of insight that Dr. Tay has. But there has been a shift in parts of Southeast Asia from the '90s worrying about China; and then for a period after that, being enthusiastic about the economic opportunities, now back to some increased anxiety.

And I think there is going to be a natural tendency as China continues to develop its military capabilities, for countries particularly in Southeast Asia to be concerned because that is the natural direction, I think of those developments outwards to see the gigantic underwater submarine base at Hainan island got a lot of attention from people because it's right on to the opening of the South China Sea.

So I think there is going to be more concern. If you read the Australian white paper, which I found a really rather surprising document, that goes on at length about the importance of maintaining a U.S. presence, and a balancing role; but expresses very openly a concern that the United States is either going to be unable to do that or for some reason perhaps unwilling over the long run. And that as a result, Australia needs to build up its own military capabilities. And you hear this of course in India as well. It has been an interesting change, I think in South Korea, which is associated with the change in government there but not exclusively, from a great, I would say, infatuation with China and the growing importance of China's economic problem, now tempered by some concern about China's long-term goals regarding North Korea. And more interest than there was or that I would have predicted a few years ago in strengthening and maintaining the alliance with the United States.

In my view, the key piece of t his puzzle is Japan and the U.S. relationship with Japan. I'm not an expert on Japan, but my impression is that the previous administration and others before it worked very, very hard to increase defense cooperation, strategic cooperation; and to bring that to something more resembling a normal alliance with the two really collaborating and sharing the burdens. And it was able to do so in part because of changes in political attitudes in Japan; and particularly skills of Koizumi and the people around him.

But now it looks like things may be going back in the other direction. Japan is becoming increasingly caught up in its internal problems and unable or unwilling to play this larger role. The one thing that has changed, I think, in the last say 10 years, including the last five years mostly, is that China's policy towards Japan has become much more sensible. Previously, for various reasons, Chinese leaders repeatedly criticized Japan for its refusal to acknowledge its history and so on; and really kept up a drum beat of criticism, which I think stirred even greater anxiety than was already there in Japan towards China.

But now they've turned, and at least for the time being, they've become much more forthcoming and friendly with Japan. And that makes a lot of sense from their perspective. And I think that's going to be a very important relationship for us to watch.

TAY: I know I am not a speaker, but Liz asked me -- have some perspectives and so does Aaron. And my views do differ quite sharply so I should just say a few words. First on Japan, actually most of us in Southeast Asia are looking past Japan. Diplomatically, Japan has played a very bad hand over the last five to seven years. If you look at the efforts to try to get themselves a U.N. Security Council seat, nobody in Southeast Asia supported them unequivocally, except my own country and I believe Vietnam.

Despite years of trying and giving donations to ODA, Japan really has not played on the same level as the Chinese. So I read this change, which I agree with Aaron of the Chinese policy towards Japan as simply now saying, since I'm so far ahead of you, I don't need to be bashing you on the head. The second point, on which I think Aaron and I do agree, is that there has been a shift in Southeast Asian views. Where we do need to see that shift really mature is, as he said, the ability of America to offer an interesting, attractive alternative.

The Obama administration, in a sense, has a window to win back a lot of support in Southeast Asia by both his particular soft power and America's still very real economic and other powers. And so I'm looking forward to the U.S.-ASEAN summit, which will be the first, I think, U.S.-ASEAN summit held in the shadows of the APEC meeting, held in Singapore. I've said enough.

The gentleman, you had your hand up first.

QUESTIONER: Richard Gardner, Columbia University. How do the Chinese see our struggle against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan? How do they perceive their interests in this? And are they in a position to be helpful in some way?

FRIEDBERG: This is an area where, as I mentioned just very briefly, I think there was some hope in the United States and elsewhere that there would be a greater convergence of interests between the United States and China in dealing with the problem of terrorism than in fact there has turned out to be. And that's in part a result of the fact that the Chinese concern is at this point almost exclusively regarding developments in their western provinces and along their frontier. They're not interested in what's going on elsewhere nearly to the extent that the United States has been.

I would say also that if you read a fairly broad assortment of commentary in China about what the United States is doing, there are people who say very openly that it's a great thing for the United States to be preoccupied with other problems. And that if not for 9/11 the United States would have focused much more heavily on China as a potential rival. I think the idea of the 20-year window of opportunity which people talk about in China -- started talking about I believe in 2002, is related to this sense that the Americans are going to be occupied elsewhere.

The one issue that I think is -- well, let me say two other things. There was concern immediately after 9/11 and there is still some that the United States was creating for itself semi-permanent military facilities and a military position in Central Asia, where it had never been before on China's western borders. And several people mentioned the conspiracy theories -- there are people in China who would say 9/11 was just an excuse, what the Americans really wanted to do was to set up air bases in Kazakhstan and so on. And there is some of that, but I think there is also more confidence that in the long run it will be very difficult for the United States in fact to maintain that position.

The big question in my mind is Pakistan. And of course, Pakistan has been a major client of China's, and continues to be, and I think the Chinese government didn't have a lot of choice initially when the United States became engaged in Pakistan in order to fight in Afghanistan; and may have hoped that the U.S. would help Pakistan deal with some of its internal problems, which in the long run would benefit China as well. This is anecdotal, but I sense that there is some concern on the part of people in China about what's happening in Pakistan. And my indicator of this is going to meetings where Chinese colleagues will pull me aside, and say what are we going to do about Pakistan, which is a conversation that I've certainly never had and never heard of anybody else having. That really makes me worried about Pakistan because it suggests that the Chinese are concerned about it too.

QUESTIONER: Susan Levine, Marshfield Associates. You said in your comments, which I found very interesting that underpinning the U.S. policy towards China for many administrations has been this desire to see China's political system change. And you also said how flexible and adaptable to certain -- (inaudible) -- that the Communist Party has been. Do you think if we changed that attitude towards China it would -- what would happen? What would be the impact within our relationship and the relationship of China and the rest of Asia?

FRIEDBERG: Well, in a sense I don't think it matters what we say or what we do, it's what we are that is a concern. Of course, the Chinese leaders would rather us not lecture them about human rights and so on. And they're perfectly happy if we're going to back away from that as the current administration has indicated very openly that it's going to do. But I don't think that means they believe that our long-term objectives or wish for their future development is any different than it once was. So I think they continue to be concerned about it. Probably if we said -- we've said about as openly as I can imagine any American official saying it, the more we say it, the more they suspect it's not true, would be my guess.

TAY: There are quite a few questions and hands. If I could suggest, Aaron, we'll take a few. Then you can pick and choose the comments. We'll also have a better gauge of the time we've got left. I've got a few hands -- two ladies over there, the gentleman in the back, the middle; and then one in the back. So take four in a row.

QUESTIONER: Theresa Barger. For much of recent history, people have relied on markets and market clearing prices for access to raw materials. To what extent has the new Chinese push to actually have state-owned enterprises, state-owned actors own these minerals; and perhaps up the ante in a future rival-risk conflict?

TAY: And the lady just behind you.

QUESTIONER: Anne Karalekas. The panel this morning addressed China's domestic issues and some of the underlying challenges or instabilities surrounding economics, internal security, health care of the minorities. How would you assess the impact of China's domestic circumstances on its foreign policy and on the thinking of decision makers within China?

TAY: The gentleman right here in the middle.

QUESTIONER: Given the wide perception that the economic problems had their genesis here in the United States, to what extent do you think that the Chinese economic development model and their governance model has become an important factor in Asian and Africans attitudes about that model versus the Western model? And to what extent do you think it's changed the soft power relationships between the United States and China in East Asia?

TAY: And then, right at the back, I saw your hand just now -- the young gentleman, yes.

QUESTIONER: Carl Minzner, Washington University in St. Louis. I just wanted to get your perspective on a part of China's relationships with Asia, which often go overlooked, and that is Russia and Siberia. I'm kind of curious particularly there because it seems like in contrast to many other places in Asia, you've got a crashing population on the Russian side, immigration from China, large natural resources, and potentially global warming that makes that area more useful. What do you see for the future in terms of Chinese-Russian relationships on that issue bilaterally; and then also, the United States relationships with both countries?

FRIEDBERG: How much time do we have?

TAY: We've got about 15 minutes.

FRIEDBERG: Okay. These are all outstanding questions about which one could talk all day. Let me start at the back and then work through them. On the question of the relationship with Russia, of course this has been highly beneficial to China both for strategic reasons. Russia has been a major supplier of arms and technology to China; and also, because of the potential at least for access to energy and other resources.

China, I think, would like to develop that relationship to the extent possible to sort of suck all the useful things out of Russia. And there is an undercurrent at least in some circles in Russia of concern about the imbalance in this relationship and where it's headed in the long run. If not for the ideological affinity between the two regimes, both varieties of authoritarianism, I think there would be more of a tendency in Russia eventually to lean to the West. And I think that may be a long-term development, but it also ought to be something that we're open to and interested in cultivating.

And so, to the extent that we push the Russians eastward and exclude them from the West, I think it pushes them closer to China. In the long run, I think there is going to be tension between Russia and China.

TAY: I'm sorry, it's 10 minutes.

FRIEDBERG: Okay. On the question of the Chinese model versus the Western model on the issue of soft power, there is no doubt that the crisis and the perception which I take to be largely correct that it initiated in the United States has been harmful in a fairly general way to the perception of U.S. competence if nothing else. I don't know that that's going to have a long-term impact on people in other places and the choices they make about how to organize their societies. I do think there is a natural attraction for authoritarian rulers to the idea that you can have a monopoly on political power and also have the benefits of economic growth and integration into a global economy.

And the Chinese haven't been averse to suggesting that this would be a good thing for others to do. A friend of mine sent me an e-mail this morning about -- I think it was from yesterday's New York Times - about Russian comments on the Chinese model. He said well, they can have the authoritarian political party, but they don't seem to have the work ethic. And there are many other things that are required to make economic growth, but I don't think that many countries in the world can do anything close to what the Chinese have done. And I doubt in the long run that that model is going to be appealing to other countries that are presently more integrated with the West.

The question of domestic challenges and their implications for foreign policy, this is I think an extremely difficult and important problem; and I think you can argue it several different ways. I do think there was a tendency, at least a few years ago for many people in the West to say -- and for the Chinese themselves actually, to say we have so many problems, we are so preoccupied. We couldn't possibly do anything that you wouldn't like externally. We're completely focused inwards.

And I don't think that's true in part, as I mentioned, I think the pursuit of prestige and military power and so on, serves the purposes of the regime, and it's helpful domestically. There are some people who worry that if there was an intensification of trouble in China, that the Chinese regime might seek the opportunity to export some of that energy and anger that would otherwise be directed towards themselves by picking fights with others, with Taiwan, with Japan, conceivably with the United States. And that's a possibility that is not entirely predictable.

So I think there are reasons to think that that instability is actually problematic. In the long run, to the extent that this contributes to slower economic growth, and perhaps if the Chinese government gets serious about dealing with these problems, greater flow of resources towards dealing with them may slow the development of Chinese military power; and that wouldn't be a bad thing.

Raw materials -- owning your resources, the Chinese clearly are of two minds at least on the question of reliance on global markets for the most important resources and energy. In particular, we tend to say why don't you do what we do, and rely on the market -- conveniently forgetting that we have a massive military presence in the Persian Gulf, and a Navy that patrols the sea lanes, and that guarantees our access, and could conceivably threaten the access of others. I don't think the Chinese are going to be content indefinitely to be in a position where they're reliant on us to secure their access to resources.

Overall I would say their inclination to buy resources in the ground is not a bad thing for the rest of the world, except to the extent that it bolsters some bad regimes. It's probably going to turn out to be a bad investment, so it's a waste of money. And it also is increasing China's stakes in other parts of the world and in maintaining a decent relationship with the United States and the West because they're becoming more vulnerable.

TAY: I think we're out of time, but I would be remiss not just to project something for the future, different from what Aaron said. I think that I need to talk -- rather alarmed that Aaron has in a way -- I don't often use this word, but seemed that there will be increasing competition; and he has actually described it fairly, given less value to the cooperative aspects of relationships.

Might there have been an alternative embedded in his own remarks with his idea of an EU like Asia, that Asia would be more full and more free. However, Aaron suggested that some of the Chinese thinking was that America must be on the margin of such a united Asia. Might not America in a sense realize and accept that there will be a more multi-polar world in which Asia itself will be more multi-polar, without necessarily having the sort of radical choice and competition between China on one hand and America on the other? Particularly from Southeast Asia, whenever we've offered the Chinese, we always like to say we don't really want to choose, let there be a good, protracted competition in the short term.

FRIEDBERG: Well, I'll take the final word, I think.

TAY: It was more of a question for you.

FRIEDBERG: Asia, without the active participation of the United States, is not multipolar. It is unipolar with China as the dominant power, possibly balanced to some extent by India. So, I think yes, there is a lot to be said for a more integrated region. And I think the United States, as I indicated, would favor that as long as it's an open region that's integrated with the rest of the world. And as long as the United States continues to have an important role there, which I believe most of the other countries in the region would like to see us play.

TAY: Please join me in thanking Aaron Friedberg very much. (Applause.)