



# What Does China Want?

*by Ross Terrill*

**W**hen China first intrigued America, in the late 18th century, we desired its tea and silk. The American missionaries and traders who reached Canton and other ports did not trouble to reflect on what China might want of us—nothing more than the Christian gospel and gadgets and tobacco, they seemed to assume. In the years since, Americans seldom have had occasion to ponder the question. The historical pattern was that



*Shanghai's Pudong financial district, sprouting on former farmlands across the Huangpu River from the city's famous 19th-century Bund, has already established itself as one of Asia's financial hubs.*

America influenced China, and that unequal dynamic climaxed in the World War II alliance with Chiang Kai-shek's shaky Kuomintang government against the fascist powers. In the 1940s it was presumed that China desired simply to recover from Japanese occupation, poverty, disunity, and corruption.

When "our China," the Nationalist regime of Chiang, went up in a puff of smoke at the end of the 1940s and the Communists took over Beijing, China became The Other. In the acrimonious years after Mao Zedong's triumph in 1949, China was beyond our influence. But we knew what China wanted: Mao had warned that he would "lean to one side," and soon he declared, "The Soviet Union's today is China's tomorrow." We were the "imperialists," and Mao was against us.

After Moscow and Beijing quarreled in the early 1960s and the Vietnam War escalated later in the decade, what China wanted became more complex. In the so-called Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, Mao's realm seemed irrational to the United States—and also to Moscow and most of the world. Yet, in 1971, Beijing indicated to President Richard Nixon its desire to lean to the

American side to counterbalance the (assumed) coming eclipse of the United States by a rising Soviet Union.

Today, China's goals have again become hard to read; yet understanding them has never been so urgent. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the worldwide spread of democracy, China embodies an enigma: economic success under a Communist regime. The world knows what the United States stands for: free markets and democracy wherever possible. And it knows what Osama bin Laden wants: a return to the Caliphate. But China's goals are less clear. What do the post-Mao, post-Soviet Union, money-minded Chinese want? The question puzzles—and worries—many Americans.

Despite its enhanced influence in the past few years, Beijing still tends to behave reactively rather than pursue distinctive goals beyond China's borders. This comforts some people; they see China as a cautious, even conservative, power. And, to an extent, it is. But that's not the whole story. Beijing indeed behaves defensively in three fundamental respects: It sees itself as recovering from economic backwardness; it copes in quiet frustration with its relative weakness as compared with the strength of the United States; and it participates in a great number of international organizations for the limited purpose of keeping their agendas from

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inconveniencing China. This defensive behavior may suggest that Beijing is uncertain about whether to seek to return to a past imperial primacy in Asia, the “Middle Kingdom,” or to join what people other than the Chinese style the “international community.” It may, of course, be simply that China is playing for time, hiding plans that for now seem too hard to pull off.

Unlike the United States, which trumpets its goals, China does seem to keep its intentions under wraps. If you read the speeches of President Hu Jintao, who is also Communist Party chief and head of the military, or those of his predecessor, Jiang Zemin, “peace and development” seem to be the goals of Chinese foreign policy. The phrase reveals but also misleads. Peace and development are means rather than ends for Beijing’s foreign policy. To say they are China’s goals is like saying Hu Jintao’s purpose tomorrow is to put on his trousers and brush his teeth.

China is unusual in today’s world because it is part empire and part modern nation. A modernizing Marxist-Leninist party state has been built upon a very old and successful tradition of governance and the imperial mentality that went with it. This extends autocratic empire into an era otherwise done with multinational empires. Communist China, astonishingly, inherited the borders of the Qing empire at its grandest, including Tibet, southern Mongolia, and the Muslim west that was once East Turkestan. But a modernizing China is torn: Hold on to empire for the sake of Chinese glory? Or yield to a postimperial politics made natural by the new society and economy visible in today’s Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing?

The impulse to transmute the old Middle Kingdom into a hegemony based, this time, not on Confucian ethics but on economic power, is still there, but two forces cut against it. International economic and cultural interdependence will at some point collide with political paternalism. And the United States, Japan, India, and other powers may not permit a neo-Middle Kingdom.

Because China remains an authoritarian state, we cannot know what the Chinese people want. Still less can we assign a direction to the future of Chinese civilization, saying, for example, that it will “clash” with Islam or Western civilization. We can answer the question about China’s goals only in terms of the actions of the current Beijing party-state. What are the nine male engineers who make up the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeking for China? We can discern perhaps six goals in their actions.



China pursues a foreign policy that maximizes stability at home. This is true of many other nations as well, but acutely so of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Control of the populace has seldom been taken for granted by post-1949 Beijing, as indeed it could not be taken by Chinese rulers through the 150 years of foreign pressures and domestic troubles

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that marked the decline of the Qing dynasty. From the beginnings of the PRC to the present, Beijing has been wary of losing its grip on its far-flung realm.

China's three largest provinces, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, were historically not Chinese territory, and their rooted inhabitants differ in religion, language, culture, and typical livelihood from Chinese people. Dealing with minorities who may prefer independence to rule by Chinese has led Beijing to employ semicolonial methods. In Tibet, higher education is open only to Chinese speakers, the vast west of the PRC is all on Beijing time, and the Muslim Uyghur population in Xinjiang has been purposely diluted by Chinese internal immigration, to cite just a few examples. In addition, the claim of the CCP to be the fount of truth as well as power creates numerous forbidden mental zones that must be policed. Any philosophical heterodoxy is treated, with or without justification, as a political threat to the CCP. The regime trusts you with your money but not with your mind.

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In 1998, Jiang Zemin gave a startling 20 speeches on World War II during a visit to Japan. The Japanese chief cabinet secretary eventually said in frustration, "Isn't that all behind us?" But Japan's past transgressions will never be "all behind us" so long as the imperial state in Beijing feels a need to legitimate itself with the Chinese people by shouting "Japanese militarists!" Insecurities of this sort shape foreign policy. Thus, dealings with South Asia

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are intended to weaken the links between Tibet and the Tibetan government in exile in India—much as dealings with Central Asia are intended to dampen the hopes of Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang. The same eye to domestic control guides policy toward Mongolia, Korea, Thailand, and other neighbors. In sum, the PRC is a diverse semi-empire, with many inhabitants sharing racial, religious, or historical links with peoples just across one of China's borders. And the PRC is an authoritarian regime that, as if in response to self-induced nightmares, often acts like a state afraid of its own citizens.

The first goal, then, is internal stability.

A second goal of Beijing's foreign policy is to sustain China's economic growth. As Marxism fades and no official public philosophy replaces it, an improved standard of living and pride in the nation have come to legitimate a regime that never faces an election. The economic achievements in the quarter-century since Deng Xiaoping took the reins in the post-Mao era are certainly worth protecting. The economy has quadrupled in size, and its yearly growth continues at eight to nine percent (by government figures). Foreign trade has increased by a factor of 10 overall; recently, the volume of foreign trade has been expanding by 25 percent annually. The post-Mao economic surge is fueled by foreign money, and urban coastal areas benefit most from the trade, technology, and managerial skill generated by this investment. Farmers did well in the initial rounds of the reform period, but they have since lagged badly behind city dwellers, some 15 percent of whom enjoy characteristic trappings of contemporary middle-class life: cell phones, Internet access, cars, homeownership, and international vacations.

Beijing is crafting foreign policy to sustain the economic growth that keeps its legitimacy intact. Hence China's bow to stringent demands by the United States and others when it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001; hence its relatively transparent juggling act over the yuan-dollar exchange rate; and hence its restraint this past June when Australia allowed a defecting Chinese diplomat to be accepted as a resident in Australia. (China relies increasingly on Australian liquefied natural gas, coal, and iron ore.) It was surely in part to avoid damage to China's huge exports to the American market that Beijing suspended the provocative missile tests it had staged off the shores of Taiwan

*In 1995, Chinese police keep watch over Tibetan Buddhists celebrating the Tsong Khapa festival at a Buddhist monastery. Tensions continue to strain Beijing's authority over Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, its three largest and most distant provinces.*

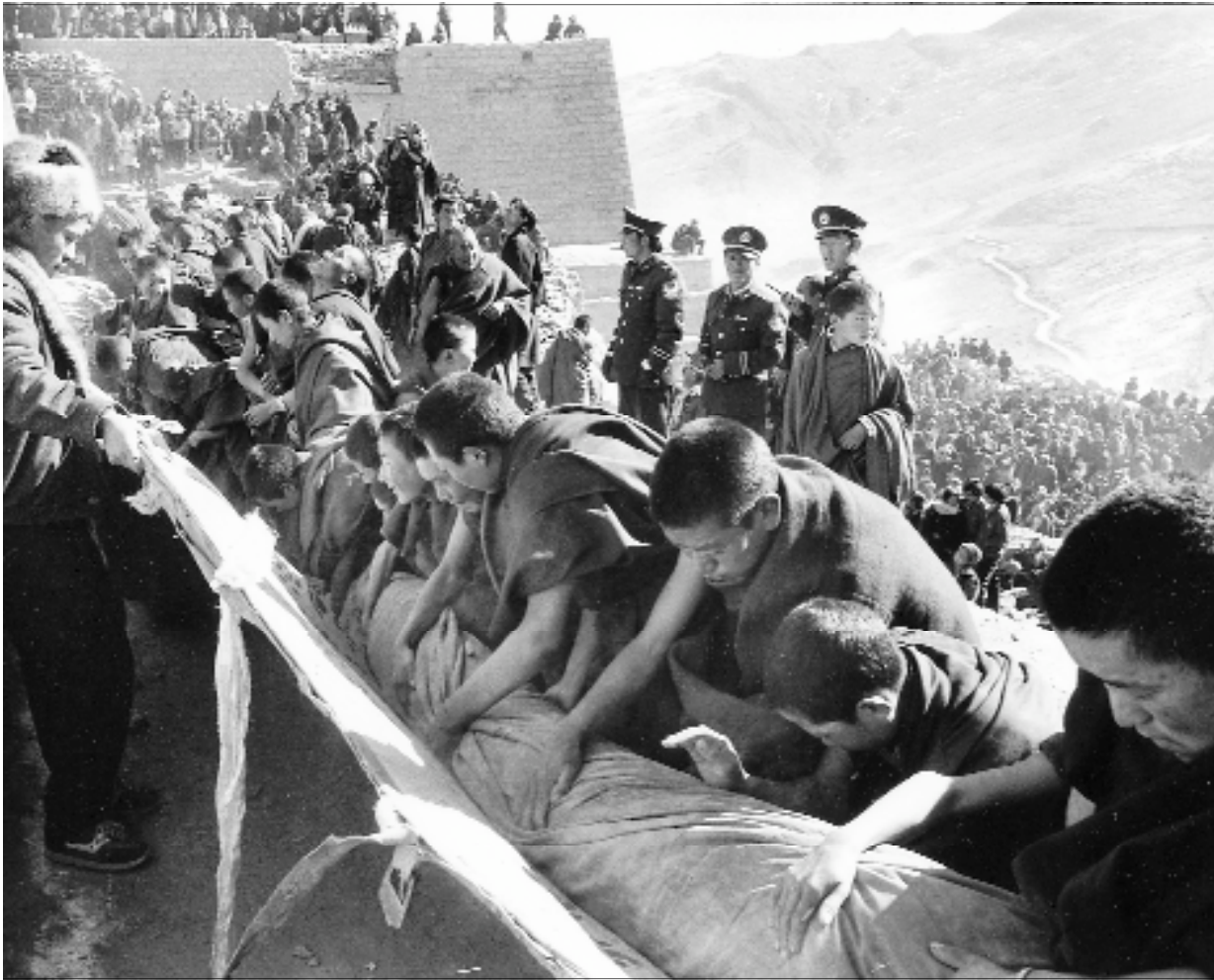


to show its displeasure with a pro-independence candidate in the island's 1996 presidential election. (President Bill Clinton had dispatched two aircraft carriers to the vicinity.) And in 2001, after a collision between U.S. and Chinese military planes near Hainan Island, Beijing abruptly switched off its initial "antihegemonic" rhetoric and returned the distressed American crew—again to protect the key bilateral relationship that furthers China's economic modernization.

The third goal of Beijing's foreign policy is to maintain a peaceful environment in China's complicated geographic situation. The PRC is the only country in the world

that has to deal with 14 abutting neighbors, seven of which share borders of more than 600 miles, and four others close by China's extraordinarily long coastline. In its first 30 years, the PRC went to war on all five of its flanks. In the Korean War, it suffered more than a million dead and wounded. The PRC fought India in 1959 and 1962. It sent 320,000 engi-

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neering and anti-aircraft troops to help Ho Chi Minh win the Vietnam War. In 1969, putative socialist brothers Moscow and Beijing took to the sword at the Amur and Ussuri rivers in the northeast. In 1979, Deng's China attacked Vietnam to "teach Hanoi a lesson."

To China's credit and Asia's relief, Beijing in the 1980s adopted a new foreign policy of omnidirectional smiles, labeled a "policy of peace and independence." Fighting no war after 1979, Beijing soon smoothed relations with the Soviet Union, mended the shattered fence with

Indonesia, stunningly recognized South Korea and stuffed a cloth down North Korea's angry throat, established a shared gatekeeper role with Moscow in Central Asia, joined international

BEIJING IS PREPARING  
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agencies by the month, and eventually became more enmeshed with the United States (except in military relations) than at any time in Chinese history. In a striking change from what was true for most of the PRC's history, Beijing today has no enemies.

Caution to gain time continues. In today's ongoing six-party talks on the Korean peninsula, Beijing, in its own opaque fashion, pursues a policy (not in American interests) of keeping the peace by clinging to the status quo. A divided Korea, however hair-raising Pyongyang's gyrations may continue to be, is better for China than a united Korea of uncertain orientation. In Central Asia, Beijing likewise opts for "talks" on border demarcation and "splittist" issues that sweep problems under the carpet and sustain the status quo.

By the turn of the 21st century, it had become clear that Beijing was moving beyond omnidirectional smiles to lay the groundwork for a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine in East Asia. This fourth goal of the PRC is, of course, unstated. China bids to replace the United States as the chief influence in East Asia. Unfortunately, the Washington-led projects in Afghanistan and Iraq may have distracted the Bush administration and the American public from the preparations Beijing is making for future dominance, when they ought to pay close attention to these moves.

**G**oal four is built on China's enhanced reputation in the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, which left it undisturbed, and on its two decades of economic success. More concrete, if still negative, aims are coming into view. On a few global issues where Chinese and American interests coincide, or Beijing cannot effectively resist U.S. policy, it goes along with the United States, "abstains," or opposes Washington with a limp wrist. But in Asia, Chinese leaders are doing much to frustrate and exclude the United States. They drive a wedge between Japan and the United States at every opportunity. They whisper in Australian ears that Canberra would be better off looking only to Asia and not across the Pacific. In December, a mile-

stone will be reached when an East Asia summit convenes in Malaysia without U.S. representation, thanks in part to Chinese pressure. Beijing sees the summit as a step toward forming an East Asian organization that will not include the United States.

In the Southeast Asian theater, the overture to a Chinese Monroe Doctrine can be heard unmistakably in Burma (Myanmar) and several other countries. Burma receives substantial Chinese aid, including funds for important infrastructure projects. The Burmese leaders are nervous about Sinicization of northern Burma, where ethnic Chinese live and trade. But like the tribute Burma traditionally paid to the Chinese court in centuries past, the smiles toward Beijing are an insurance policy. The result is that Burma has entered China's sphere of influence, as has Laos. Thailand and even Malaysia could be future candidates.

All the while, Beijing fosters a perception of China as the equal of the United States—a precious fifth goal. Consider Jiang Zemin's visit to America in 1997. "American negotiators preparing for the visit," reported *The New York Times*, "have said they were perplexed by the way their Chinese counterparts seemed extremely particular about the details of protocol and symbol." These included the size and color of carpets, the positioning, in photos of Jiang, of Harvard University's *Veritas* emblem and Philadelphia's Liberty Bell, and the style and design of the ties worn by Jiang and President Clinton. All such details were plotted to further an image of the PRC as being on a par with the United States. A *Times* edi-



*The post-Mao leaders: At a Central Committee meeting in 1992, Deng Xiaoping (in tunic) greets his successor, Jiang Zemin (center), and Hu Jintao (left), who later succeeded Jiang.*



torial after the visit must have heartened Beijing: “[Jiang] used his appearances with Mr. Clinton to present himself as a statesman who could meet on equal terms with the leader of the world’s richest and most powerful country.”

The next year Clinton went to China, and Beijing pulled similar strings to punch above its weight. It negotiated fiercely to have Clinton not stop in Japan en route, the better to showcase his China visit,

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and to stretch the visit to eight days so that it would exceed the historic seven days Nixon spent in China in 1972. In a secret speech after the trip, the Chinese premier expressed delight that Clinton “made no stopover in

Japan on his way to China . . . with the result that Japan has lost face.” The Chinese official press pounced on any morsel of comment from outside China that Clinton and Jiang had met as equals. It declared that the “two leaders together” (forget Europe, Japan, and India!) had made Asia “more stable” and the “world more peaceful.”

Goal six of China’s international policy is to “regain” territories that Beijing feels rightfully belong within the PRC. The list of such territories runs from areas of trumpeted intent to ones of secret hope and includes Taiwan and a large number of islands in the Yellow Sea, South China Sea, and East China Sea. In the case of Taiwan, Beijing awaits an opportunity that will consist of some combination of a favorable (to Beijing) evolution in Taiwan’s domestic politics, U.S. fatigue at the strain of supporting Taiwan, greater PRC capacity to transport troops and materiel quickly across the 100-mile Taiwan Strait, and a Japan more malleable to China’s wishes than it is at present. In the case of the Spratly Islands, spread across crucial Southeast Asian sea routes and claimed in part by six countries, Beijing awaits sufficient naval capacity to “resume” control; the islands are essentially uninhabited but are rich in oil and other resources. Not a few Vietnamese, Koreans, Thai, and Indians also expect China, when it is able, to lay claim to parts of their territory that were once Chinese.

Of China’s aspirations for territories on its northern flank, Mao said this in 1964: “About 100 years ago, the area to the east of Lake Baikal became Russian territory, and since then Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Kamchatka, and other areas have been Soviet territory. We have not yet presented our account for this list.” In due course, the account could be presented. By 1973, Mao had augmented the roster of territories he felt had been stolen by Moscow. Out of the blue, during a conversation on other topics with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, he complained that “the Soviet Union has carved out one and a half million square kilometers from China.” In the 1960s and 1970s, the same Communist Party that

now rules in Beijing claimed as Chinese territory parts of today's Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Should Russia's hold over its far east weaken, and the movement of Chinese people to live and trade in border areas continue, China may "present its account" for a portion of Siberia.



**A**rising power does not always attain its goals. For modern authoritarian states, success has mostly been shortlived. Thus, the goals of all three fascist powers, which caused World War II, were abruptly canceled by 1945, and the foreign-policy goals of the Soviet bloc disappeared without trace in 1991. The prospects that China will achieve its six foreign-policy goals depend, I believe, on the Chinese political system and on how other powers react to China's ambitions.

The next Chinese drama will probably unfold not in foreign relations but at home: A middle-class push for property rights, rural discontent, the Internet, 150 million unemployed wandering between village and city, and a suddenly aging population bringing financial and social strains will dramatize some of the contradictions of "market Leninism." Traveling one road in economics and another in politics makes it difficult to arrive at a stipulated destination. How China resolves the contradictions between its politics and its economics will determine how strong a role it is to play in the world.

The current rise of China, like the rise of Germany and Japan beginning in the late 19th century, displays high purpose, a sense of grievance, and heightened nationalism. But the rise of nations can have diverse outcomes. The



*China's rapid military modernization causes alarm, and Beijing clearly intends to make its weight felt in Asia. Yet while China is the world's second-biggest military spender, with a \$67 billion annual budget, the United States still outspends it five to one.*

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United Kingdom, for example, eventually accepted with equanimity the rise of the United States in the Western Hemisphere. By contrast, the rise of Germany and Japan culminated in two world wars and the destruction of the two countries' political systems—to be replaced by totally new polities and totally new international behavior. Democracy, not civilizational traits or any vast difference in relative national economic levels between today and the 1930s, makes Germany and Japan well-behaved powers in our era. Having great influence, which both now do, is not the same as being a threat to others, which both once were. China's future role in the world will be substantially determined by what happens to its out-of-date political system during the next two decades.

**I**t is sometimes overlooked that rising to the position of successful new hegemon, in any region during any epoch, presupposes three factors: the intention to be number one on the part of the rising power, the capacity to achieve that goal, and the acceptance of the new pretender by other affected powers. Beijing has the intention. The capacity is not clearly beyond it. But non-Chinese acquiescence?

East Asia retains a memory of the Chinese Middle Kingdom. Every Vietnamese and Korean knows about the age-old hauteur of the Chinese imperial court toward China's neighbors. For better and for worse, some 60 million Chinese reside in East Asia outside the PRC, reminding Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and other host countries of the primacy of Chinese civilization in the region; in some cases, the state of coexistence remains strained. Half the population of Taiwan is flat-out opposed to Beijing's intent to "resume" rule of their island, according to polls; in a 2002 survey, 38 percent saw themselves as Taiwanese, 8 percent as Chinese, 50 percent as both.

China has spent decades in the self-proclaimed role of victim: "carved like a melon" after the Opium War, bullied by the "imperialist" West, and so on. Its initial success as a hegemon would quickly present problems both of image and of practical consequence. China would learn, as the United States has done painfully, that an ascendant king of the jungle feels the bites of other beasts edged aside. A Japan that saw China eclipse the United States, its major ally, whose primacy in East Asia explains six decades of Japanese restraint, would surely challenge China. Once again, as for five decades after 1894, China and Japan would vie—and possibly fight—for control of the region.

An authoritarian China—nervous about control over its own Chinese people and without a comfortable grip on its internal non-Chinese semi-empire—probably lacks the moral appeal to lead Asia. It can be argued that the traditional Chinese empire of centuries past was a stabilizing force, but in the 21st century, any bid by China for extension of its empire, or even for a long continuance of its present multinational realm, is more likely to be destabilizing.

Empire and Communist autocracy were tightly related in the Soviet Union. There's the same interconnection in China, which, like Russia, is a landmass that did not *have* an empire but *was* one. The breakup of the Soviet

Union ended the Cold War as much as did the cracking of the Communist Party's monopoly on political power in Moscow. What Zbigniew Brzezinski said of Moscow is true of Beijing as well: "Russia can be either an empire or a democracy, but it cannot be both."

Moscow, under pressure, is redefining its national interest as it leaves behind decades of Communist empire. China has hardly begun this process. The Chinese leaders must ask whether they could smoothly rule a society as distinct from the PRC as today's Taiwan. They might ponder whether having Tibet as a state associated with China—under China's shadow, to be sure, but sovereign—might be better than everlasting tension between Lhasa and Beijing. These questions have not been asked because China is still in transition from Communist empire to modern nation, and pulled between what it wants and what it really needs. National myths (a victimized China) are beguiling; the beckoning national interest (a prosperous China) seems more compelling.

Additional questions arise about China's capacity to be the new global hegemon. Today's Beijing cannot project its power far; in the tsunami disaster of December 2004 it could not do so even to South and Southeast Asia. Problems would surely arise in Africa and Latin America, beginning with language and including race and religion and culture, if China sought to have the impact in those regions that Europe and the United States have had. There is also some doubt that China is philosophically equipped for world dominance of the kind that Britain once enjoyed through sea power, or that the United States now enjoys through business dealings, military power, popular culture, and ideas about free markets and democracy. The Maoist sense of mission was certainly strong, like the Protestant-derived Anglo-American sense of mission. Yet without communism's sharp edge, Chinese nationalism lacks a message for the world. The United States under President George W. Bush bristles with a message, even as it controls almost no non-Americans. The PRC today has no message, but is assiduous in its control at home and ambitious for a sphere of influence.

**I** speak of China as ambitious. Is China not rather a conservative power? Each proposition has passionate adherents, yet the two have a yin-yang relation. The expansionist claims of Beijing are transparent and unique among today's powerful nations. But the Beijing regime, while a dictatorship, is a rational dictatorship. It can count the numbers. It is often patient in fulfilling its goals. Equipped with a growing cadre of younger, well-trained officials, Beijing does not, like the Ming and Qing courts, deceive itself with beautiful fictions to hide the gap between reality and China's preferred worldview. China, in sum, is an ambitious power that, if faced with countervailing power, will act prudently in its long-term strategy. It surely knows that a formidable list of powers—the United States, Japan, Russia, India—has many reasons for denying China the opportunity to be a 21st-century Middle Kingdom. China was not as weak as it seemed when it was the "sick man of Asia." It may not be as enduringly strong as it now seems to those who fear or admire it. □