

CHINA AND AMERICA IN THE CHANGING WORLD

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It will soon be 25 years since I was involved in the normalization of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China, and I still recall the enormous contrast between what China was like then and what China is like now. At the time, the streets of Beijing, and I sense that this audience is quite familiar with China, was filled with people riding on bicycles, people that to the quick glance of the eye could not be differentiated by sex. They all wore blue overalls and as a consequence — looked alike. The architecture of the city was a combination of some of the magnificent relics of the past and a great deal of Soviet-style architecture. Today the city is throbbing with vitality and cars — skyscrapers built with aluminum and stainless steel and glass, and there is a distinctive difference between the sexes that is noticeable even to a detached academic observer. And, in fact, a good part of it is very, very attractive.

So the change is enormous, and of course China's role in the world is also very different from what it was then. And last but not least, the enormous change involves us as well, the United States. When I went to China, we were engaged still in the throgs of the Cold War. We were preoccupied with the possibility of a direct nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. The world was polarized. Not long after normalization, we undertook a covert strategic relationship with China in two important areas, which even a year earlier, would have seemed impossible: close intelligence cooperation of a very specialized and mutually beneficial type, and joint operations designed to make the life of the Soviet army in Afghanistan as physically uncomfortable as possible.

Since then, the United States has become the only superpower. On the one hand, the relationship between the United States and China, is relatively normal, but on the other hand, it no longer involves such close strategic cooperation against such a clearly defined enemy. America's position in the world today is paramount, and that too is very different from the situation that prevailed 25 years ago.

First of all, let us perform a quick glance at the world in a decade or two from now. What is the likely global pecking order? What can we say about the global distribution of power? I think it's fair to say that unless one antici-

pates some fundamental discontinuities, America will still be the number one power in the world, in fact, the only superpower. Unless there is a very significant discontinuity, in all probability requiring a noteworthy domestic upheaval in the United States, in terms of American values and perspectives, the kind of supremacy the United States currently enjoys, which is a complex and wide ranging supremacy, involving both military power and technological innovation — the controversial but nonetheless important appeal of American society, and the role of America as the locomotive of the global economy, with some qualifications, will probably still be the central reality. Will the United States have serious rivals, and who might they be? Europe, perhaps? Maybe, but I only believe this with some serious reservations. I think it is altogether unlikely that in the course of the next decade or two, Europe will acquire the sense of shared, distinctive, and purposeful political identity that is translatable into effective globally-ranging military power. And therefore to the extent that Europe does continue to unite, to integrate, but also to expand, it is likely to be a very complex structure, economically powerful, comparable to the United States, socially in many respects very appealing, but probably without the missionary sense that America projects, and technologically innovative, but not in the military area, regarding which there isn't the financial base and the sense of motivation. Thus, Europe will not be able to play a role worldwide that might challenge American primacy, except in some specific financial and economic areas. These are important, but that will not be sufficient to make Europe an independent global player. An ambiguous relationship of partnership and tension with America will be a security necessity for Europe. Let us consider some other possibilities.

Russia? I think one can be very confident in saying that the global, or perhaps the imperial era in Russian history is finished. Russia for a long time saw itself as the third Rome, and then as the source of a global revolution. Neither of these is likely to be continued. Russian ambitions are necessarily being scaled down. Russia is no longer an empire; it is a nation-state in the process of self-redefinition, but of considerable vulnerability. The country's population is half that of the United States, with a GNP anywhere from 10 to 15 times less than that of the United

States, a population that is dropping dramatically, (not to mention extensive frontiers with hostile peoples to the south), close to 300 million Muslims now, probably 450 million in about 20 years, and Russia by then will probably have only 120 million. To the east is a country with nine times the population of Russia, an economy already five to six times larger than that of Russia, and with a huge and potentially wealth-generating Russian Far East being gradually de-populated. Russia will not be an independent global player. To ensure its security and modernization, it will have to associate itself increasingly with Europe.

Japan? Japan twenty years from now will be probably the oldest nation in the world in terms of the distribution of age categories in the country at large. It will have a very high percentage of people over the age of 65. It will have a relatively small percentage of people under the age of 25. It will be a country that in all probability will be relatively rich in terms of per capita income, but not a source of vitality and energy — ambition and drive, unless something very dramatic happens in the Far East. It will therefore not be an independent player.

What about India, the looming possible major world power? It is not to be dismissed. It has a population as large as China's. It has an economy that is growing, though not as impressively as China's. It certainly has major international ambitions. It measures itself by its rivalry with China. But I submit to you a proposition that will strike you as probably altogether unrealistic. I am of the view that India suffers from an Achilles heel that doesn't even require fundamental discontinuity in international affairs to make itself felt, (that is to say, the Achilles heel will make itself felt from normal evolutionary processes). I am impressed by the ethnic, religious, and linguistic heterogeneity of India. I am also impressed by its remarkable democratic record, by its splendid performance in keeping national unity intact, but I am also overwhelmed by growing evidence of strains between the Muslims and the Hindus, and the Muslims in India number between 130 to 140 million people. Furthermore, I am in awe of the fact that a large portion of the population is still illiterate, much more so than in China, and politically passive. A political awakening, particularly in the first phases of national consciousness, tends to emphasize linguistic, ethnic, and religious roots. And when that happens, unity could be increasingly challenged, as it is already being challenged, both externally by the conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir, as it is being challenged internally in Gujarrat and other parts of India, and could begin to infect the

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political processes. We see some evidence of that in the dominant Hindu party, some spokesmen of which are increasingly fundamentalist in their religious national identity. And thus I think that India is going to have serious internal problems, and in any case, its ability to operate in the world scene, will be limited in some fashion by its external rivalry with Pakistan, and with the Muslims more generally.

What then China, in that context? What about China, glancing ahead and assuming no major discontinuities? I think China will be a significant regional power, but not a global power. It will be a major economy; in fact, it may well be the second largest economy. But it will still be on a per capita basis a very impoverished country. It will still have a very antiquated social infrastructure. It will still be beset by problems of backwardness, but nonetheless, it will be an important regional power, probably dominant in its immediate regional environment, in so far as Southeast

Asia is concerned, where it is already surfacing in a pre-eminent fashion. It is beginning to enter, first economically, but already timidly politically, Central Asia, using a definition which is becoming increasingly anachronistic, namely that Central Asia is the five former Soviet Central Asian republics. In fact, Central Asia includes also Iran, Afghanistan, perhaps even Pakistan, but considering Central Asia and these anachronistic terms, China is in the process of reversing a trend which manifested itself over the last 200 years, as the Russian empire expanded eastward. The Russian sway over Central Asia became more manifest, and the Chinese retreated, on the basis of what is often described as "unequal treaties." The agreement reached between Russia and China five years ago with sev-

eral Central Asian republics about regional cooperation in Central Asia, plus Russia and China, was not normally an acknowledgement of China's growing economic presence in Central Asia, which is visible to the open eye—many of you probably have traveled in Central Asia and must have seen bazaars and shopping activities

conducted by Chinese tradesmen—but it is an acknowledgement of a fundamental reverse historically. China is now moving westward, and Russian influence is receding. So China will have a sphere of influence, and might extend even to Korea, if in some fashion Korea were to become unified.

But China will still not be a global power, in the sense of having all the requisite attributes of a complex, global reach that is simultaneously political, economic, military, technological, and cultural. It will be an increasingly im-

portant player and certainly a very important player regionally, and therefore China will be more of an independent player on the world scene than anyone else except the United States. It will be more independent as a player than Europe, because of the liabilities that Europe will continue to suffer from, not to mention Russia, not to mention a rather static Japan, not to mention the potentially internally-strained India. But all of that, of course, is based on the assumption of continuity and rationality in the policies both of the Chinese and of the United States, given the centrality and importance of that relationship for both of us.

And therefore I turn to the second point, the nature of Chinese foreign policy and its relationship to us. As a broad proposition, I would say that the Chinese definition of the world currently is both apt and quite rational and quite realistic. It was well-defined and the Chinese have sometimes this slightly elliptical elegant way of defining inter-

national conditions as follows. In a recent analysis published by the daily organ of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army, I found it to capture the essence. I quote:

"The essential pattern of the development of the international situation at present, and in the near future, will be: overall peace with localized wars, overall calm with localized tension, and overall stability with localized unrest."

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I think that is a very apt and realistic analysis of how the world scene today is to be perceived, and its likely condition for some time to come. More generally, in so far as the U.S. and China are concerned, since the accidental bombing by U.S. planes of

the Chinese embassy in Belgrade several years ago, and particularly since the plane incident involving the U.S. and China in the spring of 2001, the relationship has





become much more nuanced and with both sides striving to infuse it with as much normality as possible. The Chinese analyses, for example, of America's world role, have by and large, though not exclusively, abandoned their earlier tendency, manifest as recently as a year and a half ago until prior to 9/11, to portray the United States as a hegemonic, aggressive power. Those were the exact words that the Chinese used about the Soviet Union, and when I conducted the secret negotiations with Deng Xiaoping, we found a common platform in so stressing that the Soviet Union is an aggressive, hegemonic power, and that provided the basis for some of the collaboration to which I have already alluded.

But beyond that, the Chinese more explicitly now acknowledge the reality and even in some respects the desirability of the American presence in the Far East. Let me quote from another recent Chinese analysis, just one sentence: The U.S. presence in this region is an objective reality forged through history. In other words, there is nothing abnormal about it; it reflects history, and it is an objective reality. And the Chinese, as a consequence, take a more benign view of the American presence in the Far East.

On another occasion, a Chinese analyst of the American-Chinese relationship attempt to summarize the 5 areas of difference and conflict between the United States and China. And I was rather interested by the sequence of these five points, as well as their definition. The first

was in his view a conflict regarding China's sovereignty and territory, namely Taiwan and Tibet. The second spoke of differences between China and America: ideological conflicts focusing on social system and human rights. The third is friction on issues of trade and economics more generally. The fourth are differences regarding arms and nonproliferation. And the fifth are the struggles over multipolarization, nationalism, and globalization.

It's an interesting list, because as you notice the first item pertains to a specific national issue. Only the second item speaks rather greatly and generally of doctrinal issues. Ideological issues are no longer central, no longer the critical definition of the antagonistic element in the relationship. It is a much more cautious and more nuanced definition of the occasional, or sometimes pervasive, tensions in the relationship. In light of this, it was perhaps surprising that after 9/11, the American-Chinese relationship evolved further. Both sides recognized that each needs the cooperation of the other, and the war on terrorism, whatever that may mean in practice, was seized by both sides as the point of departure for further cautious accommodations, and even some forms of collaboration. The United States, for example, decided to designate a Uighur movement in Xinjiang as a terrorist organization. The Chinese, in return, did provide some information pertaining to international terrorist activity. And last but not least, most recently, they are very cautious regarding the issue of Iraq. While not endorsing the American posi-

tion, while not associating themselves with it, the Chinese did not take the position taken by France—a direct, clear-cut disagreement with the U.S. position, leaving aside whether merits or demerits ought to be assigned to either side, America or France. They didn't even associate themselves with the more ambiguously negative position that Putin's Russia adopted on the subject. The Chinese position was one of rather cautious disapproval, but basically non-engagement in any posture that was directly colliding with the United States.

More recently still, in the last several weeks, after a posture of protracted ostentatious un-involvement in the problems posed by North Korean nuclear armament, China did undertake an initiative of sorts. It sponsored and participated in the so-called trilateral meeting involving the United States, North Korea, and China, thereby breaking the logjam between the North Korean position, which insisted on a bilateral discussion with the United States alone, thereby denigrating South Korea and putting Japan at the margins, and the American position, which insisted on a multilateral dialogue. The Chinese willingness to engage provided a convenient way out, though I have to say that in my judgment, the greater concession was made by the United States than by North Korea. China simply facilitated that greater concession by providing an umbrella that obscured, under the trilateral label, that the dialogue in reality was essentially bilateral. For the Chinese contribution was that of several armchairs, a table, electric light, drinking water, pencils and pads, plus a serious-looking Chinese official acting as host. Nonetheless, it was a step that was helpful, and does indicate that China is beginning to realize that the challenge that North Korea poses could be profoundly destabilizing in its immediate environment, in a way that may not be in China's interest, even if it is profoundly embarrassing, not to mention potentially complicating, for the United States.

On the Taiwan issue, which remains the number one issue potentially between the United States and China, basically the existing arrangement is one of agreeing to disagree and to let history work itself out. This does not preclude periodic tensions, particularly when the United States signs new arms agreement with Taiwan, and particularly when the United States upgrades the levels of official contacts with Taiwan. But even so, it is still within certain bounds of agreement to disagree, in the sense that emphasis on "one China" is maintained by the United States, and of course asserted by China. China at the same time holds in abeyance as an

eventual prospect the notion of one country, two systems—a notion which is being tried out with various degrees of success in Hong Kong, but a notion which does imply that the resolution of this issue is to be postponed into the indefinite future. China has not abandoned the right to use force, but the United States has also made it very clear, as we did 25 years ago in our first dialogue with Deng Xiaoping, that the United States could not be indifferent if force was used, even though the issue pertains to "one China" and is an internal Chinese affair. Both sides understand each other. Nonetheless, periodically the Chinese reassert their right even to the use of force, and some of their analyses of the problem do postulate that at some point, the increase in China's power may alter the nature of the manner in which this problem is handled. The recent Chinese analysis of this subject stated, for example, the following, and I quote:

The Chinese position [toward war in Iraq] was one of rather cautious disapproval, but basically non-engagement in any posture that was directly colliding with the United States.

"The greatest difficulty we face in resolving the Taiwan problem is that the actual strength of our national defense is still too weak. If we want to complete the great undertaking of unifying the motherland, we will need

the actual strength of our national defense to reach or exceed the sum of the actual military strength of Taiwan's separatist forces and their external supporters [otherwise unnamed]. Simply put, when the actual strength of our national defense is near to or reaches the level of [the United States], then the success of unification is assured. We will not need to resort to force to complete the goal of unification."

Now, this was by a leading Chinese expert, published by Xinhua. Now, obviously that is not going to happen soon, and the Chinese know that. Therefore, the issue of Taiwan is one for the future, beyond the perspective that I outlined at the beginning of my remarks, which is roughly the next 20 years. On at least one occasion, President Deng hinted that it is more a matter of fifty years, and hence it is an issue that is not, at this stage, adversely and dramatically affecting the relationship.

In the meantime, China's opening to the World Trade Organization is making itself felt. There is more Chinese activism in Asian regionalism, emphasis on China's leadership role in the emerging Asian sphere of cooperation, all in the context of a realization that a pause in any serious antagonism between China and America is in China's historical interest. And that, by and large, is matched or reciprocated by the United States. Go back just two years, shortly to the electoral season of the year 2000, or the

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discussions in the United States after the election. China was very much en vogue, and we have tended to forget the matter in which it was en vogue. In this periodic American obsession with which country is the enemy of the year, China was rapidly graduating into the most contemporary candidate. In the year 2000 and 2001, leading personalities in the public policy scene, some of them prominent in the Bush administration, were openly talking about China becoming too long the number one threat to American security. In my view, this is an exaggerated perspective, but it was the widely stated perspective, which of course cooled down dramatically after 9/11. Therefore, we recognized what might be called the need for a pause, the need to try to deal more pragmatically with a number of regional problems, with China's participation, global problems, in some respects as well.

Consequently, that brings me to my third point, namely, the implications for the foregoing of China's domestic dilemmas and prospects. Let me immediately say that I speak of this subject with some degree of hesitation, because I am not a China expert. So these are the comments of a person whose interest is in China as a world player, who realizes that there is a connection between China's domestic affairs and foreign policy, but not the view of an expert on internal Chinese developments. The way I would put it is that in my view, the more serious domestic dilemma that China faces, is the growing gap between the trajectory of domestic socioeconomic change, and of political change. The former has been dramatic, impressive, constructive, innovative, and open. The latter is slower, more discriminating, more limited in its scope, though not unimpressive on some levels, particularly local government and to some extent low-level judicial system, to some extent access to information, openness of dialogue within certain strata, but certainly institutionally lagging behind the scope of socioeconomic pluralism. There may be attempts by the new political leadership to narrow that gap, but it's not going to be easy, because the political system is not that

flexible. It's deeply entrenched; it has its own political culture; it has its own benefits of power. And these benefits of power involve even such things as personal corruption. Personal corruption in those walks of life, not excluding the very high echelons of the political leadership, and one could cite chapter and verse of that through family connections at a very high level, involving frequently different names, for those who indirectly produce the material benefits beyond that, there is an awareness within the need leadership, particularly within this new leadership, of the dilemmas posed by social inequality and regional inequality. The economically measurable coefficients of social inequality for China are now very high, comparable to some very socially unequal capitalist countries. Regional inequality is visible through the open eye. The new Chinese leadership is aware of both, and it is talking about it and it is concerned with it. I suspect that it will make more of an effort to deal with it. But still, these are monumental problems of enormous scale, not easy to address within a political system that is not very flexible. The pressures of the world economy, the pressures of global health—SARS—are impacting on that, dramatizing the problems, dramatizing the need for drastic remedies, and the question is whether these remedies will come quickly enough. If they do, then my projection of the global pecking order for the year 2020 is probably quite correct. If they do not, there could be serious discontinuities produced by developments within China.

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There is a serious problem of how China is going to define itself. For how long can a political system, which defines itself as communist and is based on one-Party hold on power, be compatible with socioeconomic

change that is increasingly capitalist, with some of the negative manifestations of capitalism, particularly in the realm of inequality and social injustice? There is going to be a crisis of self-definition, at some point, and will demand a great deal of imagination and skill and boldness on the part of the Chinese leadership to cope with it. I do not know if it will or will not. The Chinese have had a remarkable record of performance over the last 25 years. Maybe they will cope with it as well. But the problems are going to be very, very serious. And they are symbolically defined under a single word: Tiananmen. At some point, the Party, the ruling party, if it is to deal with problem of political change, will have to come to terms with Tiananmen. It cannot be swept under the rug, and dealing with it is going to test the acumen, the intelligence, the ability to cope with really large scale problems of a very new leadership. As you know, the prime minister was in Tiananmen Square with the previous leader, now still in house arrest, at a time when that leader was negotiating with the students. There is a photograph of him standing right behind the leader. He certainly must have memories of that. And if

one goes to China and talks with one's Chinese friends, in the Party, in the leadership, Tiananmen comes up with a sense of visible, historical discomfort.

China is very preoccupied with unity, for good historical reasons. One of the problems of dealing with change, is that change brings with it fear of disunity, and it is also a factor that weighs heavily on those in charge, and might limit their options. And that could produce conditions in China which could be quite explosive. My hope is that China will cope, that China will make the changes. Certainly the record justifies some degree of hope that this will be the case. But one would have to be blind not to recognize the risks, and the difficulties of making these adjustments, even on such relatively manageable issues such as SARS, though there has been some change, but how far it goes, we still are not in a position to judge.

Now what about then the possible discontinuities—what might they mean? First of all, in addition to the inherently unpredictable consequences of an internal disruption in China, which could be destabilizing for the region as a whole, we do have the potential of destabilization on the fringes of China, which will also have a destabilizing impact on the world scene and on American-Chinese relations. The North Korean issue can not fester indefinitely. It will have to be addressed in some fashion. And the only effective way of addressing it is on the basis of regional cooperation, which goes beyond a trilateral umbrella for bilateral exchange of insults between American and North Korean representatives, plus some hint at concessions. It will have to be addressed in a serious fashion. It will have to be addressed in a manner which involves also Japan and South Korea, as well as North Korea, China and perhaps Russia. That could be a very major source of instability, and if it were to get out of hand, if it were to affect the American preserve in the Far East in some fashion, what would be the impact of that on Japan? Will Japan just remain static, under the American umbrella, gradually aging, facing structural economic difficulties, essentially pacifist in its external outlook, or could there be a sudden lurch? There are people in Japan who advocate it. They are isolated, they are few, but it is also a fact that if Japan were to turn desperate, it could transform itself into a very significant military player in an incredibly short period of time, with all of the attributes of modern military power. That is something that would obviously alter the Far East in a dramatic fashion.

But it does not have to be that dramatic to be quite revolutionary. If the American-Chinese relationship (either for domestic Chinese reasons, or because of the inability of either the Chinese or the U.S. or jointly) fails to handle North Korea, there could be an emergence gradually of an American-Japanese-South Korea-Taiwanese axis,

in effect an off-shore alliance against an unstable or threatening China with or without North Korea. That, too, would greatly polarize the situation in the Far East, and create a significant crisis between the United States and China. These negative developments are not to be dismissed. They have the potential for being a reality. They may not outweigh this stable scenario that I outlined at the beginning, but it would require continuous effort to translate the current pause in the American-Chinese relationship, the current phase of quasi-normality in that relationship, into a deepening cooperative relationship. We will have to think more actively about how to upgrade that relationship. I envisage three modest steps.

The first is the upgrading of the G-7, which has already been transformed into the G-8, by including China in it. Hints to that effect have been made. The Chinese,

because of their pride, have said that they do not really want to be in that club. Well, the Chinese have been offended by the fact that the G-7 has been transformed into the G-8 by the inclusion of Russia in it. Russia is not a democracy and is hardly an advanced industrial state, far less developed in terms of economic potential than modern-day China. But a formal invitation has never been issued, and I think we ought to think very hard

about drawing China into that relationship. We ought to be thinking seriously, and I've written about it before, about increasing the scope of the existing security arrangement, trying to multi-lateralize them, trying to institutionalize them, creating in effect some of the equivalents that exist elsewhere. And last but not least, we need more sustained, more formal American-Chinese-Japanese security talks on the stability of Northeast Asia, on its future shape, on future institutional innovations. If we do these things, then I think the chances are reasonable—assuming no major internal crisis within China—that what I outlined at the beginning of my talk will in fact be the reality which many of you will be confronting, which you may be actively involved in shaping. Namely, China will be an increasingly active world player, the predominant regional power, a participant in an international system that is sometimes with some tension but nonetheless stably expanding. That is the future which is attainable; it certainly is the future which strategically we ought to pursue.

Please note that the above text is a transcript of an original speech delivered by Professor Brzezinski at Stanford University on April 29th, 2003.

Zbigniew Brzezinski was the national security adviser to President Carter and member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board; counselor-in-residence at the Center for Strategic and International Studies; trustee of the Trilateral Commission; 1981 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom; former faculty member at Columbia and Harvard universities, and current professor at Johns Hopkins University.