

Introduction

Ron Huisken

Asia looks and feels very different now compared with the Cold War period. Back then, American pre-eminence was a given even though the US presence in the region was far from ubiquitous or overwhelming. Washington shaped events in Asia with comparatively loose reins. America's unrelenting focus was the contest with the Soviet Union and the pre-eminent prize in that contest was always Europe. Certainly from the late 1970s, after the United States withdrew from Vietnam, the primary front in the Cold War moved decisively back to Europe.

In Asia, the United States had a huge geopolitical asset in Japan, the world's second-largest economy with first-order industrial and technological capacities. Japan, however, was also a state with a very modest political and security profile so it did little to create an impression of a comprehensively powerful 'Western' partnership at the helm of Asian affairs.

The sense that Asia now works differently and is marching to a different drum can be traced to a single source: the re-emergence of China. During the past 30 years, China has set new benchmarks for fast and, above all, sustained economic growth. From at least the mid 1990s, China's economic numbers—trade, investment, raw material demands—have assumed proportions that have made it a player of consequence in the global economy and a decisive force, naturally, in East Asia. It is now commonplace to observe that there is nothing new about this: China has been the dominant economic power in Asia for most of recorded history. This historical norm, however, was interrupted early in the nineteenth century—too far into the past to be recognisable and readily accommodated by the actors in today's international arena. A powerful China therefore feels new and unfamiliar.

The United States burst onto the global stage in a comparably dramatic fashion a century before China—that is, in the three to four decades before World War I. Washington was hesitant and reactive about employing its power and influence. In Asia, as Aaron Friedberg (2003:17) has observed, America's involvement developed through reactions to a series of events 'followed by a major, largely unplanned, expansion in the tangible manifestations of US power in Asia, and somewhat more gradually and subtly, by an eventual broadening in the conception of American interests and responsibilities in the region'.

China offers a complete contrast. The dominant impression gained from a study of China's behaviour during the past three decades is that of a country engaged

in the deliberate, determined, thoughtful and patient construction of what it calls 'comprehensive national power'. China is taking no chances. In particular, it has endeavoured—with considerable success—to be highly disciplined and avoid any premature muscle flexing. It is fiercely insistent that it is still in the early stages of overcoming extreme poverty and weakness, interested only in contributing to a harmonious regional and global environment to facilitate this huge internal task and neither capable of nor inclined to engage in 'strategic' calculation. China's leaders have, in fact, declared that they are determined to prove the realists wrong and to play their full part in ensuring that China's rise does not also give rise to the instabilities and, eventually, conflict that accompanied the attempts by Germany and Japan in the past to carve out prominent positions for themselves in the Anglo-American world order.

This could be a somewhat forlorn hope. As set out in the following chapters, China has elaborated an extensive and reassuring narrative on its foreign, security and defence policies and has become increasingly confident and assertive in its bilateral and multilateral diplomatic practices. Inescapably, perhaps, questions and unease linger. For one thing, China is intimidatingly large. The capacities that it could possess by 2050 are daunting. The following chapters remind us that, even if China (or India for that matter) does not currently have the capacity to disturb the basic equilibrium of the international system, the behaviour of others can be shaped importantly by the prospect that it will have the capacity and, possibly, the inclination to do so in the future. It is important in this regard that China's system of governance remains stubbornly devoid of visible and reliable internal checks and balances. Further, Deng Xiaoping's famous 24-character maxim about 'keeping a low profile, hiding our strengths and biding our time' retained its iconic status for many years despite reinforcing the message of calculation and manipulation that emanated, inadvertently but all too clearly, from China's public diplomacy.

The net affect of these factors is a considerable dissonance in the international arena in respect of China's rise. China's burgeoning power threatens to outrun its strenuous efforts at reassurance. China's government evidently feels that it should be taken at face value while many of the states that it impinges on are disposed to be cautious, watchful and attracted to hedging strategies if they are available. Among other things, the chapters in this volume make particularly clear that China has demanding relationships with all four of the larger powers that it attaches primary importance to: the United States, Japan, Russia and India.

All of these strands of thought are reflected in the presentations that follow in this volume and in the discussions provoked by these presentations. Whether it is in the management of China's key bilateral relationships, the conduct of multilateral diplomacy or the elaborate endeavours to disguise the filling out of

its military capabilities, one encounters the incongruity of a China striving to appear harmless and inconspicuous while literally bursting at every seam.

The point was made in the discussions among contributors to this volume that although intentions were notoriously difficult to divine, China's long and uniquely well-documented history could be invoked to confirm a deep-seated reluctance to use power, even when it was indisputably predominant, for purposes of aggression or expansion. This seems on the surface to be a heroic assertion even on factual grounds, let alone serving as a dependable basis for responding to the China of the foreseeable future.

Equally, however, there was an illuminating discussion that stressed the extent to which a more powerful and influential China was the natural and inevitable consequence of its economic success. One did not have to ascribe a hidden agenda to China or to fault other major powers for failing to counter China's waxing influence. China had to accept that a moving elephant affected the behaviour of those close by no matter how docile the elephant appeared or professed to be. Others, for their part, had to make room for this new elephant and to be cognisant of its interests and idiosyncrasies.

The reality, of course, is that in recent decades China's leaders have had to jettison existential threats from rogue superpowers and propagating revolutionary ideology as foundations for the authority and legitimacy of their rule. They must now lean rather heavily on delivering stability, prosperity, international respect and regional and global influence to shape events in China's interests. They bring to this enterprise a distinctive set of assets and attitudes, including: an authoritarian, one-party government; an unusually high degree of concern about the natural cohesion of the State (Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan); impressions of China's 'rightful' place framed at least in part by circumstances that prevailed centuries ago; and a conviction reinforced by millennia of experience that good governance requires that diversity of opinion be vigorously contested through the relentless articulation of the thinking that supports the leadership's view of harmony, stability and prosperity.

There are other aspects of the prevailing 'reality' that are important to the challenge of coming to terms with China's rise and trying to envisage how this entity will behave as its relative power and influence continue to grow in the coming decades. Perhaps the most important of these was Deng Xiaoping's far-sighted conviction in 1978 that China's future would remain bleak unless it enmeshed itself with the global economy, and his supporting contention that fundamental geopolitical trends made an existential threat to China improbable into the indefinite future. This policy setting overturned an ancient and enduring preference for autonomy. Deng and his supporters gambled that China could reap the economic harvest and manage any social and political consequences considered unacceptable. The basic premises of this grand strategy have been

questioned from time to time as seemingly transformational events unfolded—the domestic unrest that culminated in the Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989, the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the stubborn durability of unipolarity during the 1990s and its virtual codification when the Bush Administration came into office in the United States in January 2001—but on each occasion China's leaders reaffirmed the core elements of Deng's policy settings.

China's openness to the global economy lies at the heart of the optimism that social and political change within China will be inexorable, that these changes will give rise to dependable internal checks and balances and allow greater confidence that a powerful China will be a self-disciplined and responsible international actor, and that external actors can endeavour to engage China to encourage and intensify this process.

A second important source of reassurance in the medium to longer term is the likelihood that there will be a relatively large number of states that could legitimately be characterised as major powers. In the next half-century, China could well become statistically the largest state in the world, but there will be a bunch of states and blocs in addition to the United States that even a mature China will have to take very seriously—the likes of Japan, India, Russia, the European Union and perhaps others.

The outlook that emerges from these observations is that there is little to be gained from characterising the China question in epochal terms: that it will become irresistibly powerful and disposed to view regional 'harmony' as compliant behaviour by all in its extended neighbourhood; that it will break down internally and descend into chaos; or that everything depends on engineering a transition to a recognisable form of democracy. The more sensible outlook is to view China as a certain member of the select group of the world's leading states, that its leadership is fundamentally realist and inclined and more capable than its counterparts in democratic countries to frame policy options with a long-term perspective. This is a China with whom other states, including Australia, will have compatible, competing and clashing interests that can be exploited to mutual benefit or that have to be managed to minimise costs and risks as the case may be. There are already indications that China's confidence in its future is beginning to outgrow Deng's counsel that China needed, in effect, to be deceptive to avoid premature challenges to its aspirations. There was nothing modest about the message China endeavoured to send via the Olympic Games in 2008. Beyond this very conspicuous gesture, however, if growing Chinese confidence translates into a more honest and transparent articulation of interests and aspirations, the prospects for healthy and focused engagement with other states can only increase.

At the level of the forces that will shape the strategic parameters of the Asia-Pacific region—that is, the basic image that each of the major powers forms of the others—perhaps the most ominous possibility is that the less confidence other states have in China’s internal checks and balances the stronger will be the propensity to entertain external variants that China, in turn, will view as antagonistic, leading, very probably, to an intensified militarisation of regional affairs. China, hopefully, will appreciate sooner rather than later that its visible capacities are beginning to speak more loudly than its strenuous rhetoric on ‘peaceful development’ and a ‘harmonious world’. Harmony, it should be remembered, is very much in the eyes of the beholder. It is of some interest to imagine asking some leading American observers if there were periods in the twentieth century that they would characterise as harmonious—that is, when the international system seemed to be running particularly smoothly from Washington’s perspective—and then inviting comment from their counterparts in other states.

While it could not be said that there was consensus on this core question, the strong sense that emerged from much of the discussion at the conference was that it was certainly imaginable that the United States and China, in particular, could build and sustain a constructive and resilient relationship and keep at bay the forces that could lead to a slide into antagonism. ‘Imaginable’, of course, does not mean straightforward. Arriving at a mutually acceptable relationship of power and influence that is very different from the one that has prevailed in the past half-century and that also leaves other major players content will demand statesmanship of a consistently high order.

It is hoped that the following chapters illuminate these and other themes on the broad question of living with a powerful China. On the earlier occasions when China was the pre-eminent power in Asia it was almost continuously engaged in military campaigns near and beyond the boundaries of its empire. That is something worth thinking about given, as they say, that while history may not repeat itself, it is prone to echo into the future.

Reference

Friedberg, Aaron 2003, ‘United States’, in Richard Ellings and Aaron Friedberg (eds), *Strategic Asia 2002–03: Asian aftershocks*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle.