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The People’s Liberation Army and China in Transition

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coupled with the totality of external incentives enable or constrain high-risk behavior that can lead to conflict. The construct of war avoidance is further addressed by examining the nature of specific governments involved—intercourse between well established democratic nations, between democracies and nondemocracies, and between non-democratic states. By reference to historical examples and by examining the factors that influence the conduct of states, Moore concludes that the nature of the government alone may not be nearly as important in creating effective deterrence as the aggregate of external incentives, “which may be high or low, adequate or inadequate.”

In concluding that the best theory of war avoidance will use the “full human arsenal of insights against war,” Moore carefully identifies the entire quiver of measures available to decision makers to achieve security. These include but are not limited to: diplomacy, the existence of unequal power between adversaries, the willingness to precommit forces to a troubled area, the existence of arms control agreements, and mutual participation in international organizations. Similarly, Moore carefully analyzes those factors that influence the leadership elite to employ the military instrument—the absence of democracy, the absence of effective deterrence, and most importantly, the synergy of an absence of both.

The “incentive theory” is further tested in its application to instances of terrorist violence, specifically to the U.S. response to the 9/11 attack by al-Qa’ida, and finally, to the 2003 war with Iraq. Arguing that assessing and influencing the incentives of the decision elite who run terror networks may be even more effective than terror, Moore suggests that extremists will no longer choose to pursue it. Arguing that the incentive theory fits the Afghan War “like a glove,” Moore also posits that had Saddam Hussein focused more clearly on the incentives affecting President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, he would have understood that his only opportunity to avoid war was a highly visible effort to achieve full compliance with Security Council resolutions.

In assessing the way forward, the author urges the positive consequences for foreign policy of a paradigm rooted in the importance of internal and external incentives. As long as incentives within certain nations do not properly operate to control these scourges, incentives must be supplied externally. Moore argues that by considering the operation of collective security in deterrence terms, created through effective incentives, an essential element of foreign policy can be both preserved and enhanced.

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Based on an October 2001 conference at the National Defense University, but published with revised papers two years later, this collection of seemingly miscellaneous essays all too often either misses the mark completely or treats only very lightly a long list of potential U.S.-Chinese problems.

After an introduction, the book is divided into six sections examining
respectively, China’s fourth-generation leadership, growing nationalism, military trends, key policy challenges, U.S.-China military relations, and, finally, future options for U.S.-China relations.

Part 1 includes essays by Bates Gill and David Shambaugh. Although these chapters are well written, many of the political leaders and structural issues they describe in such detail have changed since they were submitted. For example, Jiang Zemin did resign, and many indicators suggest that he did so unwillingly. Jiang’s remaining power base, or guanxi network, may therefore be severely limited. Meanwhile, the membership of important structural bodies such as the Central Military Commission, rather than going down from eleven to eight and staying there, was later increased from eight to thirteen, thereby giving Hu Jintao crucial support to retire Jiang Zemin.

The dangers inherent in Chinese nationalism are discussed in chapters by Nan Li and Edward Friedman. Li’s essay, in particular, gives real insight in his discussion of the continuing importance of “face” in China. This cultural characteristic, he argues, can have an enormous impact on how Chinese assess their enemies: “To save face, or not to lose it, for instance, the incentive is not only to show self-righteousness or all the good, positive, and strong points of the self but also to show the evil, negative, and weak points of the other,” which can result in “an exaggeration of the strength of the self and the weakness of the enemy.” When joined with the Maoist idea of “voluntarism, which stresses the power of the mind and consciousness that can overcome obstacles of material conditions,” the two can create a deadly combination in which the “PLA strategic analyses may reflect not the balance of forces in the real world but rather an overestimation of PLA strength and an underestimation of the adversary’s abilities.” Friedman adds to this dire warning by stressing: “The political atmosphere in this China precludes accurate descriptions of Japan, America, or Taiwan and makes self-interested, common-sense compromises by the Chinese government seem, to many Chinese, to be virtual treason.”

James Mulvenon, Bernard Cole, Richard Fisher, and Richard Bitzinger contribute worthy essays describing Chinese military reforms, naval and air units, and the level of military expenditure. Although technically sound and informative, these essays reflect the extreme fluidity in China’s military modernization. It is potentially dangerous to predict China’s strategic behavior solely by observing her military. Cole, for example, even while concluding that China’s navy is focused mainly against any “East Asian force that stands in the way of achieving China’s objectives in the region,” appropriately hedges his bets in an endnote (no. 21) by admitting that China might also consider it a “justified risk” to fight the United States if it feels “backed into a corner.” Fischer, meanwhile, takes the bull by the horns when he warns that the air force “could gain a measure of superiority on the Taiwan Strait after 2005.”

Key policy challenges are examined by David Finkelstein, Cynthia Watson, John Tkacik, Eugene Rummer, Kevin Neader, and Howard Krawitz. Taken together, the contradictions and potential flash points discussed in these essays present a scary picture, with Watson admitting that if ordered to do
so the People’s Liberation Army would “likely choose the historical responsibility of keeping Taiwan part of China”; Thacik counters that the Taiwanese “will not permit an accommodation of China’s demands that Taiwan become subordinate to Beijing.” This standoff is a recipe for disaster, but one that is all too often obscured and glossed over rather than highlighted.

Finally, U.S.-China military relations are addressed by Paul Godwin and Alfred Wilhelm, Jr., while U.S.-China relations in general are outlined by Richard Thornton and David Lai. These authors again present a mixed bag, with Godwin warning of a U.S.-Chinese “escalation dynamic expanding the scope of the war beyond the intent of either adversary”; Wilhelm calling for removing “all remaining military-related sanctions on the PRC” and promoting increased military-to-military talks; Thornton advocating measures to “curb” Chinese ambitions “now before China becomes too strong to control and we find ourselves on the path to war”; and Lai arguing that the China threat has been “overblown.” Since the book does not include a much-needed conclusion to sort through this morass, or an index to assist in locating particular topics of interest, the reader is left with the unfortunate impression that the experts could not agree with each other, much less with the editors, on what final message they should present to their audience.

While many essays in this book are quite good, they do not work well as a whole. One is left with the feeling that the editors published whatever they were given, with one essay on the air force numbering almost forty pages, while a scant four pages are devoted to China’s all-important relations with Russia, where the bulk of the PLA’s most deadly weapons are purchased. Furthermore, there is no chapter devoted specifically to Sino-Japanese relations, though various authors admit that Japan is China’s nearest great power and maritime rival. Equally relevant topics not raised by this book include rising tensions over North Korea; China’s space program and the rapid growth of its missile forces; territorial disputes in the South China Sea; and the U.S.-led efforts with Japan, and perhaps even Taiwan, to build theater and national missile defense. For these reasons, this book falls short as an examination of the true nature of U.S.-Chinese relations.

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