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China's Growing Global Influence: Objectives and Strategies

I thank the Commission for inviting me to share my views with it today. In my brief opening remarks, I cannot touch on all the specific issues I am sure the Commission will want to raise in this session. Instead, as requested in the letter of invitation I received, I will present my understanding of China's international objectives and the factors shaping China's global relations. My views are outlined in greater detail in my most recent book about China's grand strategy, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), several chapters of which I have sent to the Commission's staff

China's global relations today reflect a grand strategy whose central purpose is to enable the country to emerge as a true great power during the 21st century. The elements of this strategy came together in the mid-1990s as the leaders in Beijing more clearly recognized the stiff international challenges they faced in pursuing this goal. I will begin by briefly explaining the origins of the strategy, next describe its basic features, and finally discuss some of its implications for U.S.-China relations and U.S. policy towards China.

I. *China Settles on Its Strategy*

Four factors explain why China embraced its current foreign policy approach in the mid-1990s.

1. *U.S. Strength*. By the mid-1990s, Chinese analysts recognized that, contrary to their belief when the Cold War ended, the world was not quickly going to become multipolar. Instead, unipolarity would last for decades with the U.S. remaining the world's sole superpower. As such, for the foreseeable future China would have to operate in a setting where the U.S. would have the ability to frustrate China's international ambitions.

2. *China's Weakness*. Although China's economic and military capabilities were growing as a result of the reform program in place since 1979, it still lagged far behind the world's leading states, especially the U.S.. Perhaps most significantly, as China's leaders witnessed U.S. military operations during the 1990s, beginning with Operation Desert Storm in 1991, they more clearly recognized just how far they had to go before their armed forces were in the same league as the U.S. and its allies.

3. *Nervous International Reaction*. Even though China remained economically and militarily outclassed in the first half of the 1990s, its growing capabilities had already begun to prompt others to debate "China's rise" and led some to react in ways that could damage China's interests. In the U.S., there was new talk about a "China threat" and

what might have to be done about it. Among China's immediate neighbors, especially those in Southeast Asia, there was new concern about China's assertive posture towards resolving maritime and territorial disputes and some wondered what this might portend about the role an even more powerful China would play in coming decades. Against this background, China's leaders were alarmed by Washington's efforts in the mid-1990s to update its Cold War vintage alliances with Australia and Japan, as well as enhanced U.S. military cooperation with the nations of Southeast Asia—trends that Beijing worried might be the beginnings of an American led regional effort to contain China.

4. *Taiwan Tensions*. In 1995-1996 China saw a challenge to its sovereignty claim over Taiwan from a new cohort of elected leaders on the island. When Beijing used military exercises to warn Taiwan about the risks of pursuing independence, Washington responded with its own naval maneuvers that clearly signaled a continued American interest in Taiwan's security and the likelihood of U.S. intervention if China used force to press its claim to Taiwan. This mini-crisis over Taiwan clarified for Beijing that in addition to long-term, hypothetical concerns about the U.S. and others frustrating China's rise to great power status, China had to worry about a more immediate, specific, short-term military contingency— the risk of a war in the Taiwan Strait that would require China to engage the U.S. military even while China's military remained distinctly outclassed.

In short, by about 1996, the international situation looked pretty bleak from China's perspective. What could Beijing's leaders do about it? Their answer has been the grand strategy, or the logic, that has guided China's foreign policies in the years since 1996. This grand strategy was not announced with a formal declaration, or even given a clear name. In the last few years, some in China did begin referring to their approach as the strategy of "peaceful rise" a term more recently shunned in favor of "peaceful development" (a shift in terminology for reasons of style rather than substance). Whatever label one uses to describe it, China has adopted a strategy that aims to facilitate China's rise by reducing the likelihood its growing capabilities will alarm others or provoke them to oppose China.

II. *China's Grand Strategy*

How has this strategic logic been translated into policy? Since mid-1996 China's leaders have centered their foreign policy around two broad efforts.

First, they have embraced policies designed to reassure China's neighbors and to enhance the PRC's reputation as a more responsible and cooperative international actor. Beijing's widely touted self-restraint during the wave of currency devaluations that accompanied the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s was an early example of this effort. Of more enduring significance has been China's active embrace of multilateralism since the mid-1990s that includes its central role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, its participation in the attempt to work out a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, and especially its multipronged effort to facilitate cooperation with the ASEAN countries of Southeast Asia.

Second, since 1996 China's leaders have been engaged in a concerted effort to improve bilateral relations with the world's other major powers in order to reduce the likelihood that they will unite to prevent China's slow but steady rise. By cultivating various types of partnerships, Beijing seeks to increase the benefits other great powers see in working with China ***and*** to underscore the opportunity costs of working against it. These partnerships are expected to establish a simple linkage: if China's great power partners opt to press Beijing on matters important enough to sour relations, they will jeopardize important benefits such as economic opportunities for trade and investment and cooperation in managing the security problems of weapons proliferation and terrorism.

In sum, then, the grand strategy that has guided China's foreign policy over the past decade emerged as a reaction to the stiff challenge Beijing faces as a relatively weak state, but one whose growing power and international aspirations already make others nervous and might lead them to oppose China. The combination of policies designed to cultivate China's reputation as a responsible international player and to nurture partnerships with major powers seeks to ensure an international context in which China has the opportunity to continue the decades-long process of modernization that will be necessary if it is to become a true great power.

III. *Implications of China's Grand Strategy*

In itself, China's current grand strategy, a strategy that seeks a "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" raises few concerns. It is important, however, to recognize that this is explicitly a strategy for a period of transition, designed for the decades it will take China to rise. What happens after China rises? Will it continue to embrace the current policies that make it basically a responsible status quo power? Or, once it has amassed greater capabilities will China demand changes in the international order that signal its arrival as a disruptive, revisionist power determined to alter the international system to its advantage? Confronted with these important questions, Chinese officials and analysts typically assert that China will "never be a hegemon, never practice power politics, and never pose a threat to its neighbors or to world peace." Yet many analysts outside China respond to these questions with equally firm convictions, insisting a more powerful China will *inevitably* pose a threat to international peace and stability; they typically justify their view by drawing on a preferred theory about international relations or by citing examples of rising powers that caused trouble in the past.

Which of these contrasting views is closer to the truth? My answer is not only that we *don't* know, but that we simply *can't* know. At least not yet.

In looking to the future, the Chinese may very well be sincerely representing their peaceful intentions today. Nevertheless, they cannot possible know how a Chinese government several decades from now will view their country's interests or how they will choose to respond to what will inevitably be a much different international situation. And in looking to the future, while foreign analysts are surely correct in pointing to persuasive academic theories about the disruptive potential of rising powers and in citing

worrisome historical examples of them, there are also some academic theories and historical examples that suggest the rise of a new great power need not inevitably spell trouble.

IV. *Uncertainty and Policy*

If we cannot be sure about how a more powerful China will behave, how can we sensibly deal with a rising China in the coming years? The key to sensible policy in dealing with China is to recognize that we are in the midst of what the Chinese sometimes refer to as a "period of strategic opportunity." For at least the next couple of decades, the areas of conflict between the U.S. and China (especially difficult economic problems and even the potentially dangerous disagreement about Taiwan) are in fact manageable, not intractable, problems. And both China and the U.S. have important common interests (fighting terrorism, dealing with proliferation, coping with environmental degradation, and addressing public health crises in a globalized setting) that provide strong incentives for both Beijing and Washington to work hard to manage and contain bilateral conflicts. Because conflicting interests do not yet swamp common interests in U.S.-China relations, there is time, most likely a couple of decades, to learn whether a longer-term modus vivendi is possible. Each side will be drawing conclusions along the way. Time will provide the Chinese with the opportunity to learn whether the U.S. is willing to accept a larger international role for a more powerful China Time will also provide the U.S. with the opportunity to learn whether China is in fact emerging as a responsible great power with which the U.S. can coexist without sacrificing American vital interests. A sensible policy is not only one under which the U.S. seizes this "period of strategic opportunity" to monitor what China does, but also encourages China's responsible behavior whenever possible.

There are, of course, no guarantees about how China will respond to a sensible U.S. approach of contingent cooperation. Others might well argue, then, that prudence requires us instead to "to prepare for the worst," that it is "better to be safe than sorry," and that wisdom suggests it is wiser to take a hard line against China while it is still weak. For three reasons, I think that position is misguided.

First, it would undermine currently important U.S. interests; China would reciprocate our hostility and that would make it much more difficult for us to address the many international economic, environmental, and security problems on which Chinese cooperation is important.

Second, a policy designed to contain China and prevent its rise would be exceedingly difficult to implement. Unlike the U.S. effort to contain the former Soviet Union, an attempt to contain China would find little support from the countries whose support is essential for such a strategy to succeed. On the contrary, with a few exceptions, such an approach would most likely aggravate relations with many American allies and partners around the world.

Third, and most importantly, urgent calls to deal now with the possible dangers China's rise might one day pose, overstate the risks for the U.S. of waiting and watching, responding as China acts, and adjusting our approach towards a rising China as events warrant. The U.S. holds huge advantages over China, both in hard and soft power. There is no need to be stampeded into prematurely dealing with China as an adversary. China cannot become a great power overnight; it will be a rising power for several decades and will only emerge as a great power if it succeeds in overcoming some very daunting domestic obstacles to modernization. China has adopted the grand strategy I described because it recognizes just how weak it is relative to the U.S. and its allies. As such, China's strategy reflects its attempt to play a weak hand well. The U.S., by contrast, holds most of the high cards; we need only be sure that we don't play our strong hand poorly. A rush to judgment about the nature of the China we are likely to face several decades from now is not only unwise, it is also unnecessary.