

China's Strategy for  
Neo-conservatism in Asia

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## **I. Problem Definition**

During WWII Winston Churchill regarded the Soviet Union as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”. Nowadays, China might be viewed as being such an entity. In attempting to characterize the relationship between the two most powerful states of the present, the United States and China, Mike Lambton constructed his own phrase: “same bed, different dreams” (Lambton, 2000). Lambton’s view conveys the idea that these two nations have shared spaces and areas of mutual interests but very different ideas as to why they are there and what the future of the relationship contains.

Despite the persistent gulf between the agendas of the two nations, cooperation has been relatively consistent for the past 30 years. Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, China offered support to the US in its war on terror despite the problems it faced with the neo-conservative agenda (Tow, 2004).

The neo-conservative approach, characterized as a unilateral, preemptive, absolute security focused foreign policy strategy, directly conflicts with Chinese foreign policy (Hirsh, 2002). Therefore this paper shall proceed by answering the question, what are the underpinnings of this conflict, consequences for the problem, and finally, policy options for resolving the problem?

As China and the United States are presently two of the most powerful nations in the world, the outcome of the problem is likely to be the primary factor leading to peace or war in the Asia Pacific region.

## **II. Problem Causes**

Prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, tension placed on the US-China relationship due to the Bush administration’s neo-conservative approach was already apparent (Gill, 2002). The neo-conservative ideas of preemptive unilateralism contributed to US interest in Asia-Pacific missile defense, leaving the ABM treaty, renewed nuclear weapons development, and an expanded scope and capability of military troops. President Bush’s statements, “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil” (Domke, 2004), “...I say to the American people, we've never seen this kind of evil before” (Bush, 2001), “but the evil-doers have never seen America stand up before either” (Ibid) and “You’re either with us, or against us” (Russell, 2006), illustrated his vision of a polarized world of the virtuous and the unvirtuous and clearly communicated that no other power would be capable or justified in challenging the United States.

Considering the rising power of China, it would appear that the United States pays little heed to notion of a “security dilemma” (Paranjpe, 2005). This notion suggests that a nations signaling of military development results in a reaction based arms race that ironically diminishes the security of the initiating state (Ibid). Although a security dilemma has yet to materialize, it continues to pose a threat to the security of both nations.

Preventative war and unilateral action are the basis for the neo-conservative pursuit of “absolute security” (Hirsh, 2002). This causes a problem for China as such an approach carries the risk of diminishing the effectiveness of multilateral mechanisms and negative security assurances instituted and carefully developed since the end of WWII.

Additionally, the problems of such an approach were underscored by Henry Kissinger’s statement, “The desire of one power for absolute security means absolute insecurity for all the others” (Barnett, 1996). China had originally hoped that the US need for allies in the war on terror would moderate the US pursuit of absolute security but in the end, the swift military domination of Afghanistan actually strengthened American unilateralist resolve (Malik, 2002).

Incidentally, the Iraq invasion further elaborates US views of absolute security. The removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq was a symbol intended to indicate to the world that resistance to the US agenda was futile and would be met with awesome military might even in the absence of a broadly supported multilateral initiative. Despite the intent of this signal, the case may be advanced that the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the persistent problem with insurgents in Iraq and the failure of US efforts to prevent Hamas from rising to power in Palestine all reflect the limited effectiveness of US power (Coulter, 2005, McGovern, 2005, Richter, 2006).

The gulf between popular US opinion and world opinion is profound and problematic. Despite Bush being reelected with greater public support in 2004 and the Republicans taking control of the upper and lower house, world opinion of US foreign policy has become visibly opposed (Savage, 2005). The sympathy that the US had following September 11<sup>th</sup> is long gone and been replaced with concerns over Abu Gharib, Guantanamo Bay, extraordinary rendition, and Bush’s contempt for institutions such as the International Criminal Court (Massimino, 2004, Crook, 2005).

Following George W. Bush’s reelection in 2004, he stated that he had “earned capital” and was “going to spend it” (Savage, 2005). Therefore it would seem unlikely that Bush’s strategy is likely to change before the end of his term. Additionally, despite Bush’s claim of legitimacy in pursuing American interests abroad, his actions have proved to be the opposite (Tucker and Hendrickson, 2004).

### **III. Possible Consequences**

Considering the above analysis, the problem may be interpreted to contain four notable consequences. Absolute security is a fallible concept that is not possible to achieve. The interconnected nature of economies and populations require a reorientation in US foreign policy. Due to the distributed nature of modern world, no nation can enforce its will upon the rest of the world therefore security must be managed in cooperation with other states. Finally, absolute security pursuit through the advancement of one nation’s military and economic interests will destabilize not only the state in question, but other areas of the world as well.

In the absence of another major power to challenge the US position, the question is raised, how is China, with its growth aspirations and colossal state management needs, to effectively respond in a manner that does not destabilize itself or other nations?

Prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 the Chinese were already aware of the potential conflict with Bush's foreign policy (Rumer, 2002). Right wing Republicans voiced their concern over China being the primary challenger to US hegemony (Ibid). Furthermore, the confidential US Nuclear Posture Review of 2002 explicitly identified China as being targeted for a nuclear strike in the event of a Chinese escalation over Taiwan (Oleksandr, 2003). Further tension was raised with the reports focused on revising the US nuclear arsenal and deploying ballistic missile defense systems in the Asia Pacific region (Ibid).

The consequences of the neo-conservative approach can be viewed in three phases: evasion, cooperation, and strategic response. Prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> despite the Chinese recognizing a potential conflict, they sought to evade areas of contention with the US hoping that interest in rogue states and missile defense would fade (Rumer, 2002). This indicates the evasion phase. The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks prompted the Chinese leader at the time, Jiang Zemin, to offer support and cooperation for the war on terror and to convey his own challenges with terrorism in China (Bates, 2002). This indicates the cooperation phase. Cooperation quickly ended with the Chinese refusal to support the war in Iraq. Additionally, China further signaled the end of its cooperation efforts by declining the US request that it participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative (Boese, 2004). These events consequently lead to the present phase of strategic response.

#### **IV. Policy Options**

As will be explored, the essence of the Chinese response to US neo-conservative foreign policy has been to seek multilaterally based cooperative security. China is behaving not as a bilateral realist state as it has in the past, but rather as a multilateral interdependentist nation. This post-September 11<sup>th</sup> shift in policy reflects the Chinese need to implement a more robust model of inter-state dealings that contains fewer points of failure in order to ensure the smooth maintenance of the colossal Chinese state.

Although September 11<sup>th</sup> provided a catalyst for China to fast track the change in policy, the groundwork for this policy can be seen to begin in the mid 90's. Through the mid-90's China sought to normalize relations with a greater number of states, join multilateral organizations such as APEC, ASEAN and the WTO, and in turn, expand its rapport while cultivating an image of being a responsible power. Beyond merely joining the above organizations, China assumed a leadership position in expanding regional multilateral efforts in contributing to the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN+1 and ASEAN+3 (Lijun, 2006, Kraig, 2006). This demonstrated the crux of the new Chinese approach to regional security: regional collaboration among potentially competing nations instead of polarized military alliances.

Subsequently, China expanded relations with India and even began performing joint military exercises with Pakistan and India in 2003 (Van Ness, 2004). Chinese scholars

referred to this as further evidence of the pursuit of confidence building measures with partner nations that did not focus military effort against another nation (Ibid).

This policy was further elaborated in October 2003 with China signing the ASRAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (China & World Economy, 2004). China was the first non-ASEAN nation to enter into this treaty that sought to establish a "strategic partnership for peace and prosperity" (Ibid). Congruent to China's approach, the treaty aims to develop an Asian partnership of social, economic and security collaboration (Ibid). Furthermore, China has expanded upon this approach by seeking to act as the mediator in the six-party negotiations over North Korean concerns (Kerr, 2006).

To clarify the position of this paper's analysis, the Chinese response to the US neo-conservatism in the Asia Pacific region may be characterized as multilateralism in response to US unilateralism, cooperative security in response to US pursuit of absolute security, support for international institutions in response to US scorn for such institutions, and perhaps most importantly an interdependentist approach rather than a realist approach.

To be clear, the above is not to suggest that China is behaving entirely like a pacifist nation. Its rapid increase in military spending, suppression of human rights and ongoing issues over Tibet are but a few case examples of the less-than-friendly attributes of the state.

Up until now, rather than engage in an overt arms race with the United States, China has sought to maintain a credible deterrent with a small nuclear arsenal (Wang, 2005). China is acutely aware of the economic detriment experienced by the Soviet Union in attempting to match US military outlay (Ibid). This complements the Chinese strategy of a "peaceful rise" where China is a constructive part of a peaceful global environment (Ibid). China is dependent on such a condition for its state economy and infrastructure to continue functioning. Furthermore, this approach seeks to derive mutual benefit for regional partners through increased cooperation in investment, trade and security. The range of multilateral organizations China is contributing to illustrates this cooperation.

Curiously, the above approach is similar to the method used by the Ming dynasty whereby China obtained a secure atmosphere through patronage programs with surrounding states. By operating China as the hub of the region and giving more assistance than it received, the emperor was able to maintain the amity, respect and stability of neighboring states that in turn made itself more secure (Bijian, 2005).

Clearly the contemporary scenario is quite different from ancient China but the modern need for Asian security and economic relationships is sensible. Concurrently, for China to uphold such an arrangement with surrounding nations would help to ensure the strategic stability China requires for ongoing economic growth. Although beyond the scope of this discourse, the question arises as to whether China's lack of domestic liberalization will emerge as an impediment to its peaceful rise. Like those criticizing the United States, under President Bush, China may be challenged to practice the same approach in the

domestic policy arena as it is practicing in the foreign policy arena. In the context of China, this may prove to be particularly problematic and continues to be a considerable point of contention between China and other nations.

Although China and the United States face unique challenges, considering the US experience in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, the Chinese model as outlined above, appears to serve more effectively in cultivating a peaceful and stable security environment.

As illustrated, China seeks to avert conflict with the US. Despite some opinion that a US-China cold war is inevitable, the above model is striking in that it does not require regional powers that China engages with to position their foreign policy in a polarized manner (IE in a manner conducive solely to their primary ally). Conceivably, such an approach diminishes adversarial potential while increasing regional security. Although this tactic may not be categorized as a realist response to the neo-conservative approach, its effectiveness provides a compelling reason for US to reconsider its methods in dealing with both inter and intra-state challenges.

### **Conclusion: Future Prospects**

As both Hu Jintao and George Bush were reelected in 2004, barring a significant worldwide event, a major shift in executive foreign policy is unlikely to be seen before 2008.

As alluded to above, the primary focus of the Chinese government is to manage its population of 1.3 billion, sustain economic growth and keep the state from falling into chaos. Comparatively, the United States appears to be at the limit of its military projection capability. Despite ongoing overtures of cooperation between the Chinese and US government, statements published by the former Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen may more accurately reflect the tone of China-US relations behind closed doors. Qichen stated,

The philosophy of the "Bush Doctrine" is in essence force. It advocates the United States should rule over the whole world with overwhelming force, military force in particular.

The Iraq War has made the United States even more unpopular in the international community than its war in Viet Nam. Bush did not even dare to meet the public on the streets when he visited Britain, the closest ally of the United States....

In an increasingly interdependent world, in which the benefits of every country have been closely intertwined, the damages a war can cause will be far more than the benefits it can bring. Any superpower can impossibly (sic) force the international community into accepting its own norms merely through displaying its military muscle. The current US

predicament in Iraq serves as another example that when a country's superiority (sic) psychology inflates beyond its real capability, a lot of trouble can be caused. But the troubles and disasters the United States has met do not stem from threats by others, but from its (sic) own cocksureness and arrogance.

The 21st century is not the "American Century." That does not mean that the United States does not want the dream. Rather, it is incapable of realizing the goal. (2004)

The above serves as an important indicator for future Chinese foreign policy for several reasons. Firstly, the above continues to elaborate the Chinese interdependentist outlook and refutation of unilateral realism. Secondly, Qichen published the above immediately prior to the 2004 US presidential election in an overt attempt to influence the outcome. This underscores the importance to China of articulating a clear refutation and alternative to the US neo-conservative approach.

In the past ten years, China has flipped from being an oil exporter to an oil importer (Bremner et al, 2004). At present, China depends on foreign sources for approximately 40% of its oil needs (Ibid). As this is projected to increase to a foreign dependency of roughly 75% in the next 20 years (Ibid), energy access will surely shape and test the present Chinese approach to foreign policy.

Additionally, China is presently challenged by Japanese persistence in contributing to the US ballistic missile defense project. Nevertheless, Taiwan notwithstanding, there is little reason for an overt military conflict between China and the US in the foreseeable future. Although Taiwan will likely persist in being a point of tension between China and the US, how China responds regarding US policy in Iran, Iraq and North Korea will likely yield the best reflection of how interactions will proceed. Up until now, the United States and China have had dissimilar views of the three states. Although the Iran situation appears to be in a state of rapid flux at present, in a historical context, of the three, Iraq has created the greatest source of tension for the two states. China, as was the case with other nations, was in opposition to the war in Iraq on grounds that it may impede oil flows through the Middle East. Additionally, it is the Chinese preference that rather than states acting unilaterally, such interventions go through multilateral institutions where China could seek to leverage its influence.

Comparatively, Iran raises yet another issue for the future. With US forces committed in Iraq, an invasion of Iran seems unlikely. Although technically possible that the US may pursue air strikes in Iran to stop its nuclear program, at present such an option seems unlikely to be deployed (Henry, 2006). The US appears to be indicating its preference for strong-armed diplomacy in persuading Iran to relinquish its nuclear weapons material (Ibid). In this case, China and its strategic EU partners prefer that Iran demonstrate greater NPT compliance so that economic relationships may be expanded (Solana, 2005).

China's hosting of the six-party talks over the North Korean nuclear situation has

provided a direct challenge to the US unilateral approach. Beyond North Korea initiating a regional conflict, China is also concerned that North Korean proliferation would lead to South Korea, Japan and Taiwan acquiring nuclear weapons (Simmons, 2005). As a result, it has been China's preference to reject the US's forceful Proliferation Security Initiative in favour of pursuing multilateral institutions that bring North Korea into the discussions (Wade, 2004).

Meetings between China and the US continue to address a large number of major issues such as trade imbalances, Taiwan, decreases in US currency (which China holds large amounts of) values, and the axis of evil.

In closing, the US and China continue to be 'in the same bed with different dreams' as they seek to further articulate the foreign policy strategies outlined above. The pro-independence party in Taiwan losing in the December 2004 election will likely reduce Chinese concern over Taiwan but the US approach to North Korea, Iran and Iraq continue to be issues of disagreement. As illustrated, the Chinese strategic response of multilateral interdependentist regional cooperation building is an effective, flexible and robust response to US neo-conservative policies in the Asia Pacific region.

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