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The
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A special report on China's place in the world

Brushwood and gall

China insists that its growing military and diplomatic clout pose no threat. The rest of the world, and particularly America, is not so sure, says Edward Carr

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IN 492BC, at the end of the "Spring and Autumn" period in Chinese history, Goujian, the king of Yue in modern Zhejiang, was taken prisoner after a disastrous campaign against King Fuchai, his neighbour to the north. Goujian was put to work in the royal stables where he bore his captivity with such dignity that he gradually won Fuchai's respect. After a few years Fuchai let him return home as his vassal.

Goujian never forgot his humiliation. He slept on brushwood and hung a gall bladder in his room, licking it daily to feed his appetite for revenge. Yue appeared loyal, but its gifts of craftsmen and timber tempted Fuchai to build palaces and towers even though the extravagance ensnared him in debt. Goujian distracted him with Yue's most beautiful women, bribed his officials and bought enough grain to empty his granaries. Meanwhile, as Fuchai's kingdom declined, Yue grew rich and raised a new army.

Goujian bided his time for eight long years. By 482BC, confident of his superiority, he set off north with almost 50,000 warriors. Over several campaigns they put Fuchai and his kingdom to the sword.

The king who slept on brushwood and tasted gall is as familiar to Chinese as King Alfred and his cakes are to Britons, or George Washington and the cherry tree are to Americans. In the early 20th century he became a symbol of resistance against the treaty ports, foreign concessions and the years of colonial humiliation.

Taken like that, the parable of Goujian sums up what some people find alarming about China's rise as a superpower today. Ever since Deng Xiaoping set about reforming the economy in 1978, China has talked peace. Still militarily and economically too weak to challenge America, it has concentrated on getting richer. Even as China has grown in power and rebuilt its armed forces, the West and Japan have run up debts and sold it their technology. China has been patient, but the day when it can once again start to impose its will is drawing near.

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...which about the King, explains that the Chinese story, too, is an example of perseverance and dedication. Students are told that if they want to succeed they must be like King Goujian, sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall—that great accomplishments come only with sacrifice and unyielding purpose. This Goujian represents self-improvement and dedication, not revenge.

Which Goujian will 21st-century China follow? Will it broadly fit in with the Western world, as a place where people want nothing more than a chance to succeed and enjoy the rewards of their hard work? Or, as its wealth and power begin to overshadow all but the United States, will China become a threat—an angry country set on avenging past wrongs and forcing others to bend to its will? China's choice of role, says Jim Steinberg, America's deputy secretary of state, is "the great question of our time". The peace and prosperity of the world depends on which path it takes.

Some people argue that China is now too enmeshed in globalisation to put the world economy in jeopardy through war or coercion. Trade has brought prosperity. China buys raw materials and components from abroad and sells its wares in foreign markets. It holds \$2.6 trillion of foreign-exchange reserves. Why should it pull down the system that has served it so well?

But that is too sanguine. In the past integration has sometimes gone before conflagration. Europe went up in flames in 1914 even though Germany was Britain's second-largest export market and Britain was Germany's largest. Japan got rich and fell in with the European powers before it brutally set about colonising Asia.

Others go to the opposite extreme, arguing that China and America are condemned to be enemies. Ever since Sparta led the Peloponnesian League against Athens, they say, declining powers have failed to give way fast enough to satisfy rising powers. As China's economic and military strength increase, so will its sense of entitlement and its ambition. In the end patience will run out, because America will not willingly surrender leadership.



Reasons for optimism

But that is too bleak. China clings to its territorial claims—over Taiwan, the South China Sea, various islands and with India. Yet, unlike the great powers before 1945, China is not looking for new colonies. And unlike the Soviet Union, China does not have an ideology to export. In fact, America's liberal idealism is far more potent than token Communism, warmed-up Confucianism or anything else that China has to offer. When two countries have nuclear weapons, a war may not be worth fighting.

In the real world the dealings between rising and declining powers are not straightforward. Twice Britain feared that continental Europe would be dominated by an expansionary Germany and twice it went to war. Yet when America took world leadership from Britain, the two remained constant allies. After the second world war Japan and Germany rose from the ashes to become the world's second- and third-largest economies, without a whisper of a political challenge to the

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International-relations theorists have devoted much thought to the passing of empires. The insight of “power-transition theory” is that satisfied powers, such as post-war Germany and Japan, do not challenge the world order when they rise. But dissatisfied ones, such as pre-war Germany and Japan, conclude that the system shaped and maintained by the incumbent powers is rigged against them. In the anarchic arena of geopolitics they believe that they will be denied what is rightfully theirs unless they enforce their claim.

So for most of the past decade the two great powers edged towards what David Lampton, a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, calls a double wager. China would broadly fall in with America’s post-war order, betting that the rest of the world, eager for China’s help and its markets, would allow it to grow richer and more powerful. America would not seek to prevent this rise, betting that prosperity would eventually turn China into one of the system’s supporters—a “responsible stakeholder” in the language of Robert Zoellick, a deputy secretary of state under George Bush junior and now president of the World Bank.

For much of the past decade, barring the odd tiff, the wager worked. Before 2001 China and America fell out over Taiwan, the American bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade and a fatal mid-air collision between an American EP3 spy plane and a Chinese fighter. Many commentators back then thought that America and China were on a dangerous course, but Chinese and American leaders did not pursue it. Since then America has been busy with the war on terror and has sought plain dealing with China. American companies enjoyed decent access to Chinese markets. China lent the American government huge amounts of money.

This suited China, which concluded long ago that the best way to build its “comprehensive national power” was through economic growth. According to its analysis, articulated in a series of white papers and speeches in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the country needed a “New Security Concept”. Growth demanded stability, which in turn required that China’s neighbours did not feel threatened.

To reassure them, China started to join the international organisations it had once shunned. As well as earning it credentials as a good citizen, this was also a safe way to counter American influence. China led the six-party talks designed to curb North Korea’s nuclear programme. The government signed the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty and by and large stopped proliferating weapons (though proliferation by rogue Chinese companies continued). It sent people on UN peacekeeping operations, supplying more of them than any other permanent member of the security council or any NATO country.

Inevitably, there were still disputes and differences. But diplomats, policymakers and academics allowed themselves to believe that, in the nuclear age, China might just emerge peacefully as a new superpower. However, that confidence has recently softened. In the past few months China has fallen out with Japan over a fishing boat that rammed at least one if not two Japanese coastguard vessels off what the Japanese call the Senkaku Islands and the Chinese the Diaoyu Islands.

Earlier, China failed to back South Korea over the sinking of a Korean navy corvette with the loss of 46 crew—even though an international panel had concluded that the *Cheonan* was attacked by a North Korean submarine. When America and South Korea reacted to the sinking by planning joint exercises in the Yellow Sea, China objected and got one of them moved eastward, to the Sea of Japan. And when North Korea shelled a South Korean island last month, China was characteristically reluctant to condemn it.

China has also begun to include territorial claims over large parts of the South China Sea among its six “primary concerns”—new language that has alarmed diplomats. When members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) complained about this in a meeting in Hanoi in the summer, China’s foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, worked himself into a rage: “All of you remember how much of your economic prosperity depends on us,” he reportedly spat back.

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on a visit to Beijing and later at the climate-change talks in Copenhagen, where a junior Chinese official wagged his finger at the leader of the free world; Chinese vessels have repeatedly harassed American and Japanese naval ships, including the *USS John S. McCain* and a survey vessel, the *USNS Impeccable*.

Such things are perhaps small in themselves, but they matter because of that double bet. America is constantly looking for signs that China is going to waltz on the deal and turn aggressive—and China is looking for signs that America and its allies are going to gang up to stop its rise. Everything is coloured by that strategic mistrust.

Peering through this lens, China-watchers detect a shift. "The smiling diplomacy is over," says Richard Armitage, deputy secretary of state under George Bush. "China's aspiration for power is very obvious," says Yukio Okamoto, a Japanese security expert. Diplomats, talking on condition of anonymity, speak of underlying suspicions and anxiety in their dealings with China. Although day-to-day traffic between American and Chinese government departments flows smoothly, "the strategic mistrust between China and the US continues to deepen," says Bonnie Glaser of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC.

There is nothing inevitable about this deterioration. Peace still makes sense. China faces huge problems at home. It benefits from American markets and good relations with its neighbours, just as it did in 2001. The Chinese Communist Party and the occupant of the White House, of any political stripe, have more to gain from economic growth than from anything else.

China's leaders understand this. In November 2003 and February 2004 the Politburo held special sessions on the rise and fall of nations since the 15th century. American policymakers are no less aware that, though a powerful China will be hard to cope with, a dissatisfied and powerful China would be impossible.

Now, however, many factors, on many sides, from domestic politics to the fallout from the financial crisis, are conspiring to make relations worse. The risk is not war—for the time being that remains almost unthinkable, if only because it would be so greatly to everyone's disadvantage. The danger is that the leaders of China and America will over the next decade lay the foundations for a deep antagonism. This is best described by Henry Kissinger.



Alex Williamson

The dark side

Under Richard Nixon, Mr Kissinger created the conditions for 40 years of peace in Asia by seeing that America and China could gain more from working together than from competing. Today Mr Kissinger is worried. Speaking in September at a meeting of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, he observed that bringing China into the global order would be even harder than bringing in Germany had been a century ago.

"It is not an issue of integrating a European-style nation-state, but a full-fledged continental power," he said. "The DNA of both [America and China] could generate a growing adversarial

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Washington Post Beijing has been praised in its editorial columns for equating the two nations. "The two nations have no more important task than to implement the truths that neither country will ever be able to dominate the other, and that conflict between them would exhaust their societies and undermine the prospects of world peace."

Nowhere is the incipient rivalry sharper than between America's armed forces and their rapidly modernising Chinese counterparts. Globally, American arms remain vastly superior. But in China's coastal waters they would no longer confer such an easy victory.

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