

# Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics

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By Aaron L. Friedberg

**T**he 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

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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

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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.

**D**eep-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 non-democracies 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 non-democracies 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 dis-

solved 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 non-democracies 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 non-democracies 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 govern-

ment 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. Any-

one 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.

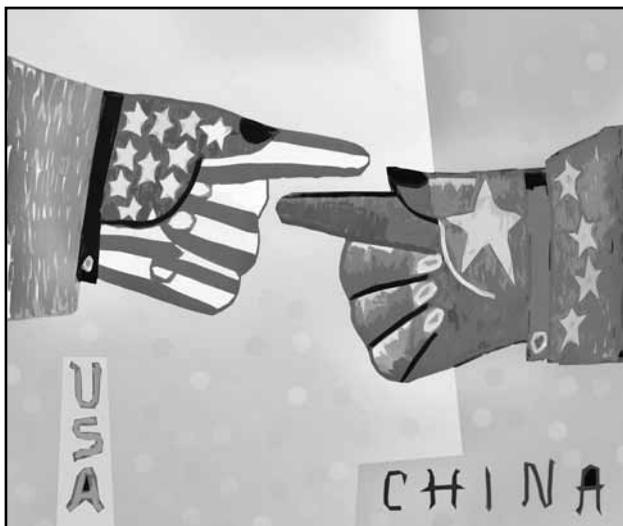
In fact, because ideology inclines the United States to be more suspicious and hostile toward China than it would be for strategic reasons alone, it also tends to reinforce Washington's willingness to help other democracies that feel threatened by Chinese power, even if this is not what a pure realpolitik 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 ma-

terial 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 in-



creasing 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.

**I**t 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

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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.

**T**hough 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

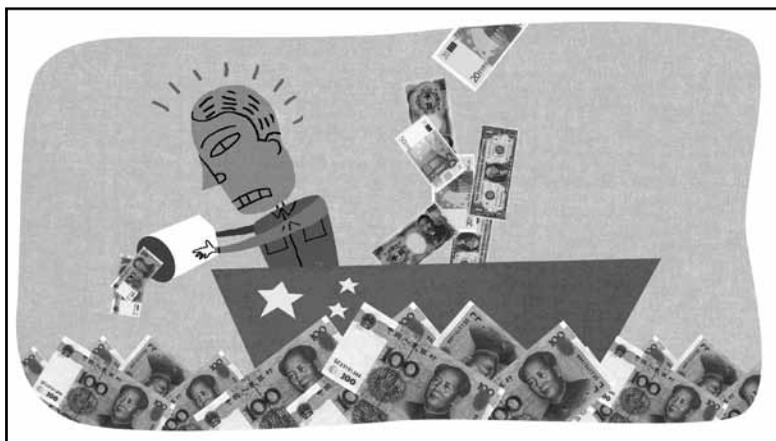
neighbors. It is undoubtedly true that even if, in the long run, China becomes a stable, peaceful democracy, its passage will prove rocky. The opening of the nation's political system to dissent and debate is likely to introduce an element of instability into its foreign policy as new voices are heard 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

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 pacify-



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

ing 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. □

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