

Remarks by Dr. Andrew J. Nathan, Columbia University  
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*“China’s Search for Security”*

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Today, I want to look at China's security situation from the point of view of Chinese policymakers. In the West, we think about the rise of China as a big threat. There are books such as Martin Jacques' *When China Rules the World* and Aaron Friedberg's *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, which is about China's intention to drive the United States out of Asia, and a new book by Michael Pillsbury called *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, in which he says China has been pursuing a long-term strategy to bide its time while it waits for U.S. power to decline to displace it as the global hegemon. So there is a lot of that kind of thinking. That thinking about the "China threat" is now becoming dominant in Washington, which is a change because for many years the thinking in Washington was pretty optimistic: engagement, that China will change, that we have so many common interests. But now it is flipping, which I think is a pretty dangerous development.

But when you look at China's security situation from a Chinese point of view, it is actually scarier and more threatening than we think. That is because power in the international system is not a lump sum; it depends on the situation you are in. The U.S. is in a very favorable security situation: geographically, demographically, historically it has unintentionally inherited this global security position, and it has many allies in Asia and Europe. A unit of power on behalf of the U.S.—whether it is a unit of military or economic power—goes a long way because we don't have to use our power, at least not much of it, to keep security within our borders. We have security problems in the U.S. such as illegal immigrants or terrorism, which are serious, but compared to China's problems they are relatively modest. It requires less use of aggregate power; we don't have to use a lot of power dealing with Mexico or Canada. So we can take power and deploy it globally.

In our book, *China's Search for Security* (co-authored with Andrew Scobell, Columbia University Press, 2013), we talk about four rings of security. The first ring is inside the borders of China. China has the Tibet problem, and the Xinjiang problem, Koreans on the border with North Korea, the Hong Kong problem, the problem of Taiwan—which probably eats up the major portion of Chinese defense planning and preparation—it has the problem of unrest in the countryside and in the factories, an estimated 100 million Christians, the problem of Falun Gong and so forth. This is a very challenging domestic security environment.

The second ring is the 19 neighboring countries. China has more direct neighbors than any other country in the world. None of those countries has a "Chinese culture." They all have their own separate culture. Of course, Korea has Confucianism and uses Chinese characters, and Japan has Chinese characters, and Vietnam has had Chinese influence, but they are all very different cultures. When you think about American and Canadian culture, it is basically



identical. Even American and Mexican culture is basically identical. Think of Vietnam, Korea, or Japan, and these are not countries that feel an automatic identity with China, especially since Chinese culture has evolved in the way that it has under Communism. Russia has a formally friendly relationship with China, but the Russians really hate the Chinese and the Chinese don't like the Russians.

And what are these neighbors? Japan has probably the second-best navy in the world. You have India, which is going to overtake China in population size and—while it has always underperformed—has incredible potential. These are countries where Chinese diplomacy has been very smart and successful in achieving the current level of cooperation. With Russia, they have created the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Chinese-Russian relations are quite stable. They have worked in their relations with South Korea, developing trade relations and intense interactions of all kinds. They have a kind of truce with India. This is good. But I don't think it is possible for these relationships to get much better than they are. I don't see any real world, foreseeable scenario where a country like Japan will tilt towards China; that is really science fiction. That has always been a difficult relationship. The same goes for Russia, India, Vietnam, or Indonesia.

Also in this second ring, you have so many unstable countries. I guess North Korea might be the number one, where any deterioration in the situation would impose enormous costs on China. The Central Asian countries are also very unstable. Pakistan is pretty unstable. So from the Chinese point of view, they are managing all these countries, some of which are very strong and will never knuckle under to Chinese influence, and others that are very weak where China cannot prevent disastrous situations from developing where China would be hurt.

The third ring is different “regional systems” where lots of countries are involved. It is a multilateral situation with the U.S. drawn into it. They are not bilateral relationships. The North Korea situation is multilateralized in a way which has some advantages for China, because it can play a pivotal role in multilateral dialogues, but it is also more difficult for China. China cannot solve the North Korean problem by itself; the U.S. is a factor. From the Chinese point of view, the U.S. is an out-of-control factor that is making the Korean situation worse because I think they believe that if the U.S. weren't threatening North Korean security—as they believe the U.S. does—then North Koreans would be much more amenable to some kind of reasonable reforms. In the Southeast Asian situation as well, something like the South China Sea, where there is a big deal at stake, if you were China, you would be crazy to just give up claims that have some historical basis. Yet they feel that ASEAN is ganging up on them, and that Vietnam is getting the other states to insist on a code of conduct and the U.S. then steps in and says, “We want a resolution by law,” which is basically unfavorable to the Chinese position. The third ring is these regional systems that involve even more countries than the twenty-four neighbors: they involve the U.S., Australia, the other Southeast Asian countries not bordering China, and more.




The fourth ring is the rest of the world. Because China is engaged in the global economy very deeply and has profited from that engagement, it has gotten the upside of globalization but also the downside which is a heavy dependency on imports of raw materials, heavy dependency on international markets, without having the military or diplomatic capability to secure these interests in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. It is a major power, but not a global power with the capacity to protect the sea lanes through the Indian Ocean or even through the South China Sea, or its personnel in Africa, where to a large extent, it is dependent on others.

If you were China, what would you want to do about that? The Chinese seem to see the U.S. as the most important strategic problem for them and that is what gives rise in Washington to this idea that the answer for China is to drive the U.S. either out of Asia—that is one theory—or just supersede it entirely as a global power. I don't think Chinese strategists see this as possible. My reading of Chinese strategy is that it is very realistic, and realist thinking would say, "China cannot in the foreseeable future achieve the hegemony or dominance in its own region" because of the pattern of relationships that I have described. If it doesn't have dominance in its own region, it won't be able to project large amounts of power into the fourth ring.

The Chinese assess that U.S. power is declining, which is controversial, but they assess that it is declining very slowly and that it is not going to be a quick or smooth process. I would add that if American power were to decline quite radically, this would present a new set of problems for China because it would destabilize strategic relations in Asia. What would Japan do in that case? One theory is that Japan would tilt to China, but I think a more realistic theory would be that the current trend of Japanese reaction against the rise of China would be accelerated. Who would provide stability for Southeast Asia? The theory that, "It is thanks to the U.S. that Asia is stable" offends many Asians, but a radical decline in U.S. power would cause all of the actors in Asia to rethink their positions and might not end up in a situation favorable to China. Chinese strategists are pretty careful and don't really harbor this overweening ambition within a twenty or thirty year time frame.

If I stop here, it sounds pretty optimistic. But I don't want to stop there because I think there is another step in the analysis, which is to say, "Okay, this very broad macro-strategic picture is pretty optimistic and status-quo oriented." But the next thing to look at is Chinese-American, shall we say, "frictions" and conflicts of interests that are important and not going to go away. Taiwan is one of those interests and is very important to both sides. The U.S. alliance system in Asia is something the Chinese really don't like and would like to weaken those relationships. The U.S. freedom of navigation policy in the South China Sea threatens Chinese interests. If you or I were the head of China, we would not accept that as a status quo.




I am not talking about international law or ethics, or who is right or wrong, but any government in China is not going to be happy with American naval dominance outside of its twelve nautical mile territorial sea, and the U.S. conducting naval operations which are not war operations but are intelligence, surveillance, training operations, exercises with allies. This is an intolerable situation which China has had to tolerate. As Chinese power increases and as they build up their navy, as they have greater economic influence over other countries in the region, we should expect China to push back against these things that threaten their interests. They naturally want access to the high seas through the first island chain. So they will try and get Taiwan and the Senkakus.

The issue of ideology also comes into this. It is true that the U.S. has a policy of democracy promotion and it is true that the US has attempted to promote democracy in China. Past presidents have said that the purpose of our engagement is to change China. We are not comfortable with authoritarian regimes. Is this just ideology or missionary thinking or is there a strategic logic to that? But I don't think it is true that the U.S. seeks to subvert the Chinese government. This might be a fine grain difference; supporting human rights, supporting civil society is not really the same as the CIA putting funding into a coup group in the Chinese leadership. But it may look similar in the eyes of the Chinese. When the color revolutions happen around the world, some U.S. agencies will brag about their role, even if it may be a little exaggerated. Meanwhile, the Chinese feel that their foreign policy is not ideological—they don't care what regime somebody else has—and from their point of view, their policy is consistent with international law, and American foreign policy is threatening. This adds to the difficulties.

If you add up the two big points I have made, you have a picture of strategic macro-caution combined with serious, important, security differences that could lead to friction and conflict, not in the sense of a war, but disagreement, trouble, and possibly low-level clashes if escalation control falters. That will go on for a long time and the outcome of which is a test of will and power as to what the balance will be in Asia. Some people have suggested this long period of friction could be avoided by the two sides reaching some agreement in advance: “let's neutralize parts of Asia, let's agree that China and the U.S. will have a condominium of Asia, or have a new model of major power relations.” But I don't think that the U.S. will agree to this, I don't think that Japan would accept it, I don't think that this is a realistic proposal, and I don't think international politics works that way. It works by tests of strength.

The third thing to add to this is more of a dynamic picture—so that is a static picture I have given you—what is likely to change going forward? There are three places we might look for change. One is inside of China. There is a great deal of debate. I do think that the future for China looks full of risk. Yes, China may continue its development, and if it does, it is obviously going to be at a slower growth rate, seven percent may go down to five percent, which many Chinese are saying that is going to be the picture. That would still be great, but



the reduction of the growth rate will cause challenges: social stability issues, employment issues, and so forth.

Politically, the regime seems to be aiming to maintain one party rule but to reach a better relationship with society in a responsive Chinese-style democracy which is not Western-style democracy. I would use the word “responsive authoritarianism.” They seem to want that. But that is a very difficult transition. We see the anti-corruption campaign, the social alienation from the ideology, and more. So there is certainly a risk of some kind of collapse or regime transition there. The sense of uncertainty in China is frightening. I wrote an article in 2003 called “resilient authoritarianism” where I said the regime is more resilient than Western analysts believe and I still think that is true. But despite the resilience of the regime, it’s amazing how much uncertainty hangs over it. That uncertainty itself is a cost for the regime, like people taking their capital out and sending their sons overseas. It is a fact right now, that uncertainty. Future trends may weaken China’s strategic situation even more than it is already vulnerable.

The second area where change might occur is in the region. Countries like Japan, Vietnam, and Indonesia seem stable, but there are danger spots: there is the risk of conflict in Taiwan, there is North Korea, Pakistan is a mess, and the Central Asian countries are a mess, so things can break out. I am not suggesting that next week something will happen in any of these countries, but over a ten or so year time frame the possibility of disaster of some kind or another in bordering countries where China’s ability to control it, is pretty limited. They could be presented with those challenges or with the opposite kind of challenge of the rise of India or recovery of Japan.

The third area of uncertainty has to do with U.S. policy. Our policy is so unpredictable in the U.S. that it has always been a problem for our allies. Who is going to be the new president and how much do they know about foreign policy? We never know. We never know where the U.S. economy is headed. My view is that the U.S. is not declining, yet. For the foreseeable future, it will remain committed in Asia. We now have this statement in the U.S. that America is a “resident Pacific power,” so they repeat this mantra. It signals that the U.S. has very important strategic interests that if we allow a “thread” to be pulled out such as Taiwan, or gave up the principle of freedom of navigation, or accepted North Korea as a nuclear power, it would unravel American credibility in Asia, and also in Europe, and it would have enormous strategic implications.

So I don’t think U.S. policymakers are going to do those things. Any projection about the future that depends on the idea of an U.S. pullout is an erroneous projection. From the point of view of China, the U.S. problem is not going to go away and it is not going to be easily solved. Chinese strategic thinkers like to appeal to reasonable sentiment, but in fact from an American point of view, these deployments in Asia are very essential and I don’t think they



are going to be abandoned. Every country looks at the U.S. and says, “How reliable is its commitment and how do we accommodate a rising China?” I understand that Korea thinks long-term about these issues and how to balance them and I guess I would like to hear from you and your thinking about that. Let me end here and thank you so much for listening.



**Andrew J. Nathan** is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. He is concomitantly chair of the steering committee of the Center for the Study of Human Rights and chair of the Morningside Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Columbia. Previously, he served as chair of the Department of Political Science (2003-2006), chair of the Executive Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Science (2003-2006), and director of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute (1991-1995). His teaching and research interests include Chinese politics and foreign policy, the comparative study of political participation and political culture, and human rights. He is engaged in long-term research and writing on Chinese foreign policy and on sources of political legitimacy in Asia. He taught at the University of Michigan from 1970-1971 and has been at Columbia University since 1971. Professor Nathan has written and published extensively, including *Chinese Democracy* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2012); *China's Search for Security*, co-authored with Andrew Scobell (Columbia University Press, 2013); and *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, co-edited with David Johnson and Evelyn S. Rawski. His articles have appeared in *World Politics*, *Daedalus*, *The China Quarterly*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Asian Survey*, and elsewhere. Professor Nathan received his B.A. in History, M.A. in East Asian Regional Studies, and Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University