

Rising China:

Risk of miscalculation

Robyn Lim

Deng Xiaoping must be spinning in his grave. His successors seem unable to follow his sensible advice that a 'rising China' should build up its wealth and power gradually, without provoking powerful rivals to combine against it.

Today's China does not seem to be calculating very well, as evidenced by an oil policy full of contradictions, as well as dangerous hubris towards Japan. More than anything else, greed could lead to Chinese miscalculation, a disease that comes from wanting too much too soon. Japan succumbed to the same disease in the 1930s, with results disastrous for itself and for the wider region.

In 2005 the most significant strategic development in this region is likely to be rising tension between China and Japan, despite their growing economic interdependence. As Lee Kuan Yew once observed, the two great powers of East Asia have never previously been strong at the same time. As a product of history, much visceral instinct lies just under the surface—something not present between the superpowers during the Cold War.

Sino-Japanese tensions will focus increasingly on Taiwan, as well as their dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands and contested sovereignty over potential oil and gas fields in the East China Sea. And as China probes eastward, it will meet the bedrock of the US-Japan alliance.

So things could go very wrong in East Asia, the only part of the world where great power war remains thinkable. The differences among the major actors that determine the East Asian balance (and are manifest in Southeast Asia) do not stem from simple misunderstanding. So they are not likely to be resolved by means of dialogue through regional forums, preventive diplomacy or so-called non-aggression pacts. Rather, these tensions are grounded in clashes of strategic interest. Only a stable power equilibrium can contain them—because 'only power checking power can restrain the use of force'.

Geopolitical parallels?

The study of geopolitics—which focuses on the spatial dimension of international politics—does not provide a template. It cannot do so because history does not repeat itself. Still, some patterns are too striking to ignore.

When a land power that occupies a central geographical position starts to manifest blue water ambition, alarm bells begin to ring in the capitals of the maritime powers and all who depend on them for protection. The history of the recent struggles between land and maritime powers provides little comfort for China, the current Elephant with Ambition.

Last century saw three failed bids for hegemony over Eurasia by continental powers. Two by Germany and one by Russia. During the Cold War, the United States led to victory a mixed continental-maritime coalition held together by the sinews of maritime power. Thus Whales 3: Elephants 0. Maritime power alone did not win these titanic struggles, but in each case it provided the keys to victory.

That outcome would have not surprised Alfred Thayer Mahan, who famously wrote in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* that 'history has conclusively demonstrated the inability of a state with even a single continental frontier to compete in naval development with one that is insular, although of smaller population and resources'.

As China's blue water ambition becomes manifest, alarm bells are ringing in Washington and Tokyo. China sees itself as reasserting its rightful position as East Asia's Middle Kingdom after its century of humiliation. But the United States is not likely to see things that way.

Because of the maritime basis of its own security, America needs to see power balances struck, and conflicts resolved, as far from its shores as possible. It cannot tolerate a bid for hegemony over Eurasia, or any of its critical parts, and China is the current chief candidate. China possesses the motive, will and opportunity to seek dominance in East Asia.

If China were to succeed in doing so that would detract from American security, directly by excluding the United States from the area, and indirectly by its effects on Japan.

The US-China Nexus

The US-China nexus will drive strategic developments in this region. True, these great powers have many shared interests. These include avoiding war, and preventing the nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. Moreover, it suits the interests of both parties, as well as the wider region, that Japan should continue to rely on the United States for

its nuclear and long-range maritime security.

But the United States and China are pursuing opposed interests that could lead to war if unchecked. In relation to the Korean peninsula, for example, China's success in having reduced South Korea to the status of craven ally has increased the risks already present as a consequence of North Korea's nuclear ambitions and dangerous brinkmanship.

Further afield, Sino-American tension is also rising. China may think that its growing strategic foothold in Latin America is merely tit-for-tat for America's continued dominance in China's backyard. But President Hu Jintao's recent Royal Progress through Latin America (including Cuba) will remind United States of the reasons for the Monroe Doctrine.

In Iran, as in North Korea, America wants to see regime change. But both regimes are developing nuclear weapons as the best available guarantee of retaining power. So there is symmetry among Washington, Pyongyang and Tehran. All are playing the same game, albeit from different points of view.

China doesn't want Iran to succumb to American pressure. So Beijing has hinted that it might block the Bush administration from taking the issue of Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions to the UN Security Council. PLA-related companies also continue to provide Iran with missile technology. China encourages Iran's defiance because Beijing understands better than most that the United States intends to use its position in Iraq and Israel to secure a dominant position in the Middle East and Gulf regions. But China, by raising its head above the parapet on the Iran nuclear issue, is drawing ever more attention to the growing challenge that Beijing is posing to global US interests.

Nor can the United States afford to ignore China's drive to bring Taiwan to heel—because of America's own interests as the dominant maritime power, and because of Taiwan's importance to Japan's strategic security.

Taiwan flashpoint

The island of Taiwan occupies a vital position on the First Island Chain because it screens the maritime approaches from the west to both China and Japan. Few in the Japanese navy have forgotten the USS *Queenfish*, a submarine that lurked in the Bashi Channel (between Taiwan and Luzon) in the latter stages of the Pacific War and sank an inordinate amount of Japanese shipping.

The Taiwan issue is a strategic residue of the Cold War. It was sidelined during the latter stages of the Cold War, when the United States and China moved into strategic alignment in order to resist the growing Soviet power that threatened them both. The Taiwan issue resurfaced with the end of the Cold war, and with a dangerous twist, because Taiwan had become a democracy. Now neither China nor the United States can control the competitive political process on Taiwan. That's an illustration of the fact that democracy is not a panacea to strategic problems.

Indeed, to the growing irritation of the Bush administration, some in Taiwan seek to poke China in the

eye and expect the United States to keep China on a leash. That is redolent of the way Chiang Kai-shek kept provoking Japan in the 1920s while expecting America to keep Japan on a leash.

Moreover, Taiwan's raucous democracy is a challenge to the legitimacy of the regime in Beijing, or rather to the lack of it. In China, unlike in the unlamented Soviet Union, the party and the military have always been equals. Moreover, the legitimacy of the PLA is bound up with the 1937–1945 war against Japan. For these reasons, none in the leadership in Beijing can afford to look weak on Taiwan.

Today there is no Old Deng who, wielding the authority of the Long Marcher, can insist that China play the long game. Tensions between the United States and China, for example, would be easier to manage if each party had reason to think that time was on its side.

In relation to Japan, China wants a quiescent Japan, not a powerful rival. But its provocations to Japan, starting with Jiang Zemin's disastrous 1998 visit, are producing the kind of Japan that China least wants. Can it be in China's interests, for example, that it is no longer taboo in Japan to talk about pre-emptive strike and nuclear weapons?

China's provocation of Japan

Do China's provocations towards Japan show that the PLA is beginning to slip its leash, the way Japan's military did in the 1930s? China's warships and survey vessels constantly intrude into Japanese-claimed waters without giving the required notice, and have demonstrated astounding hubris by sailing through the Tsugaru Strait between Honshu and Hokkaido, the maritime heart of Japan.

Japan's leaders have not forgotten that during the 1904–5 Russo–Japanese war, the Vladivostok Squadron escaped Admiral Togo's blockade, sailed through the Tsugaru Strait, and panicked the defenceless cities on Honshu's eastern seaboard. Today's China, fixated on waving its own bloody shirt—'remember Nanjing'—(and still teaching a highly nationalistic version of history in its textbooks) is unlikely to understand how Japan reads its history. It is not hard to see, however, that 'remember the Vladivostok Squadron' and 'remember the *Queenfish*' must have particular resonance in a resource-poor but populous archipelagic state barely off the east Asian littoral.

Moreover, last November a Chinese submarine was tracked as far out as Guam, way out in the Second Island Chain. That was yet more evidence of Chinese ambition—even though the submarine was only an old Han, and the Chinese seamanship on display showed that China has a long way to go in being able to operate submarines efficiently.

Small wonder that Japan's new defence policy outline named China as a threat, along with China's quasi-ally North Korea. In fact, this Chinese maritime incursion was God's gift to the Japanese navy, then in a knife fight with the finance ministry about its budget. The submarine's refusal to travel on the surface while transiting a Japanese strait, as required by international law, was headline news

in Japan. Moreover, the submerged submarine was most enthusiastically ‘pinged’ by Japanese surface ships and maritime surveillance aircraft in order to make the point that it is Japan, and not China, that has the real navy in North Asia.

We will soon see Japan basing its maritime surveillance aircraft on Shimoji-shima, near Ishigaki (east of Taiwan and south-west of Okinawa), and close to both Taiwan and the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands. Japan is also developing amphibious capabilities lest China try to take the Senkakus by force. That would enable Japan to invoke Article V of the US–Japan security treaty.

Moreover, neither Japan nor the United States can afford to ignore growing Chinese strategic pressure in the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait and the Indian Ocean.

Malacca Strait

China’s extensive territorial claims in the South China Sea represent the greatest threat to strategic stability in the ASEAN region. Because the ASEAN claimants are unable to combine in defence of their interests, China will pick them off one by one when the time is ripe. In addition, a growing foothold in friendless Burma has allowed China to press on the Malacca Strait from both directions. China, by virtue of its alignment with Pakistan—designed to contain India within its subcontinent—has also acquired a strategic foothold on Pakistan’s Indian Ocean coastline by building the port of Gwadar in Baluchistan, which will be connected to Karachi, 460 km away, by the hard-surfaced Makran Coastal Highway.

Would anyone be surprised to find Gwadar had become a PLAN submarine base, pointed equally at the Gulf and the western entrance to the Malacca Strait? Indeed, the eight Kilo class submarines that China ordered in 2002 (in addition to the four the PLAN already operates) are being built in three separate Russian shipyards—another sign that China is in a hurry, not least because it sees Taiwan slipping from its grasp.

Oil: China’s Achilles heel

China’s Achilles heel is its dependence on Middle Eastern oil. So in 2003 Hu Jintao issued an order to secure oil supplies abroad that would not be subject to interdiction in case of a conflict over Taiwan. The result has been a near-hysterical scramble to secure oil production in such places as Brazil, Venezuela and Sudan.

Thus China paid an inflated price for a trade deal with Brazil that included funding for a joint oil-drilling and pipeline program said to be three times the cost of simply buying oil on the market. Moreover, in Sudan, which now supplies some seven per cent of China’s oil, China has become one of the leading supporters of the odious Sudanese regime. Thus, in relation to the Darfur issue, China found itself threatening for the first time in decades to wield its veto power in the Security Council against a petition initiated by the US and backed by France and Britain.

But China, however hard it tries, cannot avoid

dependence on Middle East oil and gas. Moreover China, in planning a blockade of Taiwan, has more to worry about than the US Seventh Fleet interdicting its oil supplies. China cannot assume that the Japanese navy would necessarily remain in port. How could China hope to prevail against the world’s two most powerful navies—which also have a long history of close co-operation (whatever Japan’s interpretation of its constitution says to the contrary).

The Chinese also understand that Australia, a particularly close US ally, fronts the Indian Ocean and the Southeast Asian straits, and has a powerful fleet of modern, ocean-going conventional submarines. Given Australia’s equities in US alliance protection, and its long history of seeing the long-term worth of defending small democracies from totalitarian aggressors, it’s hard to see Australia being able to stay out of a Taiwan Strait clash—even though the booming resource trade is increasing China’s leverage in Canberra.

India, which has its own strategic ambitions and sense of historical grievance, might also join the fray if New Delhi calculated that China was bound to lose in a Taiwan Strait clash (a reasonable assumption). Although India behaves with characteristic ambivalence, no one in Beijing can afford to assume that India would not take the opportunity to avenge its humiliation by China in 1962—and pick up some of the spoils if a failed attempt to take Taiwan led to a collapse of the regime in Beijing.

If that were to happen, Vietnam might also be keen to avenge the humiliations of 1974 (China’s invasion of the Paracels) and 1988 (naval clashes in the South China Sea)—as well as Deng Xiaoping’s administering the ‘first lesson’ by invading northern Vietnam in early 1979 (to make the point that Vietnam could not with impunity invade Cambodia with Soviet backing, and that Moscow was an unreliable ally).

China’s continuing *sotto voce* tensions with Vietnam—which has sought dubious refuge in ASEAN—are a reminder of Mahan’s dictum previously quoted. China has land borders with fourteen states, few of which it can call a friend. The weaker states will have no choice but to acquiesce to growing Chinese power. But others will be inclined to resist, and to form coalitions in order to do so.

For example, the hubris on display in Beijing may lead Russia and Japan to sink their differences in order to align against a ‘rising’ China that threatens them both. It would not be the first time Russia and Japan have resolved their differences, the precedent having been set in the period from 1907 to 1916. Indeed, recent visits by senior Japanese army officers to the Russian Far East would have any old *geopolitiker* sniffing the breeze.

As noted, the history of Whales 3: Elephants 0 stands as a warning of the difficulties that China faces in managing its ‘peaceful’ rise. It is all starting to look redolent of what happened in Germany early last century when an arrogant and foolish young Kaiser sacked that great helmsman Bismarck. Wanting too much too soon, the Kaiser soon provoked the formation of the very coalition of the flanking powers (France and Russia) that Bismarck had laboured

so hard to prevent. That soon led into a disastrous war.

Currently, those advising Deng's successors are said to be studying this history. But are they learning the right lessons? If not, it will be a familiar story of greed, hubris and miscalculation leading to war—and this time with nuclear weapons as part of the equation. ♦

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(Cont'd from Letters p. 4)

Sir: David Mason (*Defender*, Summer 2004/05) laments the 'psychological dependence on the US alliance' as a cause for the public's low interest in defence and defence spending. In large measure I agree. Indeed the insurance industry has a name for it, the 'morale hazard', a situation where people, for instance, leave their keys in their cars because they are insured.

The insurance industry addresses this problem by loss sharing provisions and reduced premiums for loss-control measures. I wonder how many people are aware that, as I understand it, there is a loading of over 20 per cent on their inner city home insurance to cover terrorist incidents. If they did they may, such as in the case of the similar fire levy, demand that some of their premium be used to fund terrorist fighting and terrorist prevention measures just as the fire levy funds metropolitan and rural firefighting services.

**Kevin Walsh
Victoria**

Sir: The last issue of *Defender* carried two articles on Islamist terrorism which promote a viewpoint that I believe is counter-productive in the 'war on terrorism'. One was by Dennis Richardson, the head of ASIO, and the other by Paul Dibb (from the ANU) and Geoffrey Barker (of the *Australian Financial Review*). Both articles promoted the view that such terrorism is not primarily motivated by political, economic or justice concerns but by pure, religious dogma and a hatred of the values of our society - a world view which is so alien to our own that we can never communicate with these people or reduce their desire to destroy us. In short—the perfect enemy.

Yes, fanatical ideology is there—but fanatical groups could never sustain their existence without a base of support and sympathy in the societies they operate within. The base of this support is a widespread perception within Muslim societies that the West has been unjust and exploitative in its dealings with the Muslim world. This is based on hard economic and political realities, not ideology. It is largely a function of the foreign policy of the West. One of the major grievances, of course, is the treatment of the Palestinians by Israel and the unbalanced manner in which the United States supports Israel. Addressing such foreign policy issues would be a much more effective way of conducting the 'war on terrorism'.

The idea that this is all about religion cannot be correct. The real world does not operate like that. Religions and ideologies do not exist in a vacuum—economic, social and political forces lie behind them. Even religious wars have as their foundation political and economic realities, not empty ideological concepts. To focus on religious fanaticism is to mistake the symptom for the disease. Terrorism has concrete foundations—the religious ideology comes on top of them. Continuing on the course we are going will only exacerbate the problem and help to bring about a self-fulfilling prophecy—the 'clash of civilisations'. We must fight an effective 'war on terrorism' by addressing the very issues which are sustaining the terrorists.

**Colin Mitchell
South Australia**

Sir: Dr Malcolm Kennedy's thoughtful review essay on three recent books on the 1942–44 Papua and New Guinea campaigns was a good example of effectively using history to draw contemporary lessons and warnings, and plan for the future. Hopefully television, the internet, and the decline of deference generally, will prevent future Australian politicians and American and Australian 'chateau generals' from treating successful field commanders so disgracefully and then blocking the truth getting out.

**Phillip Bradley
Western Australia**

Sir: May I add my voice to those who have thanked *Defender* for publishing the thorough and scholarly review of Tony Kevin's polemic on the sinking of SIEV X. You only have to visit Mr Kevin's self-publicising and self-righteous website to learn how much he has been stung by Dr Frame's calm and balanced criticism of his unfounded claims.

Lyn Strachan [Letters, *Defender*, Summer 2004/05] may be right to call for Tony Kevin to be prosecuted for criminal libel, but there are two problems sustaining such a prosecution. Kevin defames organisations but not individuals with his calumnies, and a charge of criminal libel really requires the defamation to be so malicious and unfounded that it is likely to cause a serious breach of the peace. The restraint of those police and Service personnel subject to his insults would appear to be Kevin's only saving grace in this regard.

**Kerry Beecher
New South Wales**