Expansion and Coexistence with ‘Chinese Characteristics’?
The Historical Sources of China’s Grand Strategy

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Most studies dealing with the “rise of China” tend to focus on its contemporary military and technological posture. However, a closer look at the critical post-Cold War period reveals the general parameters of China’s grand strategy and the underlying forces that shape it. This paper argues that identifying the influence of the 1990s on China’s foreign and security policies is overwhelmingly vital for our understanding of China’s current grand strategy. The following analysis suggests that the significant power disparity between the United States and China will not deter China from maintaining an assertive position towards the United States and promoting a multipolar system.

American President Barack Obama (2009) argued during a Sino-American strategic and economic dialogue meeting in July 2009 that “the relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century.” Indeed, the “rise of China” issue has generated a heated debate over the implications of China’s regional and international military and economic growth. More specifically, various scholars attempted to determine whether China is a ‘revisionist’ or a ‘status-quo’ power.¹

However, while a growing number of studies sought to evaluate the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) current and future regional and global posture, its post-Cold War formative years were largely underappreciated. It is the argument of this paper that the 1990s are overwhelmingly critical for our understanding of China’s current and future grand strategy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consolidation of American hegemony, the PRC went through a profound process of strategic learning and reorientation. This demanding process, in turn, created the material and political infrastructure for most of the policies China has been following ever since and will continue to pursue in what can be termed its “expansion and coexistence” grand strategy.²

¹ See for example, Brown et al. (2000); Johnston (2003); Fravel (2010); Ross (1997); Shambaugh (2004/05).
² The phrase is borrowed, of course, from Ulam (1974)
Unlike Mao’s highly ideological approach to foreign policy during the revolutionary era, his followers in the post-Maoist period were less ideologically entrenched. Thus, Deng Xiaoping and his successors were able to practice a more flexible and pragmatic foreign policy. As time passed, and the Chinese leadership was less and less committed to the Maoist tradition in both domestic and international affairs, Realpolitik replaced communist dogma. Nevertheless, since China has been persistently and actively pursuing the same grand strategy ever since the end of the Cold War despite tactical maneuvers or “policy diversification” (Medeiros 2009), by studying the general parameters and thrust of China’s grand strategy as it was formulated and executed in the 1990s, we can understand its current and future trajectories. As Winston Churchill (as cited in Manchester 1983, 12) commented once, “the longer you look back, the farther you can look forward.”

The following analysis suggests that the significant power disparity between the two countries that still persists will not deter China from maintaining an assertive position towards the United States and promoting a multipolar system. Only such a configuration, from Beijing’s viewpoint, may safeguard China’s national interests and economic growth, ensure that American unilateralism vanishes and that Washington’s compliance with international law becomes absolute. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2000), rather illustratively, issued in November 2000 a statement announcing that “Multi-polarization on the whole helps weaken and curb hegemonism and power politics, serves to bring about a just and equitable new international political and economic order and contributes to world peace and development.”

This argument is developed in three sections: the first part portrays the distinct role of the United States in shaping China’s post-Cold War foreign and defense policy and then surveys the domestic and external elements that enabled the Chinese leadership to pursue a nuanced and

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3 On this transformation of Chinese Policy in the post-Mao era, see Robinson (1998).
versatile yet consistent hard balancing behavior vis-à-vis the United States. The last section describes the current determinants of Chinese grand strategy and concludes by suggesting general policy recommendation for the Obama administration.

**China’s “Second Great-Leap” Forward**

When asked to comment on the outcomes of the French Revolution, former Chinese Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai (cited in Howard and Lewis 1998, 328) replied, cynically perhaps, that "it is too early to tell." In the case of Chinese post-Cold War grand strategy, Beijing was fairly quick to understand the ramifications of the Soviet collapse on its regional and global position and what it would be required to do to sustain it. As one study concludes, there were three main objectives for China’s post-Cold War grand strategy: 1) the preservation of the existing internal order and especially the control of the CCP in face of alleged American-capitalist subversion and interference in China’s domestic affairs; 2), defending the country’s territorial integrity and promoting the unification with Taiwan and; 3) increasing the PRC’s regional and even global geostrategic posture and influence (Swaine and Tellis 2000).

The fundamental difference between China during most of the Cold War and China in the 1990s is that throughout the Cold War China may have had the motivation to pursue these objectives, but in the post Cold-War era the PRC seems to have the capacity to pursue them. In essence, there are four noticeable elements facilitating this interpretation of China’s post-Cold War grand strategy: 1.) Increased apprehension of American predominance in East Asia and possible attempts to topple down the communist regime; 2.) High level economic growth enabling China to build a better national economy with superior wartime mobilization potential; 3.) Significant improvement in China’s ability to convert its economic and industrial assets for the purpose of modernizing the PLA and turn it into a crucial factor in both the regional and the
global contexts; and 4.) The existence of a number of regional and global actors attentive to Beijing’s willingness to promote a multipolar world.

*The Role of the United States in China’s Geostrategic Blueprint*

Despite the fact that the demise of the Soviet Union removed a persistent element in Beijing’s map of threats ever since the early 1960s, it actually amplified China’s apprehension of an American attempt to consolidate an East Asian hegemonic regional order mainly through the Taiwan issue and the application of a “peaceful (r)evolution” policy to topple China’s communist regime, a theme present in Sino-American relations from the establishment of the PRC in 1949 (Sun 1991). A smuggled limited-circulation Chinese study proclaimed in the fall of 1993 (Munro 1994, 360-61):

> Because China and the United States have longstanding conflicts over their different ideologies, social systems, and foreign policies, it will prove impossible to fundamentally improve Sino-U.S. relations... the two countries will be wary of each other even while they cooperate and use each other... the United States still views China as a potential enemy in its regional defense strategy... given U.S. global strategic calculations, the United States cannot tolerate a powerful adversary in East Asia.

Previous attempts to act as a third party in the post-1972 "strategic triangle" landscape paved the way to a new post-Cold War era in which the United States had the potential to impose its preferable regional or global environment without necessarily considering any of China’s interests (Ong 2002, 136; Roy 1996, 438). Longtime China observers like Avery Goldstein (2005, 2) argued that, "As diplomacy eased the Soviet threat to both China and the United States during the 1980s, and especially as the USSR itself collapsed in the early 1990s, the solid military-strategic foundation of self-interest that had encouraged Sino-American entente crumbled."

Insofar as the Chinese were worried about American global ascendancy, their gravest apprehension was closely related to China’s decade long irredentist aspirations and policies vis-à-
This does not mean that there were no other sources for Chinese anxiety during the early and mid-1990s, especially fear of American attempts to thwart China’s reemergence as a regional and maybe global great power, the American-Japanese alliance or human rights, but rather that this issue was the most acute or pressing in Beijing’s overall agenda through which most other topics were evaluated (Scobell 2000, 20).

The Tiananmen incident between April and June 1989 exacerbated the tension between the two countries, highlighted historical anti-Western sentiments and created a shaky setting for the more significant crisis surrounding Taiwan (Wan 2001, 42-43). American President George Bush halted all arms sales to China but immediately afterwards attempted to reassure the Chinese leadership. In a confidential letter to Deng, Bush (1999, 430) confessed that “the actions that I took as President of the United States could not be avoided… the clamor for stronger action remains intense.” The President then suggested sending a special emissary to discuss how to restore relations between Beijing and Washington, a proposal that was accepted by Deng and lead to the dispatch of National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Deputy Secretary of State Larry Eagleburger. Their mission was successful in that it conveyed Bush’s wish to preserve the channels of communication with the Chinese leadership, but it did not change Beijing’s fundamental perception that American response was, in fact, interference in China’s internal affairs (Cohen 2010, 241-42). In another letter sent to Deng, following the return of the Scowcroft and Eagleburger, Bush asked the Chinese leadership to exhibit flexibility and mercy toward the demonstrators who were arrested so that Washington may overcome anti-Chinese public opinion and political opposition in Congress. Bush (1999, 437) was honest enough to suggest that “we can both do more for world peace and for the welfare of our own people if we can get our relations back on track… (but) If there is to be a period of darkness, so be it.”

4 On the "traditional" role Taiwan plays in Sino-American relations, see Lasater (1999).
Indeed, newly elected General Secretary of the CCP Jiang Zemin stated in September of that year that "the disturbances stirred up by hostile forces, both internal and external, were aimed at overthrowing the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership and subverting the socialist system, at turning China into a bourgeois republic and reducing it once again to a dependency of the Western capitalist powers’ (Kristof 1989). Deng Xiaoping (cited in MacFarquhar 1997, 485) on his part, proclaimed in June 1990 that, "The entire imperialist Western world plans to make all socialist countries discard the socialist road and then bring them under the control of international monopoly capital and onto the capitalist road.”

While Jiang was in favor of a more multilateral approach to foreign affairs, and especially a peaceful resolution of the Taiwanese issue, he rejected any American attempt to use human rights violations in inner China as a pretext for applying any kind of diplomatic, military or economic pressure on Beijing. During a meeting with former President Richard Nixon, for example, Jiang (cited in Holley 1989) argued that the events in Tiananmen had nothing to do with any foreign country including the United States and that this incident was "entirely China’s internal affair."

This rather unyielding position that aimed at what Beijing considered to be American interventionism was also shared by many of the People’s Liberations Army’s (PLA) influential high command. In addition to conducting war games in which the United States played the enemy’s role from 1991 onwards, Allen Whiting observed that rhetorically the United States was considered by the military establishment as a whole to be the PRC’s "number one" source of danger. He quotes a report that concluded a special intra-Chinese strategic assessment symposium in which it was estimated that the United States global superiority will be used to undermine China’s socialist regime and topple its CCP rule (Whiting 1996, 607-8).
American military performance during the Gulf War exhibited the technological inferiority of the PLA and encouraged the Chinese leadership to fasten and broaden existing plans to modernize and improve the Army’s capabilities for the purpose of potentially waging a limited or local war (Lampton 2001, 73). But beyond the military dimension, Chinese leaders perceived the Gulf War to be "an indication of the unbalanced global pattern of relations between states following the relaxation of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union," as Prime Minister Li Peng (as cited in Ong 2002, 143) contended. Despite the fact that China took advantage of the Gulf War in order to renew relations with the United States by supporting the coalition, it was done amidst intensive American pressure as manifested in Secretary of State James Baker’s warning to Chinese Foreign Minister Qian (as cited in Maynard 2008, 79): Washington “could accept a decision on their part not to contribute forces to the international effort, but we would not understand if they stood in the way of our pursuing an appropriate resolution in the UN.”

An immediate effect of this first post-Cold War American-led military campaign on Chinese policymakers was a actually genuine peril of an American matching initiative to "shift its forces eastward to dominate Japan and China and establish an Asia-Pacific empire" (Cheng 1998, 218) Another reaction, highly popular and widespread within the PLA, was that China can successfully overcome American military superiority only by deploying a multitude of asymmetrical means and doctrines (Qiao and Wang 2002).

The major post-Cold War Sino-American crisis occurred predictably over the issue of Taiwan between August 1995 and July 1996. In response to a visit of Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to the United States that took place in May 1995, the PRC launched missiles over the Taiwanese territorial waters. From Beijing’s perspective, allowing President Lee to visit the United States was clearly an act undermining China’s sovereignty since it allegedly contradicted
the 1979 Joint Communiqué that terminated Taiwan’s independent diplomatic status as part of the rapprochement between China and the United States (Tyler 1995). But far from it, the Chinese leadership continuously rejected the role played by Washington in East Asia in general. As Foreign Minister Qian (as cite in Mann 1995) claimed, China does not "recognize the United States as a power which claims to maintain the peace and stability of Asia.” Jiang (ad cited in Mosher 2000, 100), on his part, explained China’s actions and told a Japanese newspaper that, "If we abandon the threat of force against Taiwan, then it is not possible that peaceful unification will be achieved.” Accordingly, and in face of an initially restrained reaction by the Clinton Administration, China continued to conduct naval exercises and missile tests across Taiwan’s shoreline until March 1996.5

In 1996, Washington dispatched various combat naval vessels to the region. In response to the positioning of American aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Straits as a mean to buffer between China and Taiwan, and the news that another carrier was on its way to the region, Foreign Minister Qian (Tyler 1996a) warned that "China has never committed itself to abandoning the use of force for reunification. If foreign forces invade Taiwan or the Taiwan authorities attempt to go in for Taiwan independence, we will not sit by idly and remain indifferent.”

China ended its naval maneuvers and missile tests two days after presidential elections took place in Taiwan for the first time (March 23). The exact outcomes of this crisis remain unsettled, but one thing has become even clearer to the Chinese leadership and that is that any attempt to forcefully unify the "lost territories" will probably involve American military intervention and that in this respect the United States is clearly China’s enemy rather than ally (Ross 1996, 466). Only a few days before formally announcing the end of the exercises, Chinese

5 For a detailed description of what was later called the "Third Taiwan Straits Crisis” from various perspectives, see Zhao (1999).
Foreign Ministry spokesman (as cited in Mufson 1996b) warned that, "The United States must immediately stop its activities designed to interfere in China's internal affairs and intensify the tensions in the Taiwan Strait area."

One additional factor that increased Beijing's negative perception of the United States’ regional aspirations involved Japan that was considered to be Washington’s proxy in East Asia ever since the mid-1950s. Despite the end of the Cold War and Japanese attempts to revitalize regional multilateral and bilateral cooperation with China and other actors in the Asia-Pacific rim, North Korean nuclear weapons program and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and China’s March 1996 missile tests encouraged Tokyo and Washington to reaffirm their strategic alliance and commitment of mutual defense and to sign in mid-April a Joint Security Declaration for that purpose (Green 2002, 26-27).

The Declaration highlighted the necessity of preserving American military presence in East Asia and the need to "promote bilateral policy coordination, including studies on bilateral cooperation in dealing with situations that may emerge in the areas surrounding Japan and which will have an important influence on the peace and security of Japan." In addition, the leaders of both countries "emphasized that it is extremely important for the stability and prosperity of the region that China play a positive and constructive role, and, in this context, stressed the interest of both countries in furthering cooperation with China" (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009).

Beijing’s response was extremely critical and a Foreign Ministry spokesman called the Declaration "a bilateral defense treaty left over from history," and warned that this new arrangement or realignment "shouldn't go beyond its bilateral nature, otherwise there will be complications" (as cited in Suettinger 2003, 268-9). The same spokesman warned that, "If Japan's
self-defense forces further build up armaments . . . it is bound to cause concern and vigilance among other Asian nations. We urge Japan to move with caution” (Mufson 1996a).

However, the fallout of the Taiwan Crisis and the renewal of the US-Japan military alliance were only exacerbated by the May 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by American forces operating under the cloak of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). According to American and NATO officials, the targeting of the Chinese embassy was an “intelligence failure” that resulted from faulty information provided by the Central Intelligence Agency (Gordon 1999). The Chinese leadership and public opinion were not convinced that it was a mistake and ten days after the incident, Chinese President Jiang issued a statement in which he claimed that the “United States continues to pursue hegemonism and power politics, and wantonly interferes in the international affairs of other countries”(Eckholm 1999).

**China’s Economic Miracle and Mobilization Potential**

The PRC’s successful economic transformation became evident in the early 1980s after Deng introduced in 1978 radical economic and industrial reforms that mainly entailed mild-capitalist privatization and lifting of state price control under the premise that central economic planning was neither efficient nor salvageable. Some scholars believe that he also tried to distance himself from the ideological elite that initiated the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and eventually imitate as much as possible the economic model put forward by South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, or Asia’s “Four Tigers” (Chow 2007, 47-48).

Practically, whereas in the pre-1978 period China enjoyed an average annual growth rate of 6 percent, in the post-1978 it was averagely higher than 9 percent per year and in some years the growth rate was around 13 percent. Chinese per capita income has quadrupled in the period between 1978 and 1997, and between 1979 and 1994 productivity rates increased annually in an
average rate of 3.9 percent as an International Monetary Fund (IMF) study concluded (Hu and Khan 1997, 1, 4). Furthermore, a World Bank report stated that China’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates were nearly 13 percent in 1992 and 14 percent in 1993 with relative low inflation rates (Harrold and Lall 1993, xi). China's international trade volume had also grown in the same period of time from 38 billion dollars in 1980 to almost 200 billion dollars in 1993 (Lardy 1994, 2).

It is true that China was looking to improve its economic relations with the United States in order to safeguard fiscal reforms and high growth rates throughout the early 1990s, but Beijing repeatedly announced that trade will not be useful as leverage to change Chinese policies (Tyler 1994). On the contrary, the Chinese leadership saw the PRC’s economic power as instrumental in its capacity to deal with the United States since historically it was embedded in its ongoing "four modernizations" (national defense, science and technology, industry and agriculture) introduced by Zhou Enlai in 1964, launched in 1975 and became a national priority in 1978 under Deng’s leadership (Grasso, Corrin and Kort 2004, 241). Indeed, Jiang encouraged technological modernization when he told members of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in early 1993 that, "We must win high-tech, small-scale wars under modern conditions" (as cited in Munro 1994, 360). Similarly, the Chairman of the Commission on Science, Technology and National Defense Industry (COSTIND) General Ding Henggao (1997, 156) warned that, "The one who possesses high-tech superiority will have the upper hand on the battlefield."

To a certain extent, China’s industrial capacity to mobilize its resources in case war erupts in the post-Cold War was actually anchored in the Sino-American tension during the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War and China's lack of superpower support after the emergence of the Sino-Soviet split. Mao believed that war with the United States was more than possible and consequently ordered to expedite the relocation of existing vital military-related
factories to Northern China and strengthening them in order to form what was called the "Third Front". "The basic purpose of the Third Front," as Barry Naughton (1988, 369) explains, "was to provide an alternative industrial base that would allow China to continue to produce - and thus to fight- in the event of an attack on its primary urban centers."

"Third Front" enterprises numbered about 2000 companies and factories of various kinds and sizes and employed more than three millions workers. Despite the fact that they were partly an economic burden, Deng appreciated their technological potential value to modernize the civilian industrial sector as a whole and to contribute to China's economic growth, he decided to reform their structure in order to invigorate and sustain the civilian Chinese economy (Gurtov 1993, 218).

True, the "Third Front" concept, just like many other state owned enterprises (SOEs), did not entirely endure Deng's reforms, but the fundamental idea that China must promote self-sufficiency in matters related to its national security, remained exceptionally valid throughout the 1990s. As one study argues, 40 percent of the PRC's major industrial sector was actually under direct and full control of the PLA and its different bodies. In this sense, China's military-industrial complex "controlled almost all advanced technical research that had military implications... and thus contained almost all talent for overseeing and running trade in advanced technologies" (Lewis, Di and Litai 1991, 99).

This situation changed somewhat in the first half of the 1990s after the Chinese government decided that there is an acute need to privatize its SOEs. But it was made clear from the start that it is the central government's goal to privatize medium and small size SOEs and not the larger enterprises that produced defense or military-related goods since the aim was "to build an integrated system of defense/commercial production viable for both war and peace times" (Zhenhuan 1997, 196). Thus, Beijing maintained its control over the large industrial enterprises
essential for peacetime civilian economical modernization and innovation and for possible wartime mobilization.6

In addition to the industrial sector that provides the strategic depth for wartime mobilization, the PRC has become during the 1980s one of the world's leading arms exporters. Some estimates argue that in 1995 Chinese companies sold weapons and military technology for the approximate sum of 600 million dollars and that half of this amount was directly allocated to the PLA’s budget (Ding 1996, 434). By actually becoming an economic entrepreneur controlling between 15,000 and 20,000 companies, the PLA increased its budgetary base and became an organization enjoying ownership over industrial and economical assets worth more than 20 billion dollars according to one estimate and annual profits that range between $1 to $3 billion (Shambaugh 2002, 200). Not surprisingly, the PLA’s Chief of the General Staff Zhang Wannian (as cited in Mulvenon 2007, 222) warned in December 1993 that, "Over the past few years, the army has managed to make up for the deficiency in military spending, ensure normal military training and operations against war, and improved its own material conditions by engaging in production and business, but such a practice also gave rise to some problems."

Undeniably, the commercialization of the PLA had some negative effects on the potency of the defense industry and the prospects of successful wartime mobilization despite its prosperity for some intra-PLA elements. In addition to problems of financial coordination and unified strategic management of incomes, the profitability of the PLA’s enterprises brought about numerous ethical challenges which often resulted in claims of corruption and hedonism on behalf of senior and junior officers (Bickford 1994, 469-72).

Indeed, by the mid-1990s, the Chinese defense industry performed relatively poor in terms of its qualitative and quantitative outputs compared to its potential; hence Jiang and other

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6 On this privatization process, see Cao, Qian and Weingast (1999).
top officials in the CCP, the CMC and the PLA began consolidating what has become the military-business complex (Cheung 2001, 50-53). However, this structural underperformance was mostly amended after the Chinese government introduced a new set of reforms and regulations in 1993 and especially during 1998 when Beijing swiftly moved to convert some of the defense-related firms into civilian-oriented producers of goods (Cheung 2009, 98-100).

Quite paradoxically, this “civilianization” process benefited the defense industry sector by introducing new technologies that in turn were used for military purposes later on. The combination of increased governmental investments in the industry, an accumulation of research, design and production processes and acquisition of new technology from external sources resulted in a renaissance of China’s defense industries despite some marginalization in the overall Chinese economic scenery (Medeiros et al. 2005, 22-3). In a conference held under the auspice of the PLA’s General Equipment Department in January 1999, Jiang (1999) praised the defense industry and commented that the “industry’s efforts have established a solid foundation for safeguarding the national security and raising the nation’s international status.”

Constructing China’s post-Cold War Military Posture

There is a certain degree of uncertainty in estimating the exact size of the PLA or its overall budget since Chinese transparency is a rare commodity, especially when it comes to defense-related data. Additionally, some of the information that the PRC's official bodies do release does not include all the indicators one needs in order to determine how big or strong are the Chinese armed forces (Wang 1996, 889). But as Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro (1997, 25) concluded after the 1996 Taiwan Crisis, that "whatever the exact figures, China is now engaged in one of the most extensive and rapid military buildups in the world, one that has accelerated in recent
months even as China’s rhetoric has softened and Beijing has moved to improve its ties with the United States."

In reality, already in the CCP’s Congress of October 1992, Jiang (as cited in Kim 1996, 6) told the delegates that the armed forces "should enhance combat strength in an all-around way; should more successfully shoulder the lofty mission of defending the country’s territorial sovereignty over the land and in the air, as well as its rights and interests on the sea; and should safeguard the unification and security of the motherland.” Mainly, but not only because of political calculations, Jiang supported the PLA’s position in budgetary affairs from his first day as Secretary General of the CCP in order to increase its support after the accession of Deng in 1989 (Evron 2007). During his first year in office, he advocated greater financial allocations to the army and its personnel including increasing the soldiers and the officers pay and living standards. Unlike his predecessors, he refrained from calling the PLA to decrease its annual spending and after the Gulf War, Jiang actually advocated pouring more money as long as the economic growth rates allow (Ji 2001, 34-35).

Hence, Jiang launched various initiatives aimed at increasing the PLA’s strategic stance, and its capacity to provide Beijing with the possibility to exert greater influence, by "bracketing Taiwan with missiles, constructing a military base on Mischief Reef in the South China Sea, announcing that the PLA Navy intends to dominate the sea lanes… altering the PLA Air Force’s defensive posture to one of attack readiness, and deploying a new nuclear-capable missile… able to reach the western United States,” as Steven Mosher (2000, 73) notes.

China is a nuclear power and although the end of the Cold War appeared to have lessened the prospect of a nuclear major war between the great powers, China did not abandon the possible use of nuclear weapons as part of its military strategy in what is often called "limited deterrence” strategy but rather increased its weight in the PRC’s overall military strategy.
Despite the fact that China joined the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1992, it did not see any contradiction between the Treaty’s normative basis of nonproliferation and the need to maintain a vibrant nuclear-related exporting policy for both economic and political reasons (Hu 1994).7

During the second half of the 1990s, Chinese strategists, who relied heavily on land-launched missile systems, understood that in order to obtain a viable second-strike option, they must move to submarine-based launchers and to ensure the survivability of its land-based missile systems (Xue 1995, 175-76). Although the nuclear ingredient of the Chinese armed forces is marginal in numerical terms, it bears a disproportionate portion of the general deterrence policy vis-à-vis China’s adversaries. But as You Ji (1999a, 246) notes, this alleged defensive posture was mostly designed to provide Chinese policymakers and military strategists with the time required to upgrade the usage of nuclear weapons as an indispensable element in the PLA’s war plans. Rather than treating nuclear weapons as the ultimate barrier to military conflict, by the end of the 1990s, the emerging military leadership was actually “tempted to formulate scenarios in which they fire nuclear missiles in high-tech wars.”

American hegemonic conventional and nuclear posture led many Chinese military thinkers to believe that, “The development of nuclear armaments in the United States poses a severe threat to the survival and penetration capabilities of China’s nuclear weapons.” Hence, in addition to prestige that nuclear powers posses, China’s nuclear posture is an indispensable deterrent that “can be used at a time when China’s core national security and development interests are fundamentally undermined” (Zhongchun 2007, 61).

Even after China signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996, but before the treaty’s ratification, the PLA conducted a series of nuclear tests for the purpose of upgrading

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7 On states’ motivation to support proliferation, see Matthew Kroenig (2009).
the warhead compatibility to submarine-launched delivery systems (Ji .1999a, 254). After the CTBT was ratified, China worked to advance its capacity to launch ballistic missiles that in time of need may carry nuclear warheads. One such long-range missile (DF-31) was successfully tested in August 1999 and exhibited the ability to travel more than 8000 kilometers to his targets across Eurasia and northwestern America (Roberts, Manning and Montaperto 2000, 56). These developments were noticed by the Americans, and the 1999 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) estimated that, "By 2015, China will likely have tens of missiles targeted against the United States, having added a few tens of more survivable land- and sea-based mobile missiles with smaller nuclear warheads -- in part influenced by U.S. technology gained through espionage' (Risen 1999).

But beyond the fundamental need to safeguard China’s territorial integrity and provide Beijing with the capabilities required to forcefully take over Taiwan in case peaceful unification failed, the PRC viewed the United States as its point of reference also on the way to become a global rather than a regional power. In the forthright words of China’s Defense Minister Chi Haotian (as cited in Ji 1995, 249), "we must have whatever other big powers have already had in their inventory."

Quantitatively, the PLA underwent extensive demobilization during the mid-1980s, but it had more to do with Beijing’s belief that China does not need an army of large-scale due to the character of the possible conflicts the PRC is expected to encounter and because of the economic need to allocate as much funding as possible for the purpose of improving the country’s economic growth and maintaining it. But even after this reorganization, which was in reality less

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impressive than initially declared, the PLA was more than three million people strong (Lin 1994, 722-23).9

Thus, in face of economic growth that some call "explosive" or "miraculous" it was only natural and possible for the Chinese government to modernize and strengthen the PLA in the 1990s despite the fact that it was not enlarged quantitatively. What appealed the most to Beijing was the idea that they need a smaller army but more professional, deployable, versatile and high-tech. As Colonel Fang Ning (1997, 49) from the Academy of Military Science's Department of Military Systems explained, "the size of the army should be properly controlled in peacetime. We should build a small but highly trained standing army; our national strength would not be able to support a large standing army, and it is not necessary anyway."10

In terms of military expenditures, between 1991 and 1995 there was an increase of nearly 20 percent in the PLA’s budget, and between 1993 and 1994 alone that budget was increased by nearly $1 billion (1996, 62). The share of military expenditures of China's GDP remained relatively constant with a moderate annual increase during this period and averaged about 5.5 percent (International Institute for Strategic Studies 1995, 266), but its sheer magnitude was enough to make the PLA "far more up-to-date and capable than at any time in its history" (Khalilzad et al. 1999, 38-39). These expenditures were designated, among other things, to elevate the PLA's naval and aerial capabilities and power projection potential that were considered by one Pentagon official to "have a clear anti-US intention" (as cited in Carpenter 1998, 5).

The PLA Navy (PLAN) has experienced overwhelming modernization of its strategic posture in order to allow the PRC to defend and control its maritime surroundings including the South China Sea, the Taiwan Straits, the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea, as manifested in the 1992 "Law on Territorial Waters and Adjacent Areas", and resulted in its "layered active defense"

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9 On the PLA’s demobilization process, see Shichor (1997).
10 See also Christensen (2001, 7).
naval strategy (Meconis and Wallace 2000, 141). Other key figures, including Admiral Liu Huaqing the PLAN’s former influential commander and naval thinker, preached for a "offshore active defense" that entailed a dual-phased scheme to exert Chinese control over East Asia’s naval routes through expansion and acquiring state of the art capabilities including aircraft carriers and comprehensive weapons systems (Yoshihara and Holmes 2005, 681). Admiral’s Liu’s position within the naval community in particular and the defense establishment in general tilted the balance in favor of this more assertive approach. As one study argued, Admiral Huaqing “was to the Chinese Navy what Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan was to the US Navy” (Zhan 1994, 181). Despite the different and sometimes conflicting recipes for naval strategy, all sides fundamentally assumed that the basic aim of the PLAN is "to engage the enemy in the outer approaches and prevent incursions into coastal waters,” as Elizabeth Speed (1995, 7) notes.

In March 1992, in his new position as Vice Chairman of the CMC, Admiral Huaqing (as cited in Kim 2000, 142), defined the PLAN’s assignments in addition to the need to defend China’s territorial integrity as follows: "create a safe stable environment for economic construction, reform, and opening up; and guarantee the country's lasting peace and stability."

Consequently, the PLAN’s high-command broadly interpreted these objectives to include the need for both defensive and offensive solutions, for example, in the form of a modern submarine fleet equipped with nuclear and conventional capabilities. This is intended to provide China with the advantage over regional competitors and the United States as their benefactor (Frolov 1998, 7). "In order to effectively defend China against attack from the sea,” the PLAN’s commander-in-chief Vice Admiral Zhang Lianzhong (as cited in Kim 2000, 142) explained, “it is necessary to extend the depth of defence into the oceans and to have a naval capability of intercepting and destroying the enemy.” In addition, Vice Admiral Zhang (as cited in Zhan 1994, 182) warned that since "the world is suffering from rapid population growth and resource exhaustion, all countries
are turning their eyes to ocean.” He concluded that because China is witnessing "a world wide competition for ocean resources… the rise and fall of China is closely related to the ocean," and, consequently, the Chinese Navy will "strengthen its combat capability by improving its training and equipment."

A second component in this rearrangement is the PLAN’s mid-1990s program to upgrade its posture from a white water, to a green-water to a blue-water or ocean-going strategic arm with improved power projection capacities (Goldstein 1997-1998, 47). It was only natural for Beijing, under such conditions and assumptions, to seek the purchase of an aircraft carrier and even to build one independently in a local Chinese shipyard although it seemed that the idea was abandoned on account of economic reasons. Yet the voices from the PLAN’s high-command still echo the strategic need to acquire, one way or the other, the capacity to project naval and aerial power in China Sea the by using long-range carriers (Zhan 1994, 199-200).

By the end of 1994, Russian Navy Commander Felix Gromov traveled to China in order to finalize the sale of four Kilo Class submarines with anti-surface and anti-submarine armaments and to discuss the possibility to increase their number to 22 submarines in total (Gill and Kim 1995, 61-62). One of the four submarines commissioned from Russia participated in August 1995 in a naval military war-game as part of the broader PLA maneuvers during the Taiwan Crisis that simulated the penetration and attack of an enemy’s protected harbor (Hua 1997, 33). And by the end of 1996, China had acquired at least two destroyers from Russia that were equipped with sophisticated anti-ships missiles potentially able to bypass American naval defense systems and attack aircraft carriers (Carpenter 1998, 4-5).

In the second half of the 1990s, the PLAN has managed to establish and advance the three main naval components for maritime denial as Taylor Fravel (2008, 9) observes. First, China has acquired nearly 30 submarines and nuclear-operated assault crafts. The second element
includes vessels equipped with defensive missile systems designed to cover smaller boats, and the last one comprises of a number of different anti-ship missiles that can be launch from a number of naval and aerial platforms. The Ministry of National Defense’s (2010) official website inaugurates these naval improvements and proclaims that,

Since the beginning of the new century, in view of the characteristics and laws of local maritime wars in conditions of informationization, the Navy has been striving to improve in an all-round way its capabilities of integrated offshore operations, strategic deterrence and strategic counterattacks, and to gradually develop its capabilities of conducting cooperation in distant waters and countering non-traditional security threats, so as to push forward the overall transformation of the service. Through nearly six decades of development, a modern force for maritime operations has taken shape, consisting of combined arms with both nuclear and conventional means of operations.

Similarly, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) underwent fundamental modernization in the aftermath of the Cold War and especially following the Gulf War that exhibited the importance of both high-tech capabilities and an aerial strategic arm in modern warfare. (Allen, Krumel and Pollack 1995, 31-32). Renewed political and economical ties with Moscow facilitated the acquisition of 26 fourth generation combat aircrafts SU-27 and its upgraded versions (SU-30MK and SU-37) that might enable China to take the "lead in shaping the new order here (East Asia) in our way, not the American way," as a Chinese high-ranking official claimed (as cited in Zhan 1994, 199).

Not only that the PLAAF acquired a new generation of combat aircrafts, it also enjoyed a fundamental revolution in its surveillance and long-range deployment. It was reported in mid-1992 that China managed to purchase in-flight fueling capacity, a feature that provided Beijing with increased power projection options beyond it territorial borders (Kristof 1992). As the Gulf War demonstrated, and these developments suggest, the aerial strategic arm played a central role in the modern battlefield, thus instead of treating the PLAAF as a tactical arm it was transformed into an instrument for the application of strategic "quick reaction, integrated coordination and combat in depth" capabilities (Lewis and Litai 1999, 79).
The PLAAF is trained to conduct aerial operations using a diversified technological arsenal that employs aircrafts and modernized anti-airplane missile systems. Improved training programs and exercise facilities, in turn, immensely contributed to the PLAAF’s high-command appreciation of its combat readiness. By 1996, the PLAAF’s commander, Lieutenant General Liu Shunyao, argued that the share of combat-ready regiments has reached 95 percent (Allen 2000, 193). Roughly by the same time, the PLAAF had become the world’s third-largest aerial arm that enjoyed rapid modernization and qualitative ongoing growth, while the PLAAF’s naval component immensely contributed to the overall potency (The Military Balance 1994, 172-73).

Indeed, already by 1997, the PLAAF’s commander General Liu (1997) commented that "the Chinese air force is now able to fight both defense and offense battles under high-tech conditions." More specifically, he claimed that in face of the growing pace of modernization, "over the next few years the Chinese Air Force will enhance its deterrent force in the air (with the) ability to impose air blockades and launch air strikes, as well as the ability to conduct joint operations with ground forces, navy and the air force" (China to Build State-Of-Art Equipment for Air Force 1997).

From a doctrinal perspective, whereas the PLAAF implicitly pursued a defensive posture, by the late 1990s, after the war in Kosovo, there was a significant change of heart as for the proper noticeable posture the aerial arm should uphold. Lieutenant General Liu argued publicly in November 1999 that the PLAAF must "realize as soon as possible a change from territorial defense to a combination of defense and offense" (Pomfret 1999). Later on, Jiang (1999) supported this new course and called the PLAAF “to build a powerful, modernized People’s Air Force that is capable of both attacking and defending.” Again, the Ministry of National Defense’s (2010) official website encapsulates this reorientation:

Since the 1990s the Air Force has been in a phase of rapid development. It has deployed third-generation combat aircraft, third-generation ground-to-air missiles, and a series of relatively
advanced and computerized weapons and equipment. It has stepped up the development of military theories with strategic theories at the core, and introduced a strategic concept that the Air Force should be capable of both offensive and defensive operations. As a result, the Air Force has begun its transition from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations.

The third component of this rearrangement was also manifested in the more amorphous sphere including satellite, missile and advanced technologies. As per Admiral Huaqing’s instructions (as cited in Gurtov and Hwang 1998, 225), this reorganization was to "actively create conditions to import advanced technology from abroad and borrow useful experience." Concurring with the principle of "limited war under high-technology conditions", this form of military modernization overlapped with some of the aerial and naval features previously discussed but it slightly differs in its applicability to the PRC’s geostrategic aspirations beyond the narrow territorial meaning.11

It will be sufficient to point out, in this respect, the increased interest and investment in aerospace technology since it encompasses both the technological and the military aspects of China’s military rise (Fisher 1999, 94-95). For China, space is not only an economical opportunity in terms of providing satellite-launching services to other countries and foreign companies, but is also an explicitly militarily contested area mirroring the Reagan Administration’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) rationale and also encapsulated in China anti-Satellite (ASAT) capabilities (Martel and Yoshihara 2003, 21).12

By mid-1993, China had launched seven foreign satellites and increased the number of spaceports to four. For Chinese military thinkers, space technology that includes surveillance satellites and global positioning system (GPS) is instrumental to modern warfare as exhibited in the Gulf War. As a member of the Committee of Science, Technology and Industry of the System

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11 The major concern for any American administration was the usage of these technologies for the improvement of China’s strategic ballistic missiles capabilities with compatible strategic surveillance systems. See, for example, Brown, Prueher and Segal (2003, 29).

12 On China’s ASATs, see Hagt (2007); Tellis (2007).
Engineering Institute predicted, these elements "will enable pilots and tank drivers, as well as ordinary soldiers, to know accurately their own location on the earth at all times, and it will permit contact with higher-level command organization anywhere" (Mengxiong 1997, 252). The Pentagon acknowledged these developments, and in 1994 initiated a war game that took place at the Naval War College and involved the fighting of American and Chinese forces near China's coast. What was particularly special about this simulation was the fact that the scenario envisioned a successful Chinese attempt to paralyze American satellite system, an impediment that, in the simulation, resulted in the gravest loss of human lives ever since WWII (Lambakis 1995, 428).

But these merits had a more substantial implication since the basic technology was also relevant for the modernization and improvement of China’s ballistic missiles posture. According to Chong-Pin Lin (1994, 727), "these launches carry considerable strategic significance because China’s Long March series of space satellite launchers correspond to its East Wind series of long-range ballistic missiles, with only modifiable differences between the two." Indeed, a Congressional report indicated that throughout the 1990s, China had about 20 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) of which the majority were aimed at targets across the United States (Select Committee of United States House of Representatives 1999, 183).

However, capabilities were not the only thing that the PLA attempted to revolutionize and modernize in order to compensate for the power asymmetry with the United States. The need to be able to wage high-tech armed conflict immensely stimulated the defense establishment to diversify the training of the PLA’s personnel and provide the armed forces with the technological know-how required to fight high-tech wars against high-tech rivals and especially the post-Gulf War American armed forces (Ji 1999b, 7-8).13 The replacement of Mao’s concept of

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13 For a detailed description of the doctrinal reorientation, see Godwin (2001).
“people’s war” with a more appropriate concept for the post-Cold War of “limited war under high-technology conditions” signaled a modern convergence of China’s threat perception and available technology (Shambaugh 2002, 60).

Ever since 1990, the PLA experienced an extensive and accumulative process of doctrinal reform through the General Training Program (GTP). It was accumulative since it clearly absorbed and implemented insights and lessons learned during and after the Gulf War. By 1996, after the General Staff Department (GSD) concluded a five-year period of experimenting and adjusting combat training and issued the binding GTPs for future training, a new era of unified training for “limited war under high-technology conditions” began (Biasko, Klapakis and Corbett 1996, 490). These organizational developments were put into practice between 1995 and 1996 throughout the Taiwan Crisis when the PLA conducted numerous joint exercises that involved naval, air and amphibious forces in addition to launching missiles across the Straits (Blasko 2006, 144).

By the end of the 1990s, the PLA has steadily increased the combined dimension of China’s armed forces to incorporate all of its military branches and military regions (MRs) into a cohesive training module (Puska 2002, 224). Essentially, contemporary Chinese military training emphasizes amphibious operations for Taiwan-related contingencies in addition to the fact that the armed forces train for a variety of scenarios ranging from local contingencies, conventional external threats, terrorism to rescue missions (Blasko 2005, 72). From a doctrinal/strategic perspective, military thinking and planning is still heavily influenced by the issue of Taiwan and the prospects of unification through armed conflict. Nevertheless, possible scenarios in which China faces the United States over Taiwan or other long-term issues are also considered to be relevant for military training (Gowdin 2003, 261).
In 1999, for example, the PLA introduced the concept of “new three attacks and new three defenses” that includes attacks against stealth aircraft, cruise missiles, and armed helicopters, and to defense against precision strikes, electronic warfare, and reconnaissance and surveillance (Shambaugh 2002, 87-88). The 2000 Defense White Paper celebrated the achievement of a formalized and homogeneous training program: “Through decades of development and continuous reforms and carrying forward its good traditions, a unique and relatively complete system of troop training and institutional education has taken shape” (China Report 2001, 93). In addition to efforts to increase China’s self-reliant military, economic and industrial posture as discussed thus far, Beijing also attempted to form regional and global political, diplomatic and sometimes military anti-American alliances as the next section suggests.

*Forming an Anti-American Axis*

Besides the national efforts to modernize and improve the capabilities of the PLA, or China’s internal balancing to put it in theoretical terms, Beijing was also extremely interested in external balancing and anti-hegemonic alignment. There were various regional and global actors that the PRC wanted to align with in order to advance its multipolar vision for the international system. One of the major targets of these attempts was the Soviet Union and after its collapse, the Russian Federation. Despite several cordial gestures, and some major arms sales, the general approach pursued by the Kremlin in the early 1990s was extremely cautious in order not to instigate a renewed Russo-American rivalry (Wilson 2004). Nevertheless, the expansion of NATO eastwards in the second-half of the 1990s and other related American polices were perceived by the Yeltsin administration to growingly threaten Russian national interests. Consequently, the Kremlin began to lean toward Beijing for political rather than economic reasons. Indeed, the Sino-Russian
relationship that was formerly based on financial reasoning in the early 1990s changed, becoming distinctly anti-American in the second half of the 1990s.14

In April 1990, China moved to consolidate a ten-year pact with the Soviet Union for the purpose of developing high-technology infrastructures and capabilities through intergovernmental scientific and economic cooperation. In addition to the pledge to improve financial relations, Moscow agreed to provide China with a Soviet-made modern nuclear power plant (Clines 1990). In May 1991, Jiang traveled to Moscow in order to strengthen the relations between the two countries, celebrate the end of thirty years of enmity but no less important to better military cooperation. China was especially interested in purchasing a number of modern SU-27 fighter aircrafts as the previous section described, a development defined by a senior Chinese spokesman as "a perfectly normal development" (Clines 1991). A year later it was stated that China and Russia concluded an arms deal of approximately two billion dollars that included, among other items, combat and transport aircrafts, half a dozen surface-to-air missile systems, an unknown number of T-72 tanks and four submarines (Hoagland 1992).

In September 1994, Jiang traveled again to Russia to increase economic cooperation and to officially end the tensions between the two countries by signing a formal agreement that will guarantee mutual nuclear pacification. While the Russians refrained from appearing too eager to deepen relations or give them an anti-American character, the Chinese had a different motive as one spokesman clearly implied: "The international community should acknowledge that there is no single pattern for the development of all countries and that all countries should be equal" (Specter 1994). In any case, both Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Jiang agreed to upgrade the relations between the two countries to a "constructive partnership" amidst what they considered

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14 For an overall assessment of the Sino-Russian relations, see Jingjie (1999). On the limitations of this relationship, see Garnett (2001).
to be increased American unilateralism while refraining from calling this a formal Sino-Russian alliance (Wishnick 2001, 126).

During Yeltsin’s visit to China in April 1996, Jiang expressed his wishes to elevate the relations with Russia and establish a direct secure telecommunication link (the "redline") with the Kremlin. After the meeting with Yeltsin, both leaders turned to express their shared willingness to avert American "hegemonism, power politics... (and) interference in the internal affairs of other countries under various pretexts" (Tyler 1996b). This time, Yeltsin found it difficult to resist the Chinese offer to upgrade relations since he also thought American policies were becoming increasingly anti-Russian. As Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigori Karasins’ (1997, 24) explained, “the support shown by the two superpowers... is especially pressing now, when world society is still running across the inertia of the old mode of thought that was characteristic of the Cold War times with claims for sole leadership and attempts to steer the development of international relations in the direction of monopolarity.”

Another major target of Chinese attempts to reduce American influence in Asia was India, which was also considered by Russian policymakers to be the third pillar in a Russo-Chinese-Indian “strategic triangle” for similar reasons.15 After more than thirty-one years of interstate rift, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng managed to obtain India’s support of the PRC in the matter of Tibet and to coordinate their policies vis-à-vis the United States in the post-Cold War regional order. Both Li and Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (Gargan 1991) condemned “the emerging international oligarchy,” and argued in favor of a world in which no single state will be able to "manipulate world affairs and play power politics."

Indo-Chinese relations continued to improve with the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India-China Border Areas,

signed when the Indian Prime Minister visited China in September 1993. Moreover, in 1996 both countries agreed that “neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means or seek unilateral military superiority” (China Report 1994, 241).

However, in May 1998, India’s nuclear tests crippled these positive developments. For Chinese policymakers, the detonation of a nuclear device was a sign that the improvement of the relationship between the two countries achieved through most of the 1990s suffered a devastating blow (Hu 1998). Crucially, India had blamed China for its need to develop nuclear weapons. In response to the tests, the Chinese Foreign Ministry (China Report 1999, 218, 219) issued an exceptionally harsh statement:

The Chinese Government is deeply shocked by this and hereby expresses its strong condemnation. This act of India’s is nothing but an outrageous contempt for the common will of the international community for the comprehensive ban on nuclear tests and a hard blow on the international effort to prevent nuclear weapon proliferation. It will entail serious consequences to the peace and stability in South Asia and the world at large. The international community should adopt a common position in strongly demanding India to immediately stop the development of nuclear weapons... And yet it has maliciously accused China of posing a nuclear threat to India. This is utterly groundless.

As the Sino-Indian axis appeared to disintegrate, China had no alternative other than to temporarily seek assistance from the Clinton administration in curbing India’s nuclear drive. Paradoxically, by focusing on India in an attempt to reduce American influence in the region, China ended up turning to the United States for support. In this instance, by choosing a multilateral response, highlighting the positive and constructive American role in the nonproliferation regime, China sought to upgrade its international image as an ardent nonproliferation actor and elevate Sino-American bilateral relations. In addition to a number of gestures toward the United States, the Chinese agreed unprecedentedly perhaps to apply pressure on Pakistan in order to prevent a planned Pakistani nuclear test in response to the Indian tests (Shirk 2004, 84-85).
Nevertheless, the Chinese resumed their critical treatment of American foreign policy in tandem with improvements in Sino-Indian relations, especially following NATO’s bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during mid-1999. When Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited Washington in April, he was unable to reach an agreement concerning China’s entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO) despite significant Chinese concessions (Knowlton 1999). By the end of September Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan (Kempster 1999) lashed at American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright during a joint press conference arguing that the United States’ policies toward Taiwan, and especially their military dimension, constitute “a major obstacle to the continued sound development of the [Sino-U.S.] relationship.”

Still, from Beijing’s point of view, the relations with New Delhi were instrumental in creating a regional order that diminished American influence. This position was also shared by Indian policymakers that feared, on their part, a Sino-American rapprochement over the Indian nuclear program. Hence, after about two years of direct and indirect interaction and soul searching on behalf of the two parties, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and Indian President K.R. Narayanan visited Beijing in June 1999 and May-June 2000 respectively and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan visited India in July 2000.16

In an interview to an Indian newspaper upon his arrival to New Delhi, Tang (as cited in The Hindu 2000) declared that a new chapter in Sino-Indian relations was opened and reiterated his conviction that India and China practically have similar worldviews since both leaderships “oppose hegemonism, power politics and ‘neo-interventionism’. They stand for promoting world multipolarity process, while opposing unipolar world, and are committed to the establishment of a just and equitable international political and economic order.”

16 For a detailed account of the estrangement and rapprochement period following the nuclear tests, see Garver (2001).
Conclusions

In the early 1990s China was caught paradoxically in an international constellation that was just as challenging as the Cold War international system. American intentions to redraw the global and regional landscape, and especially Washington’s reactions to the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, were badly received in Beijing. Consequently, the United States was increasingly considered to be a major source of danger to China’s national interests and political order. Under such circumstances, China pursued a wide-ranging anti-American Chinese post-Cold War counterbalancing grand strategy, and an analogous trajectory was practiced ever since despite some necessary tactical or specific adjustments.

Notwithstanding the clear and overwhelming power disparity between China and the United States, Beijing aspires to establish a more balanced international system in which there is more than one predominant great power. Multipolarity, or multilateralism as Chinese officials sometime called it, was all about a world order that brings into consideration other powers’ national interests and preserves their sovereignty intact. Indeed, in December 1999 Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin (1999) proclaimed their readiness to “push forward the establishment of a multi-polar world on the basis of the principles of the United Nations Charter and existing international laws in the 21st century, strengthen the UN’s dominant status in international affairs, and peacefully resolve international disputes through political means”

The article identified four basic features in China’s post-Cold War grand strategy that simultaneously facilitated and encouraged a hard balancing grand strategy vis-à-vis the United States; the dominance of the United States in the PRC’s map of threats, economic and industrial growth, qualitative and quantitative military modernization; and the availability of allies to oppose the United States. Properly understood, China’s formulation and application of its grand
strategy is analogous to navigating a supertanker; it is extremely reluctant to change course unless the fundamental conditions change. From Beijing’s perspective, China is far better positioned to pursue its regional and global objectives as recognized in the early 1990s.

By almost any account or standard, China is a rising power and the discussion of its revisionist or status quo orientation seems rather simplistic. Given the comprehensive modernization process of the PLA, even from a purely defensive standpoint, the scope of the actual modernization process suggests that the Chinese leadership has a more ambitious vision beyond immediate security needs. Yet China seeks to alter the regional and global order by applying hard and soft means. What this article attempted to do, under such conditions, is threefold: a.) identify the general trajectory of China’s grand strategy throughout the 1990s; b.) characterize the most important determinants that influence China’s behavior; and c.) determine the nature of these elements from a more contemporary perspective.

Christopher Fettweis (2004, 101) eloquently commented a few years ago that “no one can say with any certainty what the future international system will look like - the best an analyst can do is measure the trends and extrapolate.” Unfortunately, this is all we can actually say at this point about China as well; it may not be everything we need in order to fully predict the future of Sino-American relations, but it is hopefully more than enough.
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