The Geography of Chinese Power
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How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?

THE ENGLISH geographer Sir Halford Mackinder ended his famous 1904 article, "The Geographical Pivot of History," with a disturbing reference to China. After explaining why Eurasia was the geostrategic fulcrum of world power, he posited that the Chinese, should they expand their power well beyond their borders, "might constitute the yellow peril to the world's freedom just because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent, an advantage as yet denied to the Russian tenant of the pivot region." Leaving aside the sentiment's racism, which was common for the era, as well as the hysterics sparked by the rise of a non-Western power at any time, Mackinder had a point: whereas Russia, that other Eurasian giant, basically was, and is still, a land power with an oceanic front blocked by ice, China, owing to a 9,000-mile temperate coastline with many good natural harbors, is both a land power and a sea power. (Mackinder actually feared that China might one day conquer Russia.) China's virtual reach extends from Central Asia, with all its mineral and hydrocarbon wealth, to the main shipping lanes of the Pacific Ocean. Later, in Democratic Ideals and Reality, Mackinder predicted that along with the United States and the United Kingdom, China would eventually guide the world by "building for a quarter of humanity a new civilization, neither quite Eastern nor quite Western."

China's blessed geography is so obvious a point that it tends to get overlooked in discussions of the country's economic dynamism and national assertiveness. Yet it is essential: it means that China will stand at the hub of geopolitics even if the country's path toward global power is not necessarily linear. (China has routinely had GDP growth rates of more than ten percent annually over the past 30 years, but they almost certainly cannot last another 30.) China combines an extreme, Western-style modernity with a "hydraulic civilization" (a term coined by the historian Karl Wittfogel to describe societies that exercise centralized control over irrigation) that is reminiscent of the ancient Orient: thanks to central control, the regime can, for example, enlist the labor of millions to build major infrastructure. This makes China relentlessly dynamic in ways that democracies, with all of their temporizing, cannot be. As China's nominally Communist rulers--the scions of some 25 dynasties going back 4,000 years--are absorbing Western technology and Western practices, they are integrating them into a disciplined and elaborate cultural system with a unique experience in, among other things, forming tributary relationships with other states. "The Chinese," a Singaporean official told me early this year, "charm you when they want to charm you, and squeeze you when they want to squeeze you, and they do it quite systematically."

China's internal dynamism creates external ambitions. Empires rarely come about by design; they grow organically. As states become stronger, they cultivate new needs and--this may seem counterintuitive--apprehensions that force them to expand in various forms. Even under the stewardship of some of the most forgettable presidents--Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison--the United States? economy grew steadily and quietly in the late nineteenth century. As the country traded more with the outside world, it developed complex economic and strategic interests in far-flung places. Sometimes, as in South America and the Pacific region, for example, these interests justified military action. The United States was also able to start focusing outward during that period because it had consolidated the interior of the continent; the last major battle of the Indian Wars was fought in 1890.

China today is consolidating its land borders and beginning to turn outward. China's foreign policy ambitions are as aggressive as those of the United States a century ago, but for completely different reasons. China does not take a missionary approach to world affairs,

seeking to spread an ideology or a system of government. Moral progress in international affairs is an American goal, not a Chinese one; China's actions abroad are propelled by its need to secure energy, metals, and strategic minerals in order to support the rising living standards of its immense population, which amounts to about one-fifth of the world's total.

To accomplish this task, China has built advantageous power relationships both in contiguous territories and in far-flung locales rich in the resources it requires to fuel its growth. Because what drives China abroad has to do with a core national interest--economic survival--China can be defined as an über-realist power. It seeks to develop a sturdy presence throughout the parts of Africa that are well endowed with oil and minerals and wants to secure port access throughout the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, which connect the hydrocarbon-rich Arab-Persian world to the Chinese seaboard. Having no choice in the matter, Beijing cares little about the type of regime with which it is engaged; it requires stability, not virtue as the West conceives of it. And because some of these regimes--such as those in Iran, Myanmar (also known as Burma), and Sudan--are benighted and authoritarian, Chinas worldwide scouring for resources brings it into conflict with the missionary-oriented United States, as well as with countries such as India and Russia, against whose own spheres of influence China is bumping up.

To be sure, China is not an existential problem for these states. The chance of a war between China and the United States is remote; the Chinese military threat to the United States is only indirect. The challenge China poses is primarily geographic--notwithstanding critical issues about debt, trade, and global warming. China's emerging area of influence in Eurasia and Africa is growing, not in a nineteenth-century imperialistic sense but in a more subtle manner better suited to the era of globalization. Simply by securing its economic needs, China is shifting the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere, and that must mightily concern the United States. On land and at sea, abetted by China's favorable location on the map, Beijing's influence is emanating and expanding from Central Asia to the South China Sea, from the Russian Far East to the Indian Ocean. China is a rising continental power, and, as Napoleon famously said, the policies of such states are inherent in their geography.

IRRITABLE BORDER SYNDROME

XINJIANG AND Tibet are the two principal areas within the Chinese state whose inhabitants have resisted the pull of Chinese civilization. This makes them imperial properties of Beijing, in a way. In addition, ethnic nationalist tensions in these areas are complicating Beijing's relationships with adjacent states.

"Xinjiang," the name of China's westernmost province, means "new dominion," and it refers to Chinese Turkestan, an area twice the size of Texas that lies far from China's heartland, across the Gobi Desert. China has been a state in some form for thousands of years, but Xinjiang formally became part of it only in the late nineteenth century. Since then, as the twentieth-century British diplomat Sir Fitzroy Maclean once put it, the history of the province "has been one of sustained turbulence," punctuated by revolts and various periods of independent rule well into the 1940s. In 1949, Mao Zedong's Communists marched into Xinjiang and forcibly integrated the province into the rest of China. But as recently as 1990 and again last year, ethnic Turkic Uighurs--descendants of the Turks who ruled Mongolia in the seventh and eighth centuries--rioted against Beijing's rule.

The Uighurs in China number about eight million and make up less than one percent of China's population, but they account for 45 percent of Xinjiang's. China's majority Han population is heavily concentrated in the lowlands in the center of the country and by the Pacific, whereas the drier plateaus in the country's west and southwest are the historical homes of the Uighur

and Tibetan minorities. This distribution is a continuing source of tension, because in Beijing's eyes, the modern Chinese state should exert total control over these tablelands. In order to secure these areas--and the oil, natural gas, copper, and iron ore in their soil--Beijing has for decades been populating them with Han Chinese from the country's heartland. It has also been aggressively courting the independent ethnic Turkic republics of Central Asia, partly to deprive the Uighurs of Xinjiang of any possible rear base.

Beijing has also been courting Central Asian governments in order to expand its sphere of influence; China already stretches far into Eurasia, but not far enough given its demand for natural resources. Beijing's sway in Central Asia takes the form of two soon-to-be-completed major pipelines to Xinjiang: one to carry oil from the Caspian Sea across Kazakhstan, the other to carry natural gas from Turkmenistan across Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. China's hunger for natural resources also means that Beijing will take substantial risks to secure them. It is mining for copper south of Kabul, in war-torn Afghanistan, and has its eye on the region's iron, gold, uranium, and precious gems (the region has some of the world's last untapped deposits). Beijing hopes to build roads and energy pipelines through Afghanistan and Pakistan as well, linking up its budding Central Asian dominion to ports on the Indian Ocean. China's strategic geography would be enhanced if the United States stabilized Afghanistan.

Like Xinjiang, Tibet is essential to China's territorial self-conception, and like Xinjiang, it affects China's external relations. The mountainous Tibetan Plateau, rich in copper and iron ore, accounts for much of China's territory. This is why Beijing views with horror the prospect of Tibetan autonomy, let alone independence, and why it is frantically building roads and railroads across the area. Without Tibet, China would be but a rump--and India would add a northern zone to its subcontinental power base.

With its one-billion-plus population, India already is a blunt geographic wedge in China's zone of influence in Asia. A map of "Greater China" in Zbigniew Brzezinski's 1997 book The Grand Chessboard makes this point vividly. To some degree, China and India are indeed destined by geography to be rivals: neighbors with immense populations, rich and venerable cultures, and competing claims over territory (for example, the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh). The issue of Tibet only exacerbates these problems. India has been hosting the Dalai Lama's government in exile since 1957, and according to Daniel Twining, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund, recent Chinese-Indian border tensions "may be related to worries in Beijing over the Dalai Lama's succession": the next Dalai Lama might come from the Tibetan cultural belt that stretches across northern India, Nepal, and Bhutan, presumably making him even more pro-Indian and anti-Chinese. China and India will play a "great game" not only in those areas but also in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Xinjiang and Tibet fall within China's legal borders, but the Chinese government's tense relations with the peoples of both provinces suggest that as Beijing expands its influence beyond its ethnic Han core, it is bound to encounter resistance.

CREEPING CONTROL

EVEN WHERE China's borders are secure, the country's very shape makes it appear as though it is dangerously incomplete--as if parts of an original Greater China had been removed. China's northern border wraps around Mongolia, a giant territory that looks like it was once bitten out of China's back. Mongolia has one of the world's lowest population densities and is now being threatened demographically by an urban Chinese civilization next door. Having once conquered Outer Mongolia to gain access to more cultivable land, Beijing is poised to conquer Mongolia again, after a fashion, in order to satisfy its hunger for the country's oil, coal, uranium, and rich, empty grasslands. Chinese mining companies have been seeking large stakes in Mongolia's underground assets because unchecked industrialization and urbanization

have turned China into the world's leading consumer of aluminum, copper, lead, nickel, zinc, tin, and iron ore; China's share of the world's metal consumption has jumped from ten percent to 25 percent since the late 1990s. With Tibet, Macao, and Hong Kong already under Beijing's control, China's dealings with Mongolia will be a model for judging the degree to which China harbors imperialist intentions.

North of Mongolia and of China's three northeastern provinces lies Russia's Far East region, a numbing vastness twice the size of Europe with a meager and shrinking population. The Russian state expanded its reach into this area during the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, while China was weak. Now, China is strong, and the Russian government's authority is nowhere as feeble as it is in the eastern third of the country. Just across the border from the roughly seven million Russians who live in the Russian Far East--a figure that could fall as low as 4.5 million by 2015--in the three abutting Chinese provinces, live some 100 million Chinese: the population density is 62 times as great on the Chinese side as on the Russian side. Chinese migrants have been filtering into Russia, settling in large numbers in the city of Chita, north of Mongolia, and elsewhere in the region. Resource acquisition is the principal goal of China's foreign policy everywhere, and Russia's sparsely populated Far East has large reserves of natural gas, oil, timber, diamonds, and gold. "Moscow is wary of large numbers of Chinese settlers moving into this region, bringing timber and mining companies in their wake," David Blair, a correspondent for London's Daily Telegraph, wrote last summer.

As with Mongolia, the fear is not that the Chinese army will one day invade or formally annex the Russian Far East. It is that Beijing's creeping demographic and corporate control over the region--parts of which China held briefly during the Qing dynasty--is steadily increasing. During the Cold War, border disputes between China and the Soviet Union brought hundreds of thousands of troops to this Siberian back of beyond and sometimes ignited into clashes. In the late 1960s, these tensions led to the Sino-Soviet split. Geography could drive China and Russia apart, since their current alliance is purely tactical. This could benefit the United States. In the 1970s, the Nixon administration was able to take advantage of the rift between Beijing and Moscow to make an opening toward China. In the future, with China the greater power, the United States might conceivably partner with Russia in a strategic alliance to balance against the Middle Kingdom.

SOUTHERN PROMISES

CHINA'S INFLUENCE is also spreading southeast. In fact, it is with the relatively weak states of Southeast Asia that the emergence of a Greater China is meeting the least resistance. There are relatively few geographic impediments separating China from Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The natural capital of a sphere of influence centering on the Mekong River and linking all the countries of Indochina by road and river would be Kunming, in China's Yunnan Province.

The largest country of mainland Southeast Asia is Myanmar. If Pakistan is the Balkans of Asia, at risk of being dismembered, Myanmar is like early-twentieth-century Belgium, at risk of being overrun by its great neighbors. Like Mongolia, the Russian Far East, and other territories on China's land borders, Myanmar is a feeble state abundant in the natural resources that China desperately needs. China and India are competing to develop the deep-water port of Sittwe, on Myanmar's Indian Ocean seaboard, with both harboring the hope of eventually building gas pipelines running from offshore fields in the Bay of Bengal.

As for the region as a whole, Beijing has in some respects adopted a divide-and-conquer strategy. In the past, it negotiated with each country in ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) separately, not with all of them as a unit. Even its newly inaugurated

agreement on a free-trade area with ASEAN demonstrates how China continues to develop profitable relationships with its southern neighbors. It uses ASEAN as a market for selling high-value Chinese manufactured goods while buying from it low-value agricultural produce. This has led to Chinese trade surpluses, even as ASEAN countries are becoming a dumping ground for industrial goods produced by China's cheap urban labor.

This is occurring as the once strong state of Thailand, which has been shaken by domestic political problems lately, plays less and less of a role as a regional anchor and inherent counterweight to China. The Thai royal family, with its ailing king, cannot be as much of a stabilizing force as it once was, and factionalism is roiling the Thai military. (China is developing a bilateral military relationship with Thailand, as well as building such relationships with other Southeast Asian countries, even as the United States is focusing less on military exercises in the region in order to concentrate on its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.) To Thailand's south, both Malaysia and Singapore are heading into challenging democratic transitions as their nation-building strongmen, Mahathir bin Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew, respectively, pass from the scene. Malaysia is further coming under the shadow of China economically, even as its ethnic Chinese population feels threatened by the majority Muslim Malays. And the government of Singapore, even though Singapore is a state whose population is mostly ethnic Chinese, fears becoming a vassal of China; for years now, it has nurtured a military training relationship with Taiwan. Lee has publicly urged the United States to stay engaged in the region, militarily and diplomatically. Indonesia, for its part, is caught between needing the United States' naval presence to hedge against China and fearing that if it looks too much like a U.S. ally it will anger the rest of the Islamic world. As the United States' power in Southeast Asia passes its prime and China's rises, states in the region are increasingly cooperating with one another to mitigate Beijing's divide-and-conquer strategy. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have banded together against piracy, for example. The more self-reliant these states can become, the less threatened they will be by China's rise.

IN THE ARMY

CENTRAL ASIA, Mongolia, the Russian Far East, and Southeast Asia are natural zones of Chinese influence. But they are also zones whose political borders are unlikely to change. The situation on the Korean Peninsula is different: the map of China is particularly truncated there, and there political borders could well shift.

The hermetic North Korean regime is fundamentally unstable, and its unraveling could affect the whole region. Jutting out from Manchuria, the Korean Peninsula commands all maritime traffic to and from northeastern China. No one really expects China to annex any part of the Korean Peninsula, of course, yet China remains inconvenienced by the sovereignty of other states there, particularly in the north. And although it supports Kim Jong Il's Stalinist regime, it has plans for the peninsula beyond his reign. Beijing would like to eventually send back the thousands of North Korean defectors who now are in China so that they could build a favorable political base for Beijing's gradual economic takeover of the Tumen River region, where China, North Korea, and Russia meet and which has good port facilities across from Japan on the Pacific Ocean.

This is one reason why Beijing would prefer to see a far more modern, authoritarian state develop in North Korea--such a state would create a buffer between China and the vibrant, middle-class democracy of South Korea. But reunification on the Korean Peninsula would also eventually benefit Beijing. A reunified Korea would be nationalist and harbor some hostility toward China and Japan, both of which have sought to occupy it in the past. But Korea's enmity toward Japan is significantly greater than its enmity toward China. (Japan occupied the peninsula from 1910 to 1945, and Seoul and Tokyo continue to argue over the status of the

Tokdo/Takeshima islets.) Economic relations would be stronger with China than with Japan: a unified Korea would be more or less under Seoul's control, and China already is South Korea's biggest trading partner. Finally, a reunified Korea that tilted slightly toward Beijing and away from Japan would have little reason to continue hosting U.S. troops. In other words, it is easy to conceive of a Korean future within a Greater China and a time when the United States' ground presence in Northeast Asia will diminish.

As the example of the Korean Peninsula shows, China's land borders beckon with more opportunities than hazards. As Mackinder suggested, China seems to be developing as a great land and sea power that will at the very least overshadow Russia in Eurasia. The political scientist John Mearsheimer wrote in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics that "the most dangerous states in the international system are continental powers with large armies." This might be reason to fear China's influence as the country becomes more of a continental power. But China only partially fits Mearsheimer's description: its army, 1.6 million strong, is the largest in the world, but it will not have an expeditionary capability for years to come. The People's Liberation Army did respond to the earthquake emergency in Sichuan in 2008, to recent ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, and to the security challenge posed by the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. However, according to Abraham Denmark of the Center for a New American Security, this shows only that the PLA can move troops from one end of continental China to another, not that it can yet move supplies and heavy equipment at the rate required for military deployments. Perhaps gaining such a capability does not much matter anyway, since the PLA is unlikely to cross China's borders other than by miscalculation (if there is another war with India) or to fill a void (if the North Korean regime collapses). China can fill power vacuums on its vast frontiers through demographic and corporate means, without needing the backup of an expeditionary ground force.

China's unprecedented strength on land is partly thanks to Chinese diplomats, who in recent years have busily settled many border disputes with Central Asian republics, Russia, and other neighbors (India is the striking exception). The significance of this change cannot be overstated. There no longer is an army bearing down on Manchuria; during the Cold War, that ominous presence had forced Mao to concentrate China's defense budget on its army and neglect its navy. As the Great Wall attests, China had been preoccupied with land invasions of one sort or another since antiquity. No longer.

GETTING SEA LEGS

THANKS TO this favorable situation on land, China is now free to work at building a great navy. Whereas coastal city-states and island nations pursue sea power as a matter of course, doing so is a luxury for historically insular continental powers such as China. In China's case, this might be a luxury that is fairly easy to acquire since the country is as blessed by its seaboard as by its continental interior. China dominates the East Asian coastline in the temperate and tropical zones of the Pacific, and its southern border is close enough to the Indian Ocean that it might one day be linked to it by roads and energy pipelines. In the twenty-first century, China will project hard power abroad primarily through its navy.

That said, it faces a far more hostile environment at sea than it does on land. The Chinese navy sees little but trouble in what it calls the "first island chain": the Korean Peninsula, the Kuril Islands, Japan (including the Ryukyu Islands), Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Australia. All except for Australia are potential flashpoints. China is already embroiled in various disputes over parts of the energy-rich ocean beds of the East China Sea and the South China Sea: with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and with the Philippines and Vietnam over the Spratly Islands. Such disputes allow Beijing to stoke nationalism at home, but for Chinese naval strategists, this seascape is mostly grim. This first island chain is, in the words

James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara of the U.S. Naval War College, a kind of "Great Wall in reverse": a well-organized line of U.S. allies that serve as a sort of guard tower to monitor and possibly block China's access to the Pacific Ocean.

China's answer to feeling so boxed in has been aggressive at times. Naval power is usually more benign than land power: navies cannot by themselves occupy vast areas and must do far more than fight--namely, protect commerce. Thus, one might have expected China to be as benevolent as other maritime nations before it--Venice, Great Britain, the United States--and to concern itself primarily, as those powers did, with preserving a peaceful maritime system, including the free movement of trade. But China is not so self-confident. Still an insecure sea power, it thinks about the ocean territorially: the very terms "first island chain" and "second island chain" (the second island chain includes the U.S. territories of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands) suggest that the Chinese see all these islands as archipelagic extensions of the Chinese landmass. In thinking in such a zero-sum fashion about their country's adjoining seas, China's naval leaders are displaying the aggressive philosophy of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century U.S. naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who argued for sea control and the decisive battle. But they do not yet have the blue-water force to apply it, and this discrepancy between aspirations and means has led to some awkward incidents over the past few years. In October 2006, a Chinese submarine stalked the USS Kitty Hawk and then surfaced within a torpedo's firing range of it. In November 2007, the Chinese denied the USS Kitty Hawk carrier strike group entry into Victoria Harbor when it was seeking a respite from building seas and deteriorating weather. (The Kitty Hawk did make a visit to Hong Kong in 2010.) In March 2009, a handful of PLA navy ships harassed the U.S. surveillance ship the USNS Impeccable while it was openly conducting operations outside China's 12-mile territorial limit in the South China Sea, blocking its way and pretending to ram it. These are the actions not of a great power but of a still immature one.

China's assertiveness at sea is also demonstrated by its capital purchases. Beijing is developing asymmetric niche capabilities designed to block the U.S. Navy from entering the East China Sea and other Chinese coastal waters. China has modernized its destroyer fleet and has plans to acquire one or two aircraft carriers but is not acquiring warships across the board. Instead, it has focused on building new classes of conventional, nuclear attack, and ballistic missile submarines. According to Seth Cropsey, a former deputy undersecretary of the U.S. Navy, and Ronald O'Rourke of the Congressional Research Service, China could field a submarine force larger than the U.S. Navy's, which has 75 submarines in commission, within 15 years. Moreover, the Chinese navy, says Cropsey, plans to use over-the-horizon radars, satellites, seabed sonar networks, and cyberwarfare in the service of antiship ballistic missiles. This, along with China's burgeoning submarine fleet, is designed to eventually deny the U.S. Navy easy access to significant portions of the western Pacific.

As part of its effort to control its offshore waters in the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea, China is also improving its mine-warfare capability, buying fourth-generation jet fighters from Russia, and deploying some 1,500 Russian surface-to-air missiles along its coast. Furthermore, even as they are putting fiber-optic systems underground and moving their defense capabilities deep into western China, out of potential enemies' naval missile range, the Chinese are developing an offensive strategy to strike that icon of U.S. power, the aircraft carrier.

China is not going to attack a U.S. carrier anytime soon, of course, and it is still a long way from directly challenging the United States militarily. But its aim is to develop such capabilities along its seaboard to dissuade the U.S. Navy from getting between the first island chain and the Chinese coast whenever and wherever it wants. Since the ability to shape one's adversary's behavior is the essence of power, this is evidence that a Greater China is being realized at sea as on land.

STRAIGHT TO TAIWAN

MOST IMPORTANT to the advent of a Greater China is the future of Taiwan. The issue of Taiwan is often discussed in moral terms: Beijing talks about the need to consolidate the national patrimony and unify China for the good of all ethnic Chinese; Washington talks about preserving this model democracy. But the real issue is something else. As U.S. General Douglas MacArthur put it, Taiwan is an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" midway up China's seaboard. From there, say the naval strategists Holmes and Yoshihara, an outside power such as the United States can "radiate" power along China's coastal periphery. If Taiwan returned to the bosom of mainland China, the Chinese navy not only would suddenly be in an advantageous strategic position vis-à-vis the first island chain but also would be freed up to project power beyond it to an unprecedented degree. The adjective "multipolar" is thrown around liberally to describe the next world order; only the fusing of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland would mark the real emergence of a multipolar military order in East Asia.

According to a 2009 RAND study, by the year 2020, the United States will no longer be able to defend Taiwan from a Chinese attack. The Chinese, argues the report, will by that time be able to defeat the United States in a war in the Taiwan Strait even if the United States has F-22S, two carrier strike groups, and continued access to the Kadena Air Base, in Okinawa, Japan. The report emphasizes the air battle. The Chinese would still have to land tens of thousands of troops by sea and would be susceptible to U.S. submarines. Yet the report, with all its caveats, does highlight a disturbing trend. China is just 100 miles away from Taiwan, whereas the United States must project military power from half a world away and with more limited access to foreign bases than it had during the Cold War. China's strategy to deny the U.S. Navy entry into certain waters is designed not only to keep U.S. forces away generally but also, specifically, to foster its dominance over Taiwan.

Beijing is preparing to envelop Taiwan not just militarily but economically and socially, too. Some 30 percent of Taiwan's exports go to China. There are 270 commercial flights per week between Taiwan and the mainland. Two-thirds of Taiwanese companies have made investments in China in the last five years. Half a million tourists go from the mainland to the island annually, and 750,000 Taiwanese reside in China for about half of every year. Increasing integration appears likely; how it comes about, however, is uncertain and will be pivotal for the future of great-power politics in the region. If the United States simply abandons Taiwan to Beijing, then Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and other U.S. allies in the Pacific Ocean, as well as India and even some African states, will begin to doubt the strength of Washington's commitments. That could encourage those states to move closer to China and thus allow the emergence of a Greater China of truly hemispheric proportions.

This is one reason why Washington and Taipei must consider asymmetric ways to counter China militarily. The aim should be not to defeat China in a war in the Taiwan Strait but to make the prospect of war seem prohibitively costly to Beijing. The United States could then maintain its credibility with its allies by keeping Taiwan functionally independent until China became a more liberal society. The Obama administrations announcement, in early 2010, that it would sell $6.4 billion worth of weapons to Taiwan is thus vital to the United States' position vis-à-vis China, and in Eurasia overall. And the goal of transforming China domestically is not a pipe dream: the millions of Chinese tourists who travel to Taiwan see its spirited political talk shows and the subversive titles in its bookstores. And yet, somewhat counterintuitively, a more democratic China could be an even more dynamic great power than a repressive China would be, in an economic sense and hence in a military sense, too.

In addition to concentrating its forces on Taiwan, the Chinese navy is projecting more power in the South China Sea, China's gateway to the Indian Ocean and to the world's hydrocarbon transport route. The challenges of piracy, radical Islam, and the rise of India's navy reside all along the way, including near the bottlenecks through which a large proportion of China's oil tankers and merchant ships must pass. In terms of overall strategic significance, the South China Sea could become, as some have said, a "second Persian Gulf." Nicholas Spykman, the twentieth-century scholar of geopolitics, noted that throughout history, states have engaged in "circumferential and transmarine expansion" to gain control of adjacent seas. Greece sought control over the Aegean, Rome over the Mediterranean, the United States over the Caribbean--and now China over the South China Sea. Spykman called the Caribbean "the American Mediterranean" to underscore its importance to the United States. The South China Sea may become "the Asian Mediterranean" and the heart of political geography in coming decades.

LIQUID INSECURITIES

THERE IS, however, a contradiction at the heart of China's efforts to project power at sea in the Asian Mediterranean and beyond. On the one hand, China seems intent on denying U.S. vessels easy access to its coastal seas. On the other, it is still incapable of protecting its lines of communication at sea, which would make any attack on a U.S. warship futile, since the U.S. Navy could simply cut off Chinese energy supplies by interdicting Chinese ships in the Pacific and Indian oceans. Why even bother trying to deny access if you never intend to enforce it? According to the defense consultant Jacqueline Newmyer, Beijing aims to create "a disposition of power so favorable" that "it will not actually have to use force to secure its interests." Showcasing new weapons systems, building port facilities and listening posts in the Pacific and Indian oceans, giving military aid to littoral states located between Chinese territory and the Indian Ocean--none of these moves is secret; all are deliberate displays of power. Rather than fight the United States outright, the Chinese seek to influence U.S. behavior precisely so as to avoid a confrontation.

Nonetheless, there seems to be a hard edge to some of Chinas naval activities. China is constructing a major naval base on the southern tip of Hainan Island, smack in the heart of the South China Sea, with underground facilities that could accommodate up to 20 nuclear and diesel-electric submarines. This is an exercise of Monroe Doctrine-style sovereignty over nearby international waters. China may have no intention of going to war with the United States today or in the future, but motives can change. It is better to track capabilities instead.

The current security situation at the edges of Eurasia is fundamentally more complicated than it was in the first years after World War II. As American hegemony ebbs and the size of the U.S. Navy declines or plateaus, while China's economy and military grow, multipolarity will increasingly define power relationships in Asia. The United States is providing Taiwan with 114 Patriot air defense missiles and dozens of advanced military communications systems. China is building underground submarine pens on Hainan Island and developing antiship missiles. Japan and South Korea are continuing to modernize their fleets. India is building a great navy. Each of these states is seeking to adjust the balance of power in its favor.

This is why U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's rejection of balance-of-power politics as a relic of the past is either disingenuous or misguided. There is an arms race going on in Asia, and the United States will have to face this reality when it substantially reduces its forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although no Asian state has any incentive to go to war, the risk of miscalculations about the balance of power will increase with time and with the buildup of air and naval forces in the region (if only by China and India). Tensions on land may reinforce tensions at sea: the power vacuums that China is now filling will in due course bring it into uneasy contact with, at a minimum, India and Russia. Once-empty spaces are becoming

crowded with people, roads, pipelines, ships--and missiles. The Yale political scientist Paul Bracken warned in 1999 that Asia was becoming a closed geography and faced a crisis of "room." That process has only continued since.

So can the United States work to preserve stability in Asia, protect its allies there, and limit the emergence of a Greater China while avoiding a conflict with Beijing? Offshore balancing may not be sufficient. As one former high-ranking Indian official told me early this year, major U.S. allies in Asia (such as India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea) want the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force to act in "concert" with their own forces--so that the United States will be an integral part of Asia's landscape and seascape, not merely a force lurking over the distant horizon. There is a big difference between haggling with the United States over basing rights, as the Japanese have been doing recently, and wanting a wholesale withdrawal of U.S. forces.

One plan that has been making the rounds in the Pentagon argues that the United States could "counter Chinese strategic power . . . without direct military confrontation" with a U.S. fleet of just 250 ships (down from the 280 it has now) and a 15 percent cut in defense spending. This plan, designed by the retired U.S. Marine colonel Pat Garrett, is significant because it introduces into the Eurasian equation the strategic significance of Oceania. Guam and the Caroline, Marshall, Northern Mariana, and Solomon islands are all U.S. territories, commonwealths with defense agreements with the United States, or independent states that would probably be open to such agreements. Oceania will grow in importance because it is both relatively close to East Asia and outside the zone in which China is eager to deny easy access to U.S. warships. Guam is only a four-hour flight from North Korea and a two-day sail from Taiwan. It would be less provocative for the United States to keep bases in Oceania in the future than it has been for it to keep troops in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Andersen Air Force Base, on Guam, already is the most commanding platform from which the United States projects hard power anywhere. With 100,000 bombs and missiles and a store of 66 million gallons of jet fuel, it is the U.S. Air Force's biggest strategic "gas-and-go" facility in the world. Long lines of c-17 Globemasters and F/A-18 Hornets fill the base's runways. Guam is also home to a U.S. submarine squadron and is expanding as a naval base. It and the nearby Northern Mariana Islands are both almost equidistant from Japan and the Strait of Malacca. And the southwestern tip of Oceania--namely, the offshore anchorages of the Australian-owned Ashmore Islands and Cartier Islet and the adjacent seaboard of western Australia itself (from Darwin to Perth)--looks out from below the Indonesian archipelago toward the Indian Ocean. Thus, under Garrett's plan, the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force could take advantage of Oceania's geography to constitute a "regional presence in being" located "just over the horizon" from the informal borders of a Greater China and the main shipping lanes of Eurasia. (The phrase "regional presence in being" echoes the British naval historian Sir Julian Corbett's "fleet in being" of a hundred years ago, which referred to a dispersed collection of ships that can quickly coalesce into a unified fleet if necessary. "Just over the horizon" reflects a confluence of offshore balancing and participation in a concert of powers.)

Strengthening the U.S. air and sea presence in Oceania would be a compromise approach between resisting a Greater China at all cost and assenting to a future in which the Chinese navy policed the first island chain. This approach would ensure that China paid a steep price for any military aggression against Taiwan. It would also allow the United States to scale back its so-called legacy bases on the first island chain but nonetheless allow U.S. ships and planes to continue to patrol the area.

The Garrett plan also envisions a dramatic expansion of U.S. naval activity in the Indian Ocean. It does not envision enlarging existing U.S. bases, however; it anticipates relying on

bare-bones facilities in the Andaman Islands, the Comoros, the Maldives, Mauritius, Réunion, and the Seychelles (some of which are run directly or indirectly by France and India), as well as on defense agreements with Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore. This would ensure free navigation and unimpeded energy flows throughout Eurasia. And by both de-emphasizing the importance of existing U.S. bases in Japan and South Korea and diversifying the United States' footprint around Oceania, the plan would do away with easy-to-target "master" bases.

The United States' hold on the first island chain is beginning to be pried loose anyway. Local populations have become less agreeable to the presence of foreign troops in their midst. And the rise of China makes Beijing intimidating and appealing at once--mixed feelings that could complicate the United States' bilateral relations with its Pacific allies. It is about time. The current crisis in U.S.-Japanese relations--which has arisen because the inexperienced Hatoyama government wants to rewrite the rules of the bilateral relationship in its favor even as it talks of developing deeper ties with China--should have occurred years ago. The United States' still extraordinarily paramount position in the Pacific Ocean is an outdated legacy of World War II, a function of the devastation that China, Japan, and the Philippines suffered during the conflict. Nor can the United States' presence on the Korean Peninsula, a byproduct of a war that ended over half a century ago, last forever.

A Greater China may be emerging politically, economically, or militarily in Central Asia, on the Indian Ocean, in Southeast Asia, and in the western Pacific. But just beyond this new realm will be a stream of U.S. warships, many perhaps headquartered in Oceania and partnering with naval forces from India, Japan, and other democracies. And in time, as China's confidence grows, its blue-water force could develop a less territorial approach and itself be drawn into a large regional naval alliance.

In the meantime, it is worth noting that, as the political scientist Robert Ross pointed out in 1999, in military terms, the relationship between the United States and China will be more stable than was the one between the United States and the Soviet Union. This is because of the particular geography of East Asia. During the Cold War, U.S. maritime power alone was insufficient to contain the Soviet Union; a significant land force in Europe was also required. But no such land force will ever be required around the edge of Eurasia, because even as the United States' land presence around the borders of a Greater China diminishes, the U.S. Navy will continue to be stronger than the Chinese navy.

Still, the very fact of China's rising economic and military power will exacerbate U.S.-Chinese tensions in the years ahead. To paraphrase Mearsheimer, the United States, the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, will try to prevent China from becoming the hegemon of much of the Eastern Hemisphere. This could be the signal drama of the age.

MAP: CHINA: Approximate zone of Chinese influence, Countries that will resist Chinese influence.

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