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Prof. Toshi Yoshihara, U.S. Naval War College

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China's Energy Consumption and Opportunities for U.S.-China Cooperation
To Address the Effects of China's Energy Use

Few would dispute that China's naval priorities remain locked on Taiwan. The potential range of vexing military contingencies surrounding Taiwan has been the primary driver behind China's ongoing and rapid naval modernization. Indeed, advances in the Chinese navy are being tailored specifically to meet the challenges that the nautical environment separating the island from the mainland poses to Beijing.¹ However, there is growing evidence that Beijing is already considering and preparing for broader regional and perhaps extra-regional missions that beckon far beyond the Taiwan Strait.

The reason for this outward-looking posture? Energy. As China's energy dependence accelerates, influential voices within the Chinese strategic community have forcefully called upon Beijing to develop the military means to protect its vulnerable sea lines of communications, which stretch from the Bohai Sea to the Persian Gulf. As one study asserts, "Many PRC energy security analysts from the neo-mercantilist school perceive the global oil system to be controlled by the United States. They therefore advocate acquiring the naval wherewithal to defend China's growing dependence on secure seaborne oil imports."² Consider also China's most recent Defense White Paper, issued in December 2006. For the first time, the document identifies access to raw materials and the various mediums upon which economic development depends as a major national security concern. It observes that, "Security issues related to energy, resources, finance, information, and *international shipping routes* [emphasis added] are mounting."³

These voices have not gone unnoticed. A Center for Naval Analyses report parsing the implications of the white paper suggests that "these types of statements portend a PLA [People's Liberation Army] preparing to take on missions beyond its littoral, or perhaps beyond the region, either in the singular pursuit of Chinese interests or in the context of larger international efforts."⁴ The Pentagon's 2007 annual report to Congress on *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China* goes further, asserting that "Beijing is increasingly surveying the strategic landscape beyond Taiwan." It argues that China values Taiwan's utility in part as a potential geo-strategic platform "to influence regional sea lines of communication."⁵

¹ See Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 2007), pp. 30-35.

² See Gabriel Collins, Andrew Erickson, and Lyle Goldstein, "Chinese Naval Analysts Consider the Energy Question," in Gabriel Collins, Andrew Erickson, Lyle Goldstein, and William S. Murray, eds. *Maritime Implications of China's Energy Strategy: Interim Report* (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, 2006), pp. 122-142.

³ Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in 2006* (Beijing: State Council, December 2006), p. 2, <<http://english.people.com.cn/whitepaper/defense2006/defense2006.html>>.

⁴ CNA Corporation, "China's National Defense in 2006—Roundtable Report," *Project Asia*, January 10, 2007, p. 3.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2007*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, May 2007), p. 22.

Taiwan, then, is not the only nautical objective in China's sights. Assuring free passage through the sea lines of communication linking the Persian Gulf region and the Horn of Africa with Chinese seaports—in particular through the Strait of Malacca—is now a matter of surpassing importance to China's communist regime.⁶ In particular, the uninterrupted flow of oil, natural gas, and other raw materials across the bodies of water to the mainland's immediate south and southwest—the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean—will occupy an increasingly prominent place in China's maritime calculus. This emerging energy security imperative suggests that sizing up longer-term Chinese intentions and grand strategy in the aquatic realm is an urgent task for the United States.

Soft Power and China

At present China possesses few, if any, forward-deployed military forces in Southeast and South Asia. Its capacity to shape events in these regions through coercion or military-to-military contacts remains limited. But this does not mean Beijing is without options. Students of international affairs organize the implements of national power into four loose categories. The first three—diplomatic, economic, and military—are straightforward. The fourth, variously known as cultural or “soft” power, is less so. Soft power was a term coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s to explain the ability of one entity to influence others without issuing threats or offering incentives.

The concept has regularly been misinterpreted or dismissed as too vague to be of value to foreign-policy practitioners. But if Nye is correct, then soft power creates real, tangible strategic opportunities denied states that rely too heavily on military coercion or economic inducements. If Nye's analyses since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 are accurate, moreover, then the United States is seeing its own soft power deteriorate amid widespread anti-Americanism and could see its ability to organize future multinational initiatives suffer.

Yet while Nye claims that the United States is losing soft power, the same is not true among its rivals and competitors, in particular China.⁷ Despite oft-voiced European and North American concerns over human rights and military modernization in China, Beijing's economic success and diplomatic prominence since the Deng Xiaoping reforms of the late 1970s have garnered acclaim in virtually every part of the globe. This has furthered China's soft power.

To dispel doubts and misconceptions, soft power needs to be defined in concrete terms. For Nye it is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” It

⁶ Some 80 percent of China's oil imports, accounting for 40 percent of total Chinese oil consumption, passes through the Strait, giving rise to what Chinese President Hu Jintao has called China's “Malacca Dilemma.” Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2005* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2005) p. 33. On China's demand for petroleum, see David Hale, “China's Growing Appetites,” *National Interest* 76 (summer 2004): pp. 137-47.

⁷ For recent commentary on the rise of Chinese soft power and the relative decline of American soft power, see Hugo Restall, “China's Bid for Asian Hegemony,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 2007, pp. 10-14, Alex Berkofsky, “The hard facts on ‘soft power,’” *PacNet*, No. 26, May 31, 2007, Gideon Rachman, “The Hard Evidence That China's Soft Power Policy is Working,” *Financial Times*, February 19, 2007, p. 15, and Joshua Kurlantzick, “Beijing's Big Push,” *Newsweek*, April 9, 2007, p. 10.

“arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies.”⁸ An appealing culture or political institutions engenders goodwill elsewhere in the world, helping a state’s political leaders initiate collaborative actions involving other states. Similarly, prosecuting a foreign policy regarded as legitimate magnifies a state’s soft power overseas. If the sources of soft power are intimately tied to culture, political values, and diplomatic behavior, then the custodian of soft power pulls, rather than pushes, other states to admire and imitate its core principles. The likelihood of international cooperation increases.

Chinese soft power is growing in all three of Nye’s dimensions, bolstering Beijing’s diplomatic fortunes throughout Asia.⁹ First, China’s cultural appeal is undergoing a renaissance. Its venerable civilization has inspired and overawed neighbors for centuries. Recent years have witnessed a surge in Chinese language study and foreign enrollment in Chinese universities. Beijing forecasts that 100 million foreigners worldwide will learn Chinese this decade. The Confucian Institute, a language and cultural center sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Education, has established a presence in 15 universities across the United States and over 100 around the world. These institutes aim to promote Chinese language and culture globally, propagating a benign and indeed benevolent idea of China—an idea that arguably bears little relation to Beijing’s actual policies.¹⁰

At the same time, China’s success has won it admiration. The country’s rapid economic growth over the past two decades has made it a model for the developing world. Beijing’s increasingly vigorous foreign-policy activism in regional and international organizations, coupled with its insistence on the principle of non-interference in states’ internal affairs, has also endeared China to developing countries. This hands-off policy stands in sharp contrast to the conditional aid and assistance offered by Europe and the United States. China demands little of dubious regimes while offering much.

China’s soft-power outreach has also benefited from willing audiences in areas of interest to Beijing. Southeast Asia in particular constitutes a reservoir of goodwill toward China. With an estimated 30 million ethnic Chinese living around the South China Sea, China’s cultural heritage is now widely celebrated. Indeed, more than half of Thai lawmakers can trace their lineage back to China.¹¹ Moreover, a 2005 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center showed that a majority of Indonesians voiced no objection to Chinese military parity with the United States—despite periods of racial unrest in the country, most notably in 1998 as Chinese businesses were attacked in Jakarta, and despite China’s conspicuous absence from the 2004-2005 tsunami relief effort.¹²

⁸ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. x.

⁹ See Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, “Sources and Limits of Chinese ‘Soft Power,’” *Survival* 48, no. 2 (summer 2006): pp. 17-36.

¹⁰ See Sheng Ding and Robert A. Saunders, “Talking Up China: An Analysis of China’s Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language,” *East Asia* 23, no. 2 (summer 2006): pp. 3-33.

¹¹ Tyler Marshall, “Southeast Asia’s New Best Friend,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 2006, p. 17.

¹² Sixty percent of the Indonesian public “endorse the idea of China as a military superpower.” Pew Research Center, *American Character Gets Mixed Reviews: U.S. Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June 2005), p. 33.

Nor are kinship ties the only factor at work in Chinese soft power. Farther south, a 2006 poll by the Lowy Institute revealed that among 13 threats to Australian national security, ranging from terrorism to failing states, Australians ranked “the development of China as a world power” as the *least* threatening to Canberra’s vital interests.¹³ Chinese diplomats clearly have sizable reserves of goodwill to draw on as they devise policy toward China’s southern neighbors.

Enter Admiral Zheng He

Applying soft power to seas where Beijing may want to amass naval power—and where it hopes to alleviate concerns about upsetting the naval balance—is more difficult than invoking the teachings of Confucius. Discerning China’s maritime future requires a turn to the distant past. A figure from China’s sparse maritime history—Zheng He, the “eunuch admiral” who commanded seven voyages of trade and discovery in Southeast and South Asian waters (1405-1433) during the Ming Dynasty—is playing an outsized role in China’s public diplomacy. His exploits have empowered Chinese diplomats to shape expectations about how China will conduct its naval affairs. Beijing has woven Zheng and the expeditions of his “treasure fleet”—named after the silks, porcelains, and other valuables it carried to trade with foreign peoples—into an intricate diplomacy depicting the rapid growth of Chinese maritime power as a new phase in a benign regional dominance that had its origins six centuries ago.

This historical narrative has become an integral part of Chinese soft power, in recent years gaining substantial visibility among the various elements of China’s comprehensive national power. Indeed, top Chinese leaders, including President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, and other high-level officials have explicitly used the soft-power concept to address foreign-policy matters, suggesting that they have internalized it to a high degree.¹⁴ China is applying its soft power most vigorously in Southeast Asia, a “near abroad” (to borrow a Russian term) that is especially attuned to Beijing’s historical and cultural messages.

Why mount such a charm offensive? First, Beijing evidently hopes to allay suspicions in Asian countries wary of its great-power ambitions, forestalling U.S. or Asian opposition to its bid for sea power. Second, by assuaging regional anxieties about China’s rise, Beijing is seeking to foster perceptions that the nation’s return to the nautical arena—indeed, to the same waterways crisscrossed by Zheng’s treasure fleet six centuries ago—is not to be feared but rather embraced. Beijing believes such reassurances will create a permissive maritime environment, enabling China to extend its naval reach with greater ease should it see the need to do so over the longer term for energy security purposes. Finally, and more ominously, the confident exercise of Chinese soft power at sea carries broader geopolitical implications. A recent volume on China’s soft power argues:

¹³ Ivan Cook, *Australia, Indonesia and the World: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2006), pp. 11-12.

¹⁴ See Jen Hui-wen, “China Establishes the Building of Soft Power as a Strategic Mission,” *Hsin Pao*, March 30, 2007, FBIS-CPP20070330710009; Open Source Center, “Premier Rejects Reform Strategy Shift on Eve of Legislative Session,” *Open Source Center Analysis*, March 5, 2007, FBIS-CPF20070305420001; Li Zhaoxing, “International Situation and China’s Diplomatic Work in 2006,” *Qiushi*, January 1, 2007, FBIS-CPP20070122701004.

For a China still flexing its strength as an international power Southeast Asia presents an opportunity. Perhaps, as a young United States once did in the Western Hemisphere, China could make the region its own—a Chinese Monroe Doctrine for Southeast Asia would make Beijing the major influence over regional affairs and reduce US alliances in the region.¹⁵

The stakes for the United States, then, can hardly be overstated.

Zheng He and Chinese Soft Power in Maritime Asia

China's millennia of history provide Beijing with abundant reserves of cultural events and themes to utilize as soft power, but the country lacks a significant, historically based maritime narrative. To influence attitudes in Southeast and South Asia, Beijing has mined its meager store of maritime history. The voyages of Zheng He have furnished Chinese diplomats with an invaluable totem for such an initiative. Chinese officials and commentators regularly use the charismatic mariner to make several points to regional audiences.

First, they invoke the treasure fleet's voyages to make a geopolitical point, reminding their countrymen and foreign governments that China boasts a proud tradition as a seafaring power, despite its traditional preoccupation with affairs ashore. Indeed, foreign countries throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral once acknowledged Chinese suzerainty under the tributary system reinvigorated by Zheng. Beijing plays up the beneficent characteristics of Ming predominance, declaring that China will *inevitably* follow the Ming path to dominant—yet self-denying—sea power.

And Zheng He allows the Chinese to indulge in one-upsmanship at Western expense, advancing their aim of regional preeminence. On a recent trip to Europe, Premier Wen Jiabao reminded audiences that the Chinese seaman had “sailed abroad earlier than Christopher Columbus.”¹⁶ Chinese spokesmen routinely contrast the size and technological sophistication of the Ming vessels with the relatively backward fleets put to sea in fifteenth-century Europe.¹⁷ In 2003, during President Hu Jintao's historic state visit to Australia—a visit that won media plaudits, in contrast to the tepid reception afforded President George W. Bush shortly before—the Chinese leader cast Zheng He's expeditions as a historical basis for the Sino-Australian relationship. In a speech to parliament, he declared:

The Chinese people have all along cherished amicable feelings about the Australian people. Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China's Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores. For centuries, the Chinese sailed across vast seas and settled down in what they called Southern Land, or today's Australia. They brought Chinese culture to

¹⁵ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 10-11.

¹⁶ “Premier Wen's Several Talks During Europe Visit,” Xinhua, May 16, 2004, FBIS-CPP 20040516000069. Wen sounded similar themes during a spring 2005 trip to South Asia. See Xiao Qiang, “Premier Wen's South Asian Tour Produces Abundant Results,” *Renmin Ribao*, April 13, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200504131477.

¹⁷ Reporting on the efforts of Yao Mingde, the official in charge of organizing activities to commemorate the treasure voyages, the official news service Xinhua observed that “Zheng He's fleet surpassed all other marine navigators of his time in scale, sophistication, technology and organizational skills in his seven sea trips, which were a great event in the world's navigation history.” “China Launches Activities to Commemorate Sea Navigation Pioneer Zheng He,” Xinhua, September 29, 2003, FBIS-CPP20030928000052.

this land and lived harmoniously with the local people, contributing their proud share to Australia's economy, society and its thriving pluralistic culture.¹⁸

Hu's claims that the Chinese reached Australia and settled there during the Ming Dynasty are dubious, but his overall message was indisputable: China's power and presence in maritime Asia far predate those of Europeans. His statement also indirectly justified seagoing endeavors far beyond China's shores, helping satisfy the Chinese populace's penchant for nationalism—a critical goal for Beijing as the appeal of communism dissipates, leaving little to bind the Chinese people together as a nation.

Second, to support Beijing's claim that it is pursuing a "peaceful rise" to great-power status, Chinese spokesmen accentuate the predominantly peaceful nature of Zheng He's endeavors.¹⁹ This helps assuage Asian nations' fears of China's naval buildup, which in short order has produced a leap in combat power. "The essence of Zheng's voyages does not lie in how strong the Chinese navy once was," declared Xu Zuyuan, the Chinese government's vice minister for communication, "but in that China adhere[d] to peaceful diplomacy when it was a big power....Zheng He's seven voyages to the West [explain] why a peaceful emergence is the *inevitable outcome* of the development of Chinese history"²⁰ (emphasis added). Chinese officials intimate that, had the Ming Dynasty not outlawed maritime pursuits after Zheng He's final voyage, Asian history might have taken a different—and presumably more humane—course under Chinese supervision.

Third, and closely related, Chinese officials contrast Zheng He's expeditions of commerce and discovery with the Western legacy of imperial conquest and exploitation. Chinese power, they suggest, benefits all peoples in the region. In a speech delivered in South Africa, President Hu asserted that Zheng He's armada "brought to the African people a message of peace and goodwill not swords, guns, plunder or slavery."²¹ Declared Premier Wen while visiting the United States, Zheng "brought silk, tea and the Chinese culture" to foreign peoples, "but not one inch of land was occupied."²² Guo Chongli, China's ambassador to Kenya, proclaimed, "Zheng He's fleet [was] large....But his voyages were not for looting resources"—code for imperialism—"but for friendship. In trade with foreign countries, he gave much more than he took," fostering "understanding, friendship and trade relation[s] between China's Ming Dynasty

¹⁸ Hu Jintao, "'Constantly Increasing Common Ground': Hu's Speech to Australian Parliament," October 24, 2003, <<http://www.australianpolitics.com/news/2003/10/03-10-24b.shtml>>.

¹⁹ Zheng Bijian, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): pp. 18-24. Zheng is a close advisor to President Hu.

²⁰ See for instance "China Celebrates Ancient Mariner to Demonstrate Peaceful Rise," Xinhua, July 7, 2004, FBIS-CPP20040707000169.

²¹ Speech by Chinese President Hu Jintao at the University of Pretoria on China-Africa Cooperation, "Enhance China-Africa Unity and Cooperation To Build a Harmonious World," delivered on February 7, 2007, <<http://www.internationalepolitik.de/archiv/jahrgang2007/maerz2007/speech-by-chinese-president-hu-jintao-at-the-university-of-pretoria-on-china-africa-cooperation--delivered-on-7-february-2007.html>>.

²² Chen Jian and Zhao Haiyan, "Wen Jiabao on Sino-US Relations: Cherish Harmony; Be Harmonious But Different," *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, December 8, 2003, FBIS-CPP20031208000052. The theme that Zheng He did not occupy foreign lands resurfaces repeatedly in official statements and government-controlled media outlets. See "Africa at Large: Global Influence Driving Hu Jintao's Africa Trip," *Inter Press Service*, January 30, 2007, <<http://www.afrika.no/Detailed/13444.html>>; "African Reporters Expecting More 'China Voices,'" Xinhua, November 3, 2006, FBIS-CPP20061103968044.

and foreign countries in southeast Asia, west Asia and east Africa.”²³ Another commentary published in *China Daily* is even more explicit in comparing China to the West:

Unlike many of its latter-day European counterparts, which sailed across the great oceans to conquer other nations by force, the Chinese fleet brought to those foreign lands tea, chinaware, silk and craftsmanship. They gave the rest of the world peace and civilization and never occupied any foreign land, an achievement symbolizing the ancient kingdom’s sincerity to increase exchanges with other nations.²⁴

The overt message to countries wary of Chinese ambitions: despite China’s ascendancy in Asia, it can be counted on to refrain from territorial conquest or military domination. Their implied message: Chinese mastery of the seas is preferable to that of the United States, the self-appointed guarantor of the Asian sea lanes and (they maintain) the heir to the imperialist legacy.

In short, Beijing has used Zheng He to fashion a maritime diplomacy that: (1) bestows legitimacy on China’s naval aspirations in Southeast and South Asia, mollifying littoral nations skeptical of Chinese pretensions; (2) undercuts America’s claim to rule the waves in the region; and (3) appeases Chinese nationalism, helping the communist regime maintain its rule. This represents an impressive use of soft power. Over the long term, such a use of soft power could create a more affable security environment for China. International-relations realists predict that weaker powers will band together to balance the rise of a new great power. However, if China can convincingly portray itself as a non-threatening power, its leaders can reassure fellow Asian powers, averting the rise of a balancing coalition that might oppose Beijing’s interest in secure shipping lanes or its desire for regional primacy.

This maritime outreach campaign has resonated in Asia. Many Asian diplomats now lavish praise on China’s ancient mariner, reciprocating Beijing’s overtures.²⁵ Even so, it is worth pointing out that China’s Zheng He narrative is not good history, however effective it may be as diplomacy. For one thing, today’s communist regime bears scant resemblance to the Ming Dynasty. Drawing a straight line from the Dragon Throne to the Chinese Communist Party, or from the treasure fleet to the People’s Liberation Army Navy, is a dubious exercise at best. For another, Zheng’s voyages spanned too brief a time to draw any firm conclusions about the Ming predilection for Western-style colonialism. Had the Dragon Throne persisted with the tributary system over time, it might well have used force to uphold its suzerainty—giving China’s oceanic enterprise the semblance of colonialism. Indeed, on one occasion Chinese marines did intervene on behalf of a friendly potentate on Ceylon. More such incidents might have occurred had the Ming era of maritime supremacy endured.

Asian officials’ readiness to overlook these defects in China’s tale of marine grandeur, however, bespeaks a receptiveness to Chinese diplomacy that escapes many in Washington, which since

²³ “Kenyan Girl Offered Chance to Go to College in China,” *Xinhua*, March 20, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200503201477.

²⁴ Yu Sui, “Peace Is Priceless in the Pursuit of Happiness,” *China Daily*, August 14, 2006, FBIS-CPP20060814151009.

²⁵ See for example “Malaysian Deputy PM Najhib Vows to Enhance Ties with China,” *Bernama* (Kuala Lumpur), January 11, 2004, FBIS-SEP20040112000008; “Singapore Tourism Sector ‘Wooing’ Chinese Tourists,” *Xinhua*, April 30, 2004, FBIS-CPP20040430000205.

9/11 has predicated its Asia policy on counterterrorism, scanting political and economic considerations.

Implications of China's Zheng He Diplomacy

What insights should American leaders draw from China's Zheng He diplomacy? First, the attentions of China's leadership are now locked on the seas. Gone are the days of Mao Zedong, when Beijing was content to entrust its scant maritime interests to the U.S. Navy. Nor will China's navy be a pushover, as it formerly was. As China comes to rely on the sea to support economic development, powerful incentives impel the leadership to put to sea naval forces able to defend national interests.

Accordingly, Beijing will vector its strategic gaze not eastward into the Pacific, as many China-watchers foretell (and as eminent sea-power thinkers such as former PLA Navy commander Liu Huaqing have urged), but southward, along the sea lines of communication that convey vital commodities into Chinese ports. At the same time, Beijing understands how to incorporate all elements of national power into its diplomacy in maritime Asia. Like Zheng He, today's Chinese leaders merge diplomacy, economic and trade incentives, low-key shows of naval and military force, and cultural influence into a comprehensive outreach program.

Second, Beijing's lays great weight on soft power in part because of the relative paucity of the country's "hard" power. A striking example followed the December 2004 tsunami, when countries such as the United States, Japan, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand dispatched maritime assets to Indonesia to help in recovery operations off Aceh and the Sumatran coast. Beijing demurred from deploying naval forces to aid relief efforts—underscoring its inability to use military power to influence regional and world events.²⁶ Beijing's lingering military weakness, inexperience in overseas environments, and deployment of forces to assure internal security in provinces such as Tibet and Xinjiang and regain control of Taiwan have prevented the People's Liberation Army from building up forces in regions of real and growing interest.

Absent hard power in these regions, Beijing has turned to soft power as a stopgap, deftly proliferating an admirable idea of China through its sophisticated historical narrative. This allows Chinese diplomats some say in Southeast and South Asian affairs while Beijing remains weak at sea. It also helps Beijing mold diplomatic conditions in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean basin in anticipation of a future buildup of naval power in regional waters, should Chinese leaders decide their interests warrant such a buildup. And its invented soft power may give rise to an innocuous impression of China, helping make the increasing Chinese political and military presence in coastal Asia palatable if not welcome to regional governments.

Third, owing largely to adroit Chinese diplomacy, the countries of maritime Asia do not view China with the same foreboding that grips many in Washington. For them China represents trade and investment. It is less a "China threat," to borrow a term common in Beijing, than a means to economic vitality—the top priority for national leaders throughout Asia. At the 2007 Shangri-La Dialogue, an Asian regional security forum, Singaporean prime minister Lee Hsien Loong

²⁶ Bruce A. Elleman, *Waves of Hope: The U.S. Navy's Response to the Tsunami in Northern Indonesia* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, February 2007), pp. 103-105.

asserted that most Asian countries “assess the challenge from China to be more economic than military. They see China’s actions not as a threat to regional security, but as a specific response to the cross straits situation.”²⁷ In other words, Asian leaders regard China’s naval buildup as geographically circumscribed, with little bearing on Southeast Asian affairs.

This blunt pronouncement is emblematic of a broader Southeast Asian acquiescence in Chinese foreign policies. Indeed, the littoral states in the region have abetted China’s overt and discreet attempts to frustrate U.S. regional influence. In 2001, Admiral Dennis Blair, then the commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, very publicly promoted the concept of a “security community” involving a network of U.S.-led defense ties in Asia designed to “develop habits of regional military cooperation.”²⁸ Capitols across Southeast Asia declined Blair’s proposal, purportedly as a result of behind-the-scenes Chinese pressure.²⁹

In 2004, subsequently, the Pacific Command’s proposed Regional Maritime Security Initiative, a voluntary mechanism for sharing information about transnational seaborne threats, was rejected by states adjoining the Strait of Malacca, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, for fear of U.S. interventionism in their territorial waters. Washington’s shortfall in soft power, owing to perceptions of U.S. diplomatic “meddling” in regional affairs, helped frustrate the Bush administration’s desires in this instance. While China issued no official statements with regard to the U.S. initiative, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta probably factored Beijing’s fear of the United States’ gaining a more permanent presence near the Malacca Strait into their diplomatic calculations.

Fourth, it is important not to inflate or overreact to Chinese soft power. By no means is Beijing’s attractiveness poised to overturn the balance of power in Asia. Ultimately, hard power must play an effective role in underwriting soft power, as evidenced by the regional goodwill generated by the U.S. Navy’s exemplary tsunami relief effort. As Bruce Elleman notes:

When viewed in terms of the Confucian concept of *ren*, or “humaneness,” Washington was able to outshine Beijing by far. China is clearly aspiring to become a regional superpower by using a whole range of government powers, including its military forces, but when put to the test its naval forces failed.³⁰

Simply put, it is difficult to envision the PLA Navy dislodging the U.S. Navy as the chief guarantor of sea-lane security in Asia any time soon.

While some analysts confidently assert that a hierarchical order resembling the Sino-centric tributary system resuscitated by Zheng He will reemerge,³¹ history rarely repeats itself exactly. Southeast Asian bandwagoning behavior, however troubling, is neither immutable nor unconditional. Southeast Asian states in fact pursue far more subtle and sophisticated

²⁷ “Singapore’s Lee Says Asians Do Not See China as Security Threat,” *Kyodo*, June 2, 2007.

²⁸ Dennis C. Blair and John T. Hanley Jr., “From Wheels to Webs: Reconstructing Asia-Pacific Security Arrangements,” *Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 1, (winter 2001): p. 16.

²⁹ Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, p. 213.

³⁰ Elleman, *Waves of Hope*, p. 104.

³¹ See for example David C. Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks,” *International Security* 27, no. 2 (spring 2003): pp. 57-85.

strategies—eschewing overt alignments—than many observers allow. They navigate carefully between China and the United States.³²

There are also basic limits to China's soft power. If one abides strictly by Joseph Nye's definition of soft power, Beijing's domestic political values stand out as a major handicap. Its democratic deficit, to name one glaring weakness, leaves it at a severe disadvantage with emerging and well-established democracies such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and India. As Joshua Kurlantzick observes, "China cannot offer average people a comprehensive, inspiring vision of how to build a free, rights-oriented political system and economy, a vision that remains popular in many parts of the world."³³ Similarly, Ingrid d'Hooghe concludes that China's "structural lack of openness of its society, as well as its inability to give up control" will hamper Beijing's ability to change its overseas image.³⁴

Finally, Washington should cautiously accept some of Beijing's claims to leadership in Asian waters, conditioning its approval upon China's willingness to participate in regional maritime activities such as the Proliferation Security Initiative, which in theory should advance mutual political aims. At the same time, the United States must remain wary of China's efforts to restore its supremacy in the region. If China's ancient mariner supplies Beijing a way to apply soft power, he also provides the United States with a measuring stick for China's intentions. Assuming the United States wants to preserve its own preeminence in Asia, it must watch for signs that China is deviating from the beneficent purposes embodied in its Zheng He diplomacy.

As Washington confronts a more competitive environment for influence in South and Southeast Asia, the United States needs to devise a more coherent grand strategy of its own in the region, lest it find itself less and less able to influence Asian affairs or, in the worst case, shut out of Asia altogether.³⁵ A forward military presence, in the form of ships, aircraft, and missiles, is no substitute for vigorous diplomacy. But America has supplied the international public good of free navigation—long taken for granted—for six decades now, asking little in return. Zheng He's era was fleeting by contrast, his endeavors occurred in a century long past, and in any event the Chinese Communist Party can scarcely claim credit for the Ming Dynasty's short-lived seafaring exploits. The tangible security benefits provided by U.S. maritime power *now* furnish a solid foundation for an American soft-power counteroffensive. Washington must build on this foundation.

³² See Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies," *Military Technology*, January 2006, pp. 321-323; Denny Roy, "Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 2 (2005): pp. 311-312.

³³ Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, p. 229.

³⁴ Ingrid d'Hooghe, "Public Diplomacy in the People's Republic of China," in Jan Melissen, ed. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 102.

³⁵ China's ambition to dislodge America from its leading role in Asian affairs is already on display. In mid-December 2005, partly at Beijing's insistence, Asian nations held their inaugural East Asia Summit, excluding the United States.