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Searching for Security: Prospects for Peace in Sino-Foreign Relations

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Quansheng Zhao and Guoli Liu, eds. *Managing the China challenge: global perspectives*.
London and New York: Routledge, 2009.

Dennis J. Blasko. *Chinese Army today: tradition and transformation for the 21st century*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

For most of the 20th century, academic discussions of China centered on why it declined in power as the power of the West increased.¹ Then, around the turn of the century, the main line of inquiry shifted to attempting to understand the conditions of China's rise and the implications of its rise for the contemporary world.² *Managing the China Challenge* and *The Chinese Army Today* take part in this larger conversation about the global impact of China's growing influence.

Managing the China Challenge is written in explicit opposition to the underlying thesis of John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. In his book, Mearsheimer gave voice to a dominant position in contemporary discussions of China.³ According to his theory of offensive realism, Sino-American competition for global power will eventually result in war, as the U.S. will seek to maintain its dominance, and China will strive to raise its geopolitical profile. In contrast, the editor of *Managing the China Challenge*, Quansheng Zhao, has a decidedly different vision of Sino-foreign relations.

For him, China is not a threat: it is a challenge. Relations with China are not intractable: they are manageable. Although in his article, Zhao is the only one to explicitly make this argument, most of the contributions in the volume echo his optimistic view of the future of Sino-foreign relations. Although they do acknowledge sites of tension between China and the rest of the world, the contributing authors do not take large-scale conflict as a foregone conclusion. However, Zhao asserts that the creation of long-term amicable relations is dependent on all parties actively engaging in regional and global forums that foster mutual respect and understanding. Likewise, while Dennis Blasko's book does not directly address the future of Sino-foreign relations, concerns about potential international conflicts are implicit in his discussion of Chinese military preparations.

In the following sections, I divide my examination of these two volumes into three parts. First, I explore how these two books discuss China's own response to its growing influence in the global community, as coping with the challenges related to China's rise is just as much a domestic conundrum as it is an international one. Then, I expound on the contributors' views of foreign approaches to managing relations with China. Finally, I present a brief criticism of

¹ Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*. New York: Free Press, 1968. Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*. Stanford: Stanford university Press, 1973.

² Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. R. Bin Wong. *China Transformed: historical change and the limits of European experience*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. Barry Naughton. *Growing out of the plan: Chinese economic reform, 1978-1993*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Quansheng Zhao's claim that it is possible to peacefully manage the future of Sino-foreign relations.

China's Response to its Growing Stature

Managing the China Challenge covers roughly the thirty years (1978-2008) since the Chinese leadership ended the country's era of socialist revolution and reoriented it onto a path of authoritarian capitalist reform.⁴ During this time period, China has emphasized one key concept to characterize its foreign relations – “peace and development.” In line with this policy stance, it has sought to promote international arrangements that facilitate economic growth at home and the expansion of trade abroad. In the economic realm, it has domestically favored foreign investment in China and joint ventures that promote technology transfer. Internationally, it has pushed to gain access to raw materials and markets for its manufactured products. Likewise, in the world of geopolitics, it has worked to maintain regional harmony in East Asia and beyond and emphasized interstate cooperation, not military violence, to resolve issues related to problem areas.

As the articles in *Managing the China Challenge* make clear, this strategy has proved largely successful. Aside from a war with Vietnam in the late 1970s, China did not wage a military conflict with any foreign power for over three decades and has overall showed restraint in its handling of conflicting territorial claims with neighboring countries. The only time China applied military pressure was in 1995 in order to reign in what it perceived as a recalcitrant Taiwanese province moving towards a declaration of independence. China however quickly drew down its forces when the U.S. made a show of force by moving naval vessels into the region.

Besides this brief venture into brinkmanship, China has overwhelmingly endeavored to gain political and economic influence around the world through an emphasis on shared interests with other states. In these endeavors, China has advocated the formation of a multipolar world, all the while trying not to appear to be forming alliances that the U.S. would be likely to perceive as impinging on its core security interests. As Guoli Liu's article demonstrates, with this amicable approach to foreign relations, China's domestic economy developed rapidly, and foreign trade soared. In a relatively short time span, China became not just a major contributor to the global economy, it became a key member of top economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization. It also morphed into the second largest economy in the world, and according to some predictions, it is on track to displace the United States as the world's number one economy sometime in this century.

While China has prioritized peace in its foreign policy, Dennis Blasko's book makes evident that China has not neglected the armed protection of its national security, as the government has endeavored to expand and update its military capabilities in accordance with perceived security threats and contemporary methods of defense. In response to the first Persian Gulf War, for example, China consistently pushed to move away from its army centered military and labor-intensive approach to warfare. In this pursuit, it made domestic efforts to improve the technological level of its military hardware and acquired advanced equipment from Russia. To forge a more capital-intensive military apparatus, China also formed special operation forces and started to integrate information technology and joint command and control systems into its management of the different branches of the military. In preparation for the eventualities of

⁴ Maurice Meisner. *The Deng Xiaoping era: an inquiry into the fate of Chinese socialism, 1978-1994*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996.

attack, China staged several simulated responses to various threats and established a regime of regular training for the enlisted. In the wake of 9/11, it also ran drills on how military and police forces would respond to different types of terrorist attacks. China's ongoing concern over regional separatism has manifested itself in war games centered on Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, where movements towards self-rule are perceived as most rife.

Despite these efforts to improve its military, however, certain basic aspects of China's military have not changed. The army is still the dominant branch, and a significant portion of military forces are still focused on maintaining order at home. Due to limited equipment and logistical abilities, China is also not able to project its forces for any length of time much beyond its immediate borders. Last, but not least, in spite of increases in defense expenditures, the Chinese military is still far behind the military capacity of the United States in terms of technology and financial endowments.

Foreign Approaches to Managing China's Rise

The papers in *Managing the China Challenge* testify to the fact that by and large, foreign actors with China have opted for a strategy of engagement. No matter a country's size or influence, the benefits of maintaining non-confrontational relations with China have been judged to outweigh the advantages of being antagonistic. The primary reason for such a non-antagonistic approach has been that like China, its international partners have accorded primacy to trade relations.

Robert Sutter's article shows that the United States has for the most part not been an exception to this general rule of statecraft. Congress occasionally complained about China's unfair trading practices, currency manipulation, and human rights violations, but, on the whole, the United States has sought to manage its differences with China and promote Sino-American trade. Without a doubt, tensions spiked during crisis situations, and political passions flared after the Tiananmen massacre, the bombing of China's Belgrade embassy, and the downing of a US spy plane in 2001. However, American authorities were quick to mend ties and reassert the predominance of economic concerns. On the other hand, in recent years, Americans have exhibited more trepidation about the rise of Chinese economic influence, and, as with Japan in the 1990s, political actors have blocked the purchase of certain American-owned assets by a foreign power perceived to be encroaching on U.S. dominance.

As for the European Union, while William A. Callahan's article generally downplays economic factors, state actors in Europe have also sought to advance economic relations and secure favorable trade conditions and business deals for members of the Union. It is thus not surprising that when actors in the European Union and China have endeavored to forge a strategic partnership, they have resorted to vague language that highlights the similarities between Chinese and European objectives and downplays their differences regarding political issues such as the importance of multi-party electoral democracy, a pluralist press, and the protection of human rights. The European Union, like China, has also not pushed to build more concrete institutions to bolster their alliance and make it into a counter-geopolitical pole to the U.S. Instead, the EU has valued its relationship with the United States above its relationship with China.

Mike M. Mochizuki's contribution to *Managing the China Challenge* shows that like the European Union, Japan pushed to expand economic contacts with China yet also held in higher esteem its connection with the United States (though given Japan's geographic proximity to China, it also, predictably, has devoted more energy to balancing economic interactions with efforts to improve the military security of the Japanese archipelago). Still, generally speaking,

Japan has been cautious in its handling of sensitive issues with China and has not applied much direct pressure to China in order to resolve territorial disputes. The only major exception to this restrained approach was in its treatment of its imperial past, as the government made changes to history textbooks, which sanitized Japanese military actions in China in the early 20th century, and central government leaders made repeated visits to religious shrines housing the souls of World War II perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

In contrast, as Yong Deng details, Russia and India have recently settled their historical disputes over territory. The Sino-Russian relationship, however, has gained much more in substance, as Russia has not only funneled gas, oil, and arms to China but has carried out joint war games against the United States and Japan as the unstated but no less intended enemy. With these actions, China and Russia have in a sense renewed their Cold War connection, yet this time around as anti-revolutionary authoritarian allies, seeking to use their friendship to gain more geopolitical space for maneuver and challenge America's global authority while still not directly impairing their valued relationship with the United States.

In a similar vein, India has also worked with China to create a multipolar world order. Yet, their ties to China have lacked the military and economic muscle of Russia's. Moreover, India entered more into direct competition with China over global resources and naval control of sea lanes to Middle Eastern oil than have other entities. Still, like Russia, India was also hesitant to formalize any sort of relationship that might imperil the political and economic fruits of its amity with the United States. Likewise, as Evelyn Goh illustrates, Southeast Asia aspired to ensure that its dealings with China did not damage its associations with the United States. However, the states in this region pursued this common aim for different purposes. Their goal was to prevent anyone outside power from obtaining an unchallenged dominant position in Southeast Asia and assure that neither Malaysia nor Indonesia acquired a prevailing influence. To this end, they welcomed extra-regional states to acquire a regional foothold. In practice, this has meant playing Japan, South Korea, China, and the United States against each other. As regards China in particular, on the one hand, Southeast Asian states have been concerned that international supply chains would leave Southeast Asia out of the global loop and channel foreign direct investment, low-cost production, and labor-intensive industries towards China. On the other hand, the same states have angled to have Chinese participation in regional organizations in ways that conform to regional norms.

In the case of Latin America, He Li demonstrates that China's adherence to historical norms (i.e. with respect to how outsiders interact with the region) has been both a boon and a burden. Since the late 1990s, Chinese investment in the region has surged, but the lion's share of their investment has been in Caribbean tax havens, while the rest has been in raw materials transported by the shipload across the Pacific for domestic economic endeavors. While this influx of investment has benefited raw material exporters such as Argentina, Venezuela, and Chile, it has been paired with Chinese industries exporting goods to Latin America at prices below what local producers in Mexico and Brazil can afford to charge. Yet, despite China's heightened economic presence in Latin America, it is quantitatively still far from challenging the United States' role in trade with Latin America. Indeed, in Latin American trade, the real loser in recent years has been Taiwan, as many countries have switched recognition to China in exchange for real or perceived economic advantages.

A Brief Critique

In *Managing the China Challenge*, Warren I. Cohen is the sole dissenting voice to the volume's dominant chorus of historical optimism. Taking a position that might be called the pessimism of the *longue duree*, he concludes, after a rapid overview of China's long history, that there is no reason that as China's power accumulates, it will be any less brutal and self-serving than it and other empires have been in the past. Cohen's position is a welcome counterpoint, especially as it points to a problem common to political science as a discipline. Political science analyses are capable of taking the global pulse and describing the impact of China's rise on the political and economic strategies and conditions of states around the world. Yet, with their overriding emphasis on the present and the future, the products of this analysis often lack historical depth. In *Managing the China Challenge*, this tendency is most apparent in one key area: In their discussions of China's various engagements abroad, the authors neglect, in my view, to give sufficient weight to historical memory as a factor in state politics. This omission is important because as recent imbroglios in the Pacific between China and Japan have demonstrated, the scars of World War II have not yet healed, and that which is repressed risks returning as violent outbursts—particularly if both state actors in China and Japan do not begin to carry out enduring efforts at reconciliation.

In my opinion, for this transformation to occur, the Japanese government must no longer attempt to whitewash the brutality of its imperialist past. Likewise, China must craft a sense of national identity that does not erase the history of foreign violence in China in the 19th and 20th centuries but that also develops a Chinese sense of self that is not primarily defined as a victim of past historical aggression and oppression. Without such movement on the parts of both China and Japan, it will be very difficult for any forums established to foster peaceful relations between China and its worldwide neighbors, to develop an imagined global community geared towards fostering understanding, reconciliation, and cooperation. Without such reconciliation, Pacific war games risk becoming reality, and last century's victim runs the risk of becoming this century's victimizer.