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China is the "pacing threat" for American defense planning.[1] An increasingly assertive and hostile China has triggered a "return to great power competition."[2] China is "less interested in coexistence and more interested in dominance."[3] China's grand strategy is meant to "displace the United States as the global leader."[4] Now that China's leader, Xi Jinping, has secured a third term in office, "he's able to focus even more on [the] contest for superiority with the United States."[5] The China threat is militarized and hostile, requiring a response in kind by the United States and its allies.[6] The United States not only is going to suffer defeat in an increasingly likely military confrontation over Taiwan but also is "going to lose fast."[7] The Biden administration must move quickly to increase the lethality of U.S. forces in East Asia and "assemble a coalition to contain China."[8] And so on and so on . . . or so we are told.

These assertions, and many like them, are characteristic of the growing hawkish consensus that seems overly confident in its assumptions about Chinese intent and capabilities.[9] This level of confidence is unsettling because of the complexities involved in understanding the intentions and capabilities of rising powers and the potential for overconfidence to play a harmful role in analysis and decision-making.[10] According to some commentary, the United States has drifted perilously close to groupthink. For example, scholar and practitioner Joseph Nye has warned—with only slight exaggeration—that "if you're a bright

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young staffer, Republican or Democrat, the more anti-Chinese you can be, the better your future career."[11] Diplomacy has fallen on hard times: "Those who preach moderation towards the Chinese government risk being tarred by the most strident hawks as apologists, their motives called into question."[12]

It is impossible to have 100 percent certainty, and choices must be made using analysis of the best available information. Waiting for certainty is foolish and counterproductive. We agree that there is significant evidence that China is hostile to American interests and, in particular, toward the U.S.-dominated "liberal international order." We agree that there is significant evidence that China is increasingly aggressive in its rhetoric and actions, particularly in the South China Sea. However, we also see significant evidence that China's intentions are indeterminate and, in some arenas, neutral or even possibly aligning with U.S. national-security interests. Furthermore, we think there is a significant likelihood that, even if it does have aggressive and hostile intent, China will fail in its efforts both to undermine the existing order and to replace the United States as the preeminent power in the international system. We also question whether China successfully can carry out major military operations, such as an invasion of Taiwan. Given this existing uncertainty, we do not think it is wise to base American policy and strategy on any specific prediction about Chinese intentions or abilities.

From this perspective, the U.S. strategy of engagement is something of a cautionary tale. In the 1990s and early years of the following decade, it was the doves in America who were overconfident. As early as 1979, we were told that "the seeds of democracy are growing in China"; in the 1990s, that economic openness would "increase the spirit of liberty" in China; and at the beginning of the current century, that "[e]conomic freedom creates the habits of liberty, and habits of liberty create expectations of democracy. . . . Trade freely with China and time is on our side."[13] While periods of openness did emerge in the 1980s and again late in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the predicted transformation of Chinese politics and society did not occur, and instead we see a more closed and authoritarian China than we have seen in decades. This might tempt one to say that this proves China hawks are correct, but in reality the United States gained considerably from engagement; maintaining a hard line against China would have entailed significant costs.[14] In hindsight, a stronger appreciation for uncertainty could have resulted in a more balanced strategy and policy. The United States could have done more to maintain leverage and hedge against the more harmful effects of engagement.

In the remainder of this article, we attempt to improve the discourse on American strategy toward China by offering an analysis that is sensitive to the uncertainty inherent in the U.S.-China relationship while also presenting practical advice for policy makers and strategists. An understanding of developing

strategy in the context of high uncertainty is at the center of our analysis. When a range of scenarios are possible but probabilities are difficult to estimate, strategy created on the basis of specific predictions about the future generates high levels of risk.[15] Instead, U.S. strategists should develop a response that focuses on shaping conditions, invests in self-strengthening initiatives, and keeps options open while gathering additional information. Not only can such an approach improve the U.S. position vis-à-vis China; it also can improve the U.S. position relative to a variety of other threats and risks.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, we suggest reasons why analysts should view Chinese intentions and actions as uncertain. We focus on the variable and inconsistent nature of Chinese goals, methods, and policy outcomes, as viewed through the lens of strategic culture. Second, we suggest a framework for crafting strategy in situations of high uncertainty. Third, we propose an "entanglement" approach that deepens core alliances in East Asia and strengthens the U.S. role in East and Southeast Asian intergovernmental regional organizations. This approach aims both to shape the conditions underlying the U.S.-China relationship and to develop capabilities and capacity (self-strengthening moves) for responding to a variety of China challenges as well as global problems ranging from climate change and economic crisis to pandemics.

UNCERTAIN INTENTIONS OF A RISING CHINA

What kind of challenge does China pose for the United States? The nature of the challenge is determined by both what China intends to do with its rising economic and military power and what it is able to achieve given these intentions. Although it is tempting to see Chinese intentions as correlating perfectly with its capabilities and ultimate outcomes, doing so betrays an overly simplistic understanding of great-power politics.[16] While a rising power may have incentives to increase its influence in the world, its methods for asserting that influence are uncertain, and it may not be able to achieve its intended goals.[17] If we accept that capabilities, intent, and outcomes are not correlated perfectly, it is then necessary to understand China's intent as well as its capabilities to have a sense of what kind of challenge it poses.[18] We conceptualize intent as national goals envisioned by a country's top political leadership, tempered by the variable of national strategic culture.

While this approach emphasizes the importance of understanding ideas, we do not argue that a single idea causes a specific outcome in all circumstances. Further, strategic culture is not a simple, monocausal variable; rather, it is an ideational framework shaping what political leaders see as plausible national goals and appropriate methods to achieve those goals. By combining strategic culture with stated goals and analyzing two case studies of China's policy actions, we

hope to provide a realistic view of China that highlights uncertainty with respect to China's words, actions, and outcomes. In the next section, we analyze the interplay between Chinese national goals and strategic culture and then examine two cases of China's attempts to achieve its national goals through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its nuclear-weapons program.

Scholarly Debates about China's Strategic Culture

The appropriate way to understand national intentions combines how the leadership of a country envisions national success with how a framework of norms empowers and restrains those leaders' ideas. This approach pays particular attention to norms regarding how best to achieve national goals, especially with regard to the use of force to achieve national-security objectives. Norms concerning the use of force fall under the broader construct of *strategic culture,* which we define as the "set of ideas shared among state leaders ordering strategic preferences regarding the role of military force within interstate affairs."[19] While the term *strategic culture* often suggests a monolithic way of thinking within a country, our approach emphasizes strategic culture as a background set of competing "subcultures" defining a variety of norms that bear on the role and efficacy of using military force to achieve national goals.[20] Different subcultures coexist within a broader culture, and each subculture will rise and fall as the respective influence of different norms waxes and wanes over time. A historical view of Chinese strategic culture reveals distinct strategic subcultures and suggests that use-of-force norms are contested, and therefore cause uncertainty.

As noted, the matter of defining the norms that apply to the efficacy and appropriateness of using military force to conduct statecraft occupies the center of debates about Chinese strategic culture. Some scholarly work argues that a single operative subculture—be it offensive or defensive—dominates Chinese thinking. For example, Alastair Iain Johnston argues that Chinese strategic culture is dominated by a "parabellum" culture that views "sufficient" military capabilities and an enemy's military defeat as the "sine qua non of state security."[21] Other studies, such as the impressive work by Yuan-Kang Wang interpreting six hundred years of Chinese history, provide some support for Johnston's position.[22] However, while Johnston's work on both ancient Chinese texts and Mao Zedong's strategic thought de-emphasizes the role of debates within strategic subcultures in shaping the evolution of strategic norms, we see ample evidence that strategic culture shifts over time as different norms come to the fore and others recede.[23] For example, work by Huiyun Feng and Derek Yuen emphasizes the importance of Taoism, Confucianism, nonmilitary means, and defensive orientation in Chinese strategic thought.[24] This interpretation of Chinese strategic culture is supported by historical work noting that during China's long

run as regional hegemon it did not seek to conquer or colonize its neighbors but instead created conditions for hierarchical coexistence through "cultural attraction and voluntary submission."[25] However, even this more nuanced view smooths over rough edges of contrary evidence, including early Qing dynasty conquests as well as Ming dynasty policies toward Vietnam and the non-Chinese inhabitants in modern Manchuria and southwestern China.[26]

Other research shows how elements of strategic subcultures can combine in unpredictable ways. For example, Andrew Scobell argues that the Confucian-Mencian and realpolitik traditions interact to create a "Chinese Cult of Defense." According to this perspective, Chinese leaders demonstrate a "realist outlook" privileging military action while simultaneously believing they possess a uniquely Chinese and pacifist approach to interstate relations.[27] As a result, leaders embrace the use of force but consistently justify doing so as a defensive measure. Scobell suggests that expanding Chinese interests and increasing military power will result in more opportunities for China to take aggressive-defensive actions toward its neighbors.

Derek Yuen complicates the issue further, arguing that Scobell misses the crucial Taoist strand of Chinese strategic thought, leading to an incomplete understanding of Chinese strategic culture. According to Yuen, Taoism operates at the "strategic-philosophical" level and focuses on a dialectical view of balance (e.g., yin and yang) as a core element of Chinese thinking that is not reducible to Western notions of realism or offensive and defensive military doctrines.[28] Feng and Kai He also emphasize realpolitik ("realist threat perceptions") and Confucian ideas ("moralist cultural norms"), arguing that under high levels of threat China will follow an offensive realpolitik approach, but under lower levels of threat will follow a defensive approach.[29] These studies suggest that different Chinese strategic subcultures interact to shape Chinese goals and methods in combination with a variety of contextual factors.

Taken together, this research demonstrates a vigorous and evolving debate about how, when, and why Chinese leaders view the use of force to be legitimate. While some analysts seem to side with the arguments that best support their preexisting beliefs, a more responsible approach would note the diverse sets of norms relevant to Chinese national strategy and realize the unpredictable ways in which different strategic subcultures could combine to support a variety of national goals and methods for achieving those goals.[30] Further, strategic subcultures can be used instrumentally as rhetorical and ideological resources for different political factions within a society.[31] The existence of multiple Chinese strategic subcultures suggests enduring and ongoing debates over national goals and methods; this uncertainty compels analysts to refrain from concluding that any one set of ideas has won out and alone will determine decision-making.

Interaction between Strategic Culture and National Goals

The indeterminacy of abstract debates about strategic culture matches the historical variation in Chinese leaders' contribution to strategic-culture principles through visions of national success—that is, national goals—and methods of achieving that success. By identifying the evolution of leaders' ideas about China's use of force, tracing the ideas' implementation, and conducting historical analysis to assess whether and how they have been put into practice, we can take a more complete view of the inconsistencies of Chinese strategic thought. Following this method reveals a clear shift in China's strategic culture between the Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping eras, followed by an inconclusive amalgam of concepts, goals, and visions of success articulated by Presidents Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping.

During the Mao era (1949–76), China's leaders rooted norms about the use of force in the concept of *People's War:*

> People's War defined warfare as a constant state of the human experience; threats to the Chinese state were defined as global in terms of socialist ideology, and the United States (and later, the Soviet Union) was China's primary adversary; warfare was perceived as . . . justified for preserving the security of the state from existential threats [both internal and external]; and ideological commitment to socialism was a higher-ranking strategic preference than military technology for mitigating China's national security threats.[32]

Externally, this People's War strategic culture framed state decision-making with regard to China's participation in the Korean War, its military activities in the Taiwan Strait during the 1950s, its 1962 border war with India, and its 1969 border conflict with the Soviet Union that risked nuclear escalation. Internally, People's War concepts framed state-led mass mobilization of people's militias throughout the Mao era, including the Great Leap Forward (1959–62) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

Following the post-Mao leadership change of 1976–78, China incorporated radically different "Opening Reform" ideas regarding the role of military force in statecraft, shifting toward integrating with the Western liberal international order (i.e., Opening) and introducing market-based economic systems within China (i.e., Reform). According to these Opening Reform strategic-culture principles, China's new leaders assessed that the threat of major war had decreased; political "stability" defined threats to the Chinese state; and domestic economic development, international diplomacy, improved scientific education, and the professionalization of China's political and military institutions enhanced China's ability to practice statecraft within the international system.[33] While they did not prohibit warfare entirely—see China's 1979 border war with Vietnam, for example—leaders still asserted that China did not seek hegemony, and they

de-emphasized military confrontation in favor of a generally noninterventionist approach focusing on bilateral diplomatic engagement, domestic economic development, and military reform and modernization.[34]

Note that *noninterventionist* does *not* entail being pro-West or pro–United States, nor does it mean neglecting military modernization, which began during the Deng era and continues in earnest through the current, Xi era.[35] Rather, *noninterventionist* refers to an emphasis on not engaging in military action against other countries. During the initial phase of this transition, Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader, emphasized the need to "hide your strength and bide your time" and focus on internal economic development rather than seeking influence abroad.[36] By balancing the United States and the USSR against each other during the Cold War, China could ensure geopolitical flexibility and a peaceful environment for strengthening its economy and reforming its military.[37]

Later, under the leadership of Jiang Zemin and then Hu Jintao, China augmented Opening Reform strategic principles to include links among domestic stability and international interests, ongoing military reforms, and a continued emphasis on noninterventionist norms.[38] This coincided with increased state-led investment in other countries (such as several African states), participation within economy- and security-focused multilateral institutions, and maintaining a public emphasis that China's development was not a threat to the international status quo.[39] For example, between 2003 and 2005 China debated and ultimately changed the public name of its dominant foreign policy theory from "peaceful rise" to "peaceful development" because it did not want to portray itself as challenging the dominant international security order.[40] Although they varied in their respective details, these norms still did not incentivize the Chinese government to adopt an expansionist foreign policy—focused on the use of force—while it nonetheless still pursued ongoing military reform and modernization.

The shift in leadership from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping marked a clearer shift of national goals, with Xi Jinping articulating that China currently is "striving for achievement" as an emerging world power.[41] Distancing himself from Deng's foreign politics, Xi proclaimed the need to "strive for achievement" to achieve the "Chinese Dream," a goal of national economic and military "rejuvenation"; this official discourse overlaps with a widely accepted (domestically) unofficial narrative of China's "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers that took advantage of China's internal weakness.[42] Furthermore, China increasingly thinks of itself as a great power worthy of respect and prestige on the level of the United States, portraying China's state-led development model as an alternative to the chaotic excesses of Western rights-based liberal democracy.[43] Methods for achieving these emergent national goals have shifted as well, as the Chinese military has accelerated its ambitious modernization campaign—steadily increasing

military spending to its highest level ever—to build a "world-class force" capable of fighting and winning global wars.[44] Further, China's creation of seven military bases in the Spratly Island area of the South China Sea during the period 2013–18 is one example of a newly unilateral method for advancing national-territory-sovereignty claims initiated during the Xi Jinping era, which has sparked routine interstate confrontations in the region.[45] Such unilateralism is manifesting itself domestically as well—Xi Jinping recently began a norm-breaking third term as the Chinese Communist Party's General Secretary (while remaining chairman of the Central Military Commission and PRC president), and he has centralized power by installing allies in top leadership positions.

Yet China's recent words and deeds do not point uniformly toward an aggressive orientation, and there are indications that national goals as articulated by President Xi remain rooted within the Opening Reform strategic culture framework. For example, both the "hide your strength" and "peaceful cooperation" (i.e., noninterventionist) strategies still have vocal defenders among the Chinese intelligentsia today.[46] Yang Jiechi, China's top diplomat, wrote that "[t]he Chinese Dream requires a peaceful and stable international and neighboring environment, and China is committed to realizing the dream through peaceful development," in keeping with the Opening Reform strategic-culture framework.[47] President Xi echoed this sentiment by referring to China's Asian neighbors as a "community of common destiny" bound together by mutual cooperation and driven by shared interests in security and development. Yan Xuetong equates the national goal of "striving for achievement" with an increased Chinese influence that naturally follows China's positive moral character.[48] Indeed, since the turn of the century a chorus of Chinese academics have elucidated various visions that argue that China's uniquely humane characteristics (Confucianism, most notably) could contribute to a more "harmonious world."[49] Further, the long-term effect of Xi Jinping's third term in office, and his apparent centralization of power, remains fundamentally uncertain; does this make China more likely to engage in military action, or less?[50]

While it might be tempting to map abstract strategic-cultural principles such as realpolitik and Confucian moralism to the shifts in salient strategic norms described above, the bigger point is to note the variation in norms, goals, and policy methods over time. Different constellations of norms rise to prominence at different times in Chinese history as a result of a variety of contextual factors, and no single way of thinking about the role of military force has dominated Chinese thinking or national strategy.[51] In the Mao era, the government felt a deep sense of threat, which combined with ideological principles that encouraged belief in the high efficacy and necessity of the use of mass-mobilized military force. Under Deng, Jiang, and Hu, a reduced salience of ideological principles fostered a

lower sense of threat and a more defensive belief in self-strengthening through modernization and professionalization of China's military. While a more aggressive set of ideas currently seems ascendant under President Xi, Opening Reform's noninterventionist norms—rooted in the success of China's economic development in the post-Mao period—are still part of Chinese strategic culture and will continue to have some influence on Chinese goals and methods in the future.

Uncertainty of Outcomes

Even if we were able to know China's national intentions perfectly, there would remain an enduring gap between intended national goals and their actual achievement.[52] Examples of contradictions among China's Xi-era goals, methods, and eventual outcomes are demonstrated in two of the country's most important national-strategic programs: the BRI and the recent expansion of its nuclear-weapons program. Both initiatives appear to be designed to strengthen China politically and militarily as it develops an expanded range of advantageous foreign-policy dispositions. However, as described below, uncertainty related to gaps among foreign-policy intentions, methods, and actual outcomes illustrates the difficulties in understanding how the China challenge will evolve over time.

The BRI. The ideas of "national rejuvenation" and "striving for achievement" have taken on an international dimension with China's BRI program. The BRI is Xi Jinping's signature foreign-policy program, and it has been characterized as an "economic soft balancing" measure designed to make China the center of a regional economic order in Eurasia.[53] It is a multidecade, trillion-dollar investment in infrastructure from China across Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, eastern Europe, Western Europe, and, more recently, Latin America. The overall goal of the BRI is to deepen China's integration with other world economies and thereby expand China's global geopolitical influence. The BRI method to achieve this goal is through state-financed infrastructure loans to foreign governments to pay for projects that usually are executed by Chinese state-owned companies during the construction process—suggesting that these projects amount to externalized versions of China's lavish domestic infrastructure spending that has led to its "ghost city" phenomenon.[54] Further, many projects remain under the financial control of Chinese companies long after they are completed.[55]

BRI projects usually entail construction of infrastructure across multiple domains, including ground (e.g., energy pipelines, railroads, communication towers, electricity lines, and highways), sea (e.g., deepwater ports for shipping), and air (e.g., airports). Many of these infrastructure deals are negotiated on a state-to-state level with individual countries, suggesting that China uses state-backed loans to enhance its political influence during the negotiation process.[56] Individual projects are often functionally dual use (i.e., civil-military), and China

may leverage these projects to negotiate agreements to host military forces adjacent to BRI investment locations. Cambodia exemplifies these outcomes, as the two countries have established a special economic zone that facilitated the construction of a port, investment in a range of factories and casinos, and probably an airport expansion.[57] China may have used this BRI project to extract military agreements from the Cambodian government. For example, there is a reported military agreement to host Chinese military forces at or near Ream Naval Base.[58] Additionally, in May 2022 China most likely delivered self-propelled artillery and multiple-rocket-launcher equipment to Cambodia via Sihanoukville's port.[59]

Underneath the veneer of this massive central government investment in global infrastructure projects rests uncertainty about its outcomes, with indications of a lack of market-based demand, varied international responses to BRI offers, and in some cases even outright local co-optation of BRI projects. For example, a large proportion of BRI loan recipients—perhaps as many as half—may not be able to repay their loans, which suggests economically unstable outcomes in the long term.[60] Additionally, countries respond variably to China's BRI offers; some welcome BRI investment (e.g., Cambodia), while others eschew it (e.g., Vietnam). Further, Matt Ferchen chronicles how some BRI investments in Cambodia have led to attendant semi-licit economic activities—including real estate speculation and various gambling ventures—that have fueled local anti-Chinese sentiment.[61] This suggests that while the BRI appears on the surface to be a coherent government self-strengthening gambit for expanding China's geopolitical influence, further scrutiny reveals that a portion of these investments are economically unsustainable and, more importantly, in some cases introduce unintended local outcomes that diminish rather than enhance Chinese influence.[62] Indeed, despite the portrayal of the BRI under Xi Jinping as a cohesive, aggressive method to promote Chinese influence, uncertainty surrounds the initiative's outcomes across different localities.

Improvements to China's Nuclear Program. There are multiple indications that China is improving its capability to produce and deploy nuclear weapons, although few details are known publicly about either the extent of these efforts or China's intent for wielding an improved nuclear deterrent. Since nuclear weapons are a state's most powerful national-strategic weapons program, a stronger nuclear deterrent would expand China's geopolitical influence and would be a marked change from the past. From the Mao Zedong era through at least the later stages of the Hu Jintao era (1949–2011), China developed and maintained a limited nuclear-weapons capability.[63] This supports consensus academic assessments that China historically has pursued a policy of minimum deterrence.[64] *Minimum deterrence* is a nuclear deterrence posture that theoretically requires only a

modest nuclear-force composition, because it depends on the fear of only a single nuclear weapon capable of destroying an adversary in retaliation for a nuclear first strike.[65]

However, since at least 2014 there are indications that China has expanded facilities associated with the research and development, production, testing, storage, and deployment of nuclear weapons.[66] While China's 2021 construction of several probable land-based missile-silo fields has received the most attention, it is contemporaneous observations of possible nuclear-weapons test activity at its Lop Nor Nuclear Weapons Test Area that are more alarming, given that testing is necessary to support modernization, expansion, or both of nuclear-weapon arsenals prior to deployment.[67] Yet despite such indications, uncertainty shrouds the extent and goals of these efforts. China may be prioritizing the modernization and modest expansion of its existing nuclear forces, or it could be expanding and strengthening its nuclear-weapon deployments to match more closely the capabilities of the United States and Russia.

If China is indeed enhancing its nuclear deterrent through expanding the numbers and types of its deployed nuclear weapons, it remains uncertain how this expansion relates to China's views on nuclear deterrence.[68] Within nuclear-deterrence theory, most perspectives fall between the "deterrence statist" and "nuclear strategist" positions.[69] *Deterrence statists* hold that nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to states, and thus the threat of annihilation posed by the use of nuclear weapons outweighs any potential relative gains from conventional war among nuclear-armed states. Therefore, nuclear deterrence is stable and nuclear-armed states should have fewer armed conflicts with one another.[70] On the other hand, *nuclear strategism* (also referred to as "warfighting") holds that use of nuclear weapons need not lead to the annihilation of states and that limited nuclear wars could yield relative gains. Therefore, nuclear deterrence is unstable and highly contingent on the balance of nuclear forces among potential adversaries.[71] China's views on such nuclear-deterrence perspectives are not well-known; further, if China is expanding its nuclear arsenal, would this be to support a nuclear war-fighting posture, or to enhance overall deterrence vis-à-vis other nuclear-armed states?

Regarding national goals, China additionally may see a world-class nuclear-weapons capability as having inherent geopolitical value as part of its push to become a global superpower. If so, then an improved nuclear-weapons capability would seem to reflect principles of "national rejuvenation" and "striving for achievement." However, uncertainty persists about how far China may have moved from its traditional minimum-deterrence posture, and therefore it remains unclear how to interpret recent evidence of silo construction and probable testing activity at Lop Nor. China could be prioritizing modernization of

its nuclear-weapons capabilities in a manner that modestly improves its nuclear deterrent. Such improvements would shift some regional-security dynamics but not alter dramatically the current status quo distribution of nuclear weapons capability that is concentrated in the United States and Russia. Or China could be building the foundations for a major expansion of its nuclear-weapons program. This would inject *significant* uncertainty into the regional and global security situations yet still may result in outcomes that could undermine Chinese security by increasing proliferation risks and anti-China sentiment among regional powers.

However, even assuming perfect knowledge of China's goals relative to its nuclear-weapons program improvement, there remains uncertainty related to the range of possible *outcomes* resulting from these developments. A more robust nuclear deterrent could enhance China's strategic position during conventional military competition with other nuclear-armed powers, possibly leading to an increased number of limited conventional conflicts.[72] Specifically, this enhanced nuclear deterrent could improve China's ability to conduct conventional military actions in support of changing the regional-security status quo in Asia, including reunification with Taiwan, enforcement of South China Sea land and maritime sovereignty claims, challenges to Japan's East China Sea land and maritime sovereignty claims in the Senkaku Islands (also known as the Diaoyu Islands), and expansion of military outposts in disputed territory along China's southwestern border with India.[73] Yet as the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war demonstrates, achieving even limited military goals in a conventional military conflict remains inherently uncertain given the fogginess of an opponent's will and capacity to resist. In the final analysis, China's nuclear-weapons program improvements present some amount of uncertainty about specific intent, accurate capability assessments, and variable regional-security outcomes and responses to these improvements.

Variation and inconsistencies in Chinese strategic culture, national goals and methods, and the execution of major national-strategic programs suggest that the United States should treat the China challenge as a situation of high uncertainty. Strategy development always takes place under some level of uncertainty, but the variety of plausible scenarios and the complexity of factors shaping future outcomes make the China challenge a particularly difficult problem. The following sections develop and apply principles for the creation of strategy under high uncertainty.

STRATEGY AND UNCERTAINTY

A *strategy* is a theory of success; it is a causal explanation of how and why a certain set of actions will cause a certain set of desired results.[74] Crafting a good strategy has three requirements: diagnosis of the problem or challenge the strategy

aims to resolve; identification of goals or strategic objectives that correspond with resolving the problem (i.e., definition of success); and a theory explaining how the goals will be achieved, including what actions need to be taken and how those actions will cause success.

This process of diagnosing the problem, defining goals, and creating a theory of how to achieve those goals is difficult for many reasons. One challenge in strategy making is accounting for uncertainty.[75] The sources of uncertainty are many, but in this article we focus on uncertainty related to diagnosing the problem and defining success. If good strategic objectives require a correct diagnosis of the problem, as Richard Rumelt advises, we must know the nature of the problem or challenge.[76]

For the purposes of this article, we need to know what kind of problem or challenge China presents for the United States. For example, China could present a war-fighting challenge, an influence challenge, or an economic challenge, or something completely unexpected. China could be a problem because of its strengths, its weaknesses, or some combination of the two.[77] Getting a better sense of what the challenge is requires knowledge about Chinese capabilities and intentions, including Beijing's goals and strategies. Divining the intentions of rising powers, and of great powers as well, is a recurrent problem in international politics.[78] An analyst can resolve uncertainty only by interpreting the meaning of Chinese actions, and justifications for those actions, over the long term.[79] As described above, there is little reason to be confident about China's intentions. There is enough variation in Chinese norms, goals, actions, and outcomes to suggest a high level of uncertainty in the future of Chinese national policy and strategy.

So, what should a strategist do in the face of uncertainty? In this section, we suggest principles for thinking about strategy under conditions of high uncertainty. But first we must clarify what we mean by *uncertainty*. When we argue that the U.S.-China relationship is characterized by high uncertainty, we mean that a range of futures are plausible and it is difficult to judge the probability of specific scenarios.[80] Our concept of high uncertainty lies somewhere between what Courtney, Kirkland, and Viguerie call "level 3" uncertainty—characterized as having a "range of futures"—and level 4 uncertainty of "true ambiguity."[81] It is not a situation of infinite possible futures, but the problems are "wicked" and causal relationships are complex, vague, indeterminate, and "non-stationary."[82] Some critical factors and indicators can be identified, such as economic growth rates, rising military expenditures, and investments in specific national-strategic priorities, but the fundamental uncertainties of human systems make many others difficult to identify and measure. Perhaps the most "wicked" part of strategic challenges stems from *"non-stationarity"* and *"reflexivity"* aspects.[83] The first means that no general laws govern the behavior of great powers or

rising powers, and therefore we will tend to be confronted with unique and unpredictable situations. The second refers to how human beings change the ways they think and act because of new experiences and ideas. By taking an action, you can change the beliefs and actions of others, which in turn changes the original conditions that formed the basis of your actions. In other words, outcomes are "interdependent with the beliefs of the actors themselves."[84] Reflexivity suggests that acting on the basis of a prediction of Chinese behavior may make that behavior more likely in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy.[85] These characteristics of high uncertainty make strategy formulation harder but not impossible. The benefits of creating a strategy are still attainable but must be subject to increased scrutiny.

The first benefit of a strategy is its coordinating function.[86] Strategy makes success more likely by focusing action and prioritizing resources. To a certain extent, the substance of the strategy matters less than the coordinating function. This is true when there are multiple, equally plausible, noncontradictory strategy options. In this case, it is more important to choose one and put resources behind it than to debate strategy endlessly. The issue is more vexing when plausible strategies are contradictory, because choosing the wrong strategy could do serious harm.

For example, appeasing an aggressive China only will make the problem worse. Or if China is acting out of insecurity, then an aggressive response from the United States will make the problem worse. Therefore, in an uncertain situation characterized by mutually exclusive strategic options, it is crucial to make the correct choice—a risky proposition—or to forgo the choice and avoid the trade-offs. Betting it all on making the correct choice is a high-risk approach, and formulating strategy on the basis of a prediction is a loser's game; a better approach is *shaping*.[87] Shaping takes actions to push outcomes toward a more favorable scenario. If there is a spectrum of plausible outcomes, it makes sense to take actions that make better outcomes more likely. This approach requires that strategists make an attempt to have some effect on critical variables and trends, or, as Everett Dolman suggests, "manipulating the structure within which all actions are determined."[88]

From this perspective, instead of trying to predict China's intentions, goals, and strategies, U.S. strategy should focus on shaping conditions that affect China's intentions, goals, and strategy. This recommendation is similar to Ryan Hass's advice to "channel China's rise in the direction of being ambitious without growing aggressive, toward either the United States or its security partners."[89] Shaping, or channeling, requires its own ancillary strategy to determine what needs to be shaped and how, which would contribute to broader national strategy. One plausible approach would be for the United States to take actions to reinforce

and empower norms of nonmilitarized diplomacy in East and Southeast Asia. "The Spirit of the Quad" statement and the commitment of the governments of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia to "promoting a free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity" represent a step in this direction.[90] Of course, this statement requires follow-on actions to have any effect. One way to promote these principles would be for the United States to increase its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to build support for an open, rules-based order.

Admittedly, there are some potential drawbacks to shaping efforts. In the realm of world politics, shaping can cause backlash. For example, the U.S. policy of engagement was a form of shaping that was successful for a time—and because of that success it triggered a reaction. Arguably, the recent closing of China is a reaction to the opening of the early 2000s. The important lesson is that in some cases, successful shaping can be viewed with hostility and become counterproductive. Shaping moves that focus on affecting aspects of the international and regional order should be much less threatening than efforts to affect domestic politics, but strategists and policy makers should be aware of the potential for backlash.

Second, good strategy creates power, competitive advantage, or advantageous disposition.[91] This can be done by strengthening yourself, weakening your opponent, or more generally "magnifying the effects of resources and actions."[92] To some degree, uncertainty about the potential opponent's goals and strategy hinders the search for power and advantage. For example, Sun-tzu advises that "the best military policy is to attack strategies," which can happen only if one knows the enemy's strategy.[93] However, it might be feasible to pursue general capability- and capacity-building strategies independent of the strategy and goals of an opponent.[94] Writing in the context of uncertainty and surprise, Frank Hoffman argues that "we should plan with the intent of creating capabilities and consequences that are surprise-tolerant."[95] Self-strengthening, if seen as maximizing power or strictly as the creation of additional military capabilities and capacity, is not problem neutral (i.e., it is a result of a specific diagnosis of the problem). An arms buildup could be perceived as aggressive and therefore would be part of a strategy suitable to counteracting an aggressive opponent.

Instead, a problem-neutral, self-strengthening approach seeks to increase resilience, create spare capacity, and increase absolute and relative gains. Pursuing absolute gains should be problem neutral and would mean that the United States takes steps to improve its position regardless of how those actions affect a potential adversary. A neutral relative-gains approach would mean outperforming an opponent without necessarily taking actions to weaken that opponent. Any type of self-strengthening can be seen as hostile by an opponent, and strategists

can move along a spectrum from implementing only the most benign policies to sliding closer to hostile acts. This approach is derived from making "no-regret moves" that "pay off no matter what happens."[96] One easily can generate a list of domestic self-strengthening (absolute gains) measures, including putting U.S. finances on a more stable footing, investing in education and research and development, and fortifying American democracy.[97] One also could see a variety of international capability- and capacity-building initiatives (for both absolute and relative gains), such as strengthening alliances and partnerships, working with and through inter- and nongovernmental organizations, negotiating new trade agreements, and increasing American soft power through public diplomacy.

The third benefit of strategy comes from viewing strategy through the lens of the scientific method, which gives strategists a way to evaluate their strategy before implementing it.[98] If we define *strategy* as a theory, or causal explanation, the scientific method allows strategists to fine-tune their theory over time to improve its explanatory and predictive power. Following the wheel of science, one derives a hypothesis from a theory, tests it against real-world observations, revises, tests again, and repeats to refine the theory further. Similarly, strategists consistently should seek to improve their strategy or theory of success. This way of thinking about strategy enables continuous adaptation, assessment, and searching for opportunities to shift to a more advantageous approach.[99]

Small-scale experiments to gain additional information can illuminate a strategy's strengths and weaknesses. For example, the United States could seek to engage China in regional forums on issues of importance in East and Southeast Asia. U.S. officials could judge the Chinese response to a series of initiatives on international law, commerce, navigation, nonproliferation, and other matters. The Chinese response would include signals that would allow the United States to infer Chinese intentions and observe changes in those intentions.[100] This posture of "reserving the right to play" would entail incremental investments to gain information and keep options open.[101]

To a certain degree, U.S. strategy toward China has been evolving from engagement to competition along these lines. But instead of slow course correcting with incremental experimentation and revision, the United States now faces the possible problem of veering too quickly between extremes. Consequently, the United States could implement a policy of military competition and confrontation before fine-tuning the appropriate level of restraint. The complex, nonlinear nature of causation makes such a significant change in policy unwise. It is, therefore, worth noting the value of uncertainty in thinking about a problem. Humans tend toward overconfidence, and thoughtful analysts must examine their claims continuously for this form of bias.[102] Accepting uncertainty and having a way to respond to multiple eventualities help to mitigate overconfidence.[103]

Conditions of high uncertainty may make realizing the full benefits of strategy more difficult. Uncertainty may require more emphasis on shaping the behavior of others; more inward focus on self-strengthening, hedging, and adaptation; and more dependence on well-structured experimentation. The next section describes one potential way for the United States to approach the China challenge consistent with the principles described above.

AMERICAN NATIONAL STRATEGY AND THE RISE OF CHINA

How can the United States shape conditions, engage in problem-neutral self-strengthening, and keep options open while gaining information to reduce uncertainty? A team of experts would have to invest a large amount of time and resources to overcome such a significant challenge. In this article, we sketch out a plausible strategic approach that we think can begin the process of meeting this challenge. We label this approach "entanglement." Harking back to President George Washington's Farewell Address, the term *entangle* has had the negative connotation of a nation finding itself trapped and subject to unwanted influence from abroad.[104] We repurpose the word here to denote a series of positive linkages between the United States and key countries in East and Southeast Asia that are meant to enable strengthening and shaping moves. We label this an approach rather than a strategy because it lacks the features of a fully developed theory of success, and instead should serve as a building block informing a larger American national strategy for China as well as East and Southeast Asia.

The first element of entanglement is the strengthening of core American alliances in East Asia. Forging a closer relationship among Japan, South Korea, and the United States forms the bedrock of this element and of entanglement generally. Japan and South Korea are the closest American allies in East Asia, and they can aid the United States in meeting multiple challenges by bringing to bear their extensive military, intelligence, diplomatic, and economic capabilities and capacities. A more united South Korean–Japanese–American (ROK-JP-U.S.) alliance could exist purely as a trilateral alliance or form the core of an alliance system that could expand to include other countries and complement other regional partnerships such as the Quad, AUKUS, and numerous bilateral relationships. A more robust ROK-JP-U.S. alliance requires shifting from a hub-and-spoke approach to a truly trilateral alliance. The main challenge to overcome is the historical animosity between South Korea and Japan because of Japan's colonialism and war crimes between 1910 and 1945.[105] Trade disputes, contradictory views on how to approach the North Korea problem, and differing threat perceptions of China exacerbate this foundational conflict.[106] Helping South Korea and Japan work through their differences will take significant and persistent diplomatic attention and resources from the United States, and this should be the number one

priority for American foreign policy in East Asia. U.S. officials are moving in this direction, but progress is slow and the challenges are significant. South Koreans now have a more unfavorable view of China than of Japan and have a much more favorable view of the United States than of China. However, many Koreans do not want to choose sides between the United States and China, because of South Korea's economic dependence on the latter.[107] Entanglement could help South Korea overcome this dilemma, because the ROK-JP-U.S. alliance is not by definition an anti-China alliance. Instead, the United States can build a closer relationship with South Korea and Japan regardless of how the U.S.-China relationship evolves. Some analysts have taken the opposite route and proposed using a "China threat narrative" to bring South Korea and Japan together.[108] On top of being currently unnecessary, this approach creates problems by sharpening the dilemma for South Korea relative to its relationship with China. By prioritizing the creation of a truly trilateral alliance and focusing on shared interests in solving shared problems, the three countries can address other issues after a series of trust-building measures on trade and investment.

A closer partnership with South Korea and Japan enhances American capacity and capabilities. Greater trust and dependence on South Korea and Japan could complement American military capabilities, and better interoperability among the three military forces could enhance trust.[109] The United States also is likely to benefit from Korean and Japanese region-specific knowledge and relationships, including the close economic ties both countries are developing in Southeast and South Asia. Overall, an ROK-JP-U.S. alliance would signal resolve to China and reassurance to South Korea and Japan without further militarizing the U.S.-China relationship. It also would test Chinese intent; a deeper ROK-JP-U.S. alliance that seeks to heal a deep historical conflict should not be seen as threatening to China. While there will be some defense aspects to the alliance, the initial focus on trust building and economic and transnational issues should be welcomed by China if it truly intends a peaceful rise.

The second element of entanglement is an increase in American engagement with ASEAN as a means to establish a stronger regional intergovernmental architecture that could shape China's intentions and goals. The central ideas in this element are to promote ASEAN's role in supporting a rules-based regional order and collective security and for the group to serve as a forum for dispute resolution.[110] Either China would go along and compete for influence in these initiatives, or it would risk alienating regional powers that currently are relatively neutral, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. While overcoming China's economic influence presents a steep challenge, divisive issues such as China's claims over the South China Sea and China's negative impact on the Mekong River basin create an opening for the United States. The United States also will need to prepare

for China (and other countries) to seek an advantage by manipulating rules or capitalizing on U.S. adherence to the rules, since manipulating the rules is an important element of strategy.[111] But that is also the point. If the United States can shape the competition with China such that it takes place in diplomatic venues, it would create an advantage for the United States and its allies. In moving forward with this approach, the United States should take bold steps: ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and starting negotiations to enter the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.[112] These measures would strengthen immediately the regional rules-based order and increase American soft power in East and Southeast Asia.[113]

Both elements of entanglement are consistent with a variety of diagnoses of the China challenge. If China does not pose a threat, the United States loses nothing and gains much by engaging with and increasing its influence in East Asia. For decades, the global economic center of gravity has been shifting toward Asia, suggesting that resolving major global challenges will require contributions from regional powers in East, Southeast, and South Asia. For example, some argue that the primary future problems of the United States will take the shape of transnational challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and economic crises.[114] If transnational risks dominate this century, shoring up international partnerships and institutions around the globe will be crucial to mitigating them. Entanglement keeps options open for a variety of U.S. responses to any challenge China poses, whether military or diplomatic or economic. If China presents mainly an economic and diplomatic threat, stronger alliances and a more institutionalized East and Southeast Asia are appropriate tools to meet that challenge. If China presents a military threat, strong allies willing to aggregate their power with the United States will be a huge benefit.[115] Furthermore, military threats are more likely to fit under the categories of subversion and proxy war rather than conventional great-power war, making alliances and intergovernmental organizations even more important.[116]

One reasonably may question how different this approach is from the engagement of the 1990s and early years of the following decade and the hedging approach of the 2010s. *Entanglement* is quite distinct from *engagement*. While the latter was meant to foster liberalization within China, entanglement takes active steps to strengthen alliances and the rules-based order in East and Southeast Asia. It is largely independent of the internal characteristics of Chinese politics and society and can respond to either a more aggressive or a less aggressive Chinese foreign policy. If China becomes more aggressive, entanglement will enable a unified response from the ROK-JP-U.S. alliance and provide a forum for condemnation and collective regional response to Chinese aggression. As suggested by the U.S. and European Union response to the February 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine, a unified alliance system and a means for coordinating a response

to aggression are crucial. This focus on creating a deep, long-term, trilateral alliance to enable a unified front to address any major threat or risk that affects the East and Southeast Asia regions distinguishes *entanglement* from the *hedging* or "pivot" approach of the 2010s. While continued shifts in U.S. capabilities may be called for, the deepening of alliances and strengthening of institutions enable a level of coordination and integration much more valuable than incrementally shifting resources and manpower to East Asia.

One reasonable counterargument to entanglement is that it wastes time and resources pursuing an unnecessary and ultimately weak response to the China challenge. From this perspective, the United States should focus on deploying additional military capabilities as quickly as possible to implement a "conventional forward defense" strategy.[117] However, there are several problems with this approach. First, it relies on a highly confident and specific prediction of Chinese intentions and capabilities—China is a near-term military threat to subjugate U.S. allies in East Asia. As we have discussed, under conditions of high uncertainty, creating a strategy on the basis of a specific prediction creates a high level of risk. Second, relying on a military response has a good chance of backfiring. One easily can imagine a situation in which an increasingly militarized posture alienates allies and potential allies in East and Southeast Asia, thereby increasing U.S. isolation and the likelihood that subversion will work. Furthermore, a U.S. military buildup plausibly could cause China to feel less secure, triggering a security dilemma spiraling to an arms race and higher likelihood of preemptive attack. Thus, an approach portrayed as tough and realistic rests on a foundation of sand, inconsistent with principles of strategy and overconfident to the point of recklessness.

In analyzing the debate over World War I's origins, Sebastian Rosato observed that "if scholars armed with definitions and the documentary record cannot agree about what states wanted long after the fact, it is unlikely that great powers can do so in real time."[118] The United States and its allies face this dilemma in attempting to understand China's intentions and the kind of challenge it poses. As we have discussed, many of the core elements of China's strategy—its goals and how it intends to reach them—remain uncertain. Others do not: the BRI represents an overt attempt to expand China's influence, China has initiated improvements to its nuclear arsenal, and trends in the foreign-policy discourse of China's leaders reveal a view of China as an ascending power "striving" to achieve the "Chinese Dream" and worthy of commensurate respect from the United States.

However, while we can hazard informed guesses on the basis of the information available, miscalculation could lead to devastating consequences, especially with respect to nuclear weapons. Prevailing uncertainty prevents policy makers

from definitively diagnosing the China challenge, and the United States should develop a strategic approach that accommodates ambiguity. Yet there remain certain trade-offs when choosing some approaches over others. Should the United States engage in an East Asian military buildup to signal resolve and deter an aggressive China? Should the United States reduce its military presence to an offshore balancing posture to reassure China about peaceful American intentions? A country cannot do both easily.

Following the principles of strategy described in this article, the best approach is to focus on shaping Chinese intentions toward a scenario that is best for the United States, while at the same time pursuing self-strengthening policies that will pay off no matter how the China challenge plays out, and then adapting this approach as more information becomes available. One way to start moving forward on this trajectory is to follow the entanglement approach suggested above. The main elements in this approach are investing in creating a truly trilateral ROK-JP-U.S. alliance and supporting and empowering the regional intergovernmental organization ASEAN. Importantly, it would not be the goal of the United States to turn the ROK-JP-U.S. alliance or ASEAN into an anti-China coalition or organization. The purpose of this approach is to shape the trajectory of East and Southeast Asia in a direction that emphasizes diplomatic and economic relations and strengthens the U.S. position in East and Southeast Asia to better enable a future response to a variety of challenges, including a China that is too strong, a China that is too weak, and a range of transnational problems. These no-regrets moves are likely to pay off in any scenario and should be the basis for creating a more comprehensive U.S. strategy for China.

NOTES

1. Brian W. Everstine, "Austin Highlights China Threat in First Briefing," *Air Force Magazine,* 19 February 2021, www.airforcemag.com/.
2. Uri Friedman, "The New Concept Everyone in Washington Is Talking About," *The Atlantic,* 6 August 2019, www.theatlantic.com/; Peter Martin, "Biden's Asia Czar Kurt Campbell Says Era of Engagement with Xi's China Is Over," *Bloomberg,* 26 May 2021, www.bloomberg.com/.
3. "Biden's New China Doctrine," *The Economist,* 17 July 2021, available at www.economist.com/.
4. Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021), p. 4.
5. Yun Sun, quoted in Erika Ryan, Sarah Handel, and Ailsa Chang, "Why a Third Term for Xi Jinping Could Mean Uncertainty for China," *NPR,* 17 October 2022, www.npr.org/.
6. Elbridge Colby and Walter Slocombe, "The State of (Deterrence by) Denial," *War on the Rocks,* 22 March 2021, warontherocks.com/.
7. James Kitfield, "'We're Going to Lose Fast': U.S. Air Force Held a War Game That Started with a Chinese Biological Attack," *Yahoo News,* 10 March 2021, news.yahoo.com/.
8. Max Boot, "Biden's Australian Submarine Deal Is a Big Win in the Strategic Competition with China," *Washington Post,* 20 September 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/.

9. The *hawk* and *dove* binary is reductionist and oversimplified, and it elides a full range of positions on China, but we use these terms as a convenient and commonsense way to suggest some very basic differences in judgment about the threat posed by China.
10. David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2020); Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2018); Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014–15), pp. 48–88; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2011).
11. Joseph Nye, in Aspen Institute, "A New Era of Great Power Competition," streamed live on 18 July 2019, YouTube video, 59:45, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryC-Zl6DdZw.
12. "Even Doveish China-Watchers in America Are Becoming Hawkish," *The Economist,* 1 May 2021, www.economist.com/.
13. George W. Bush, quoted in Orville Schell, "The Death of Engagement," *Wire China,* 7 June 2020, www.thewirechina.com/.
14. See, for example, Robert Griffiths, "Engagement with China: Was It a Mistake?," *Foreign Service Journal* 98, no. 5 (June 2021), pp. 31–33, available at afsa.org/.
15. See Frank G. Hoffman, "The Future Is Plural: Multiple Futures for Tomorrow's Joint Force," *Joint Force Quarterly,* no. 88 (1st Quarter 2018), pp. 4–13.
16. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987); Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988; repr. 2004), pp. 56–82.
17. Jeffrey W. Meiser, *Power and Restraint: The Rise of the United States, 1898–1941* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2015).
18. Capabilities provide important information about the range of actions a country can undertake, in the sense that more capabilities give a country more options.
19. Renny Babiarz, "The People's Nuclear Weapon: Strategic Culture and the Development of China's Nuclear Weapons Program," *Comparative Strategy* 34, no. 5 (2015). See also Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998); Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995), pp. 32–64; and Runa Das, "Strategic Culture, Identity and Nuclear (In)Security in Indian Politics: Reflections from Critical Constructivist Lenses," *International Politics* 47, no. 5 (September 2010), pp. 472–96.
20. Alan Bloomfield, "Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 3 (2012), p. 451.
21. Johnston, *Cultural Realism,* p. 61.
22. Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010). Wang argues that "structural realism" rather than culture is the best explanation for Chinese military policy, but in practice his case studies suggest a significant role for what Johnston calls "cultural realism."
23. See Johnston, *Cultural Realism,* pp. 29, 40, 59.
24. Derek M. C. Yuen, *Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read "The Art of War"* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 168–69; Huiyun Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War* (London: Routledge, 2007).
25. Wang, *Harmony and War,* p. 15; Zhang Yunling, "China and Its Neighbourhood: Transformation, Challenges and Grand Strategy," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July 2016), p. 836.
26. John W. Dardess, *Ming China, 1368–1644: A Concise History of a Resilient Empire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), pp. 8–12, 21; Zhang, "China and Its Neighbourhood," p. 836. The Ming governed the indigenous groups of southwestern China specifically using a system of indirect rule known as *tusi*. As ethnic Chinese immigrants gradually began to outnumber the native groups, the Ming fully (and involuntarily) incorporated these areas into regular administration.
27. Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), p. 26.

28. Yuen, *Deciphering Sun Tzu,* pp. 168–84.
29. Huiyun Feng and Kai He, "A Dynamic Strategic Culture Model and China's Behaviour in the South China Sea," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 4 (2021), pp. 510–29.
30. For an example of using only evidence that supports preexisting beliefs, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), chap. 10.
31. Meiser, *Power and Restraint,* pp. xvi–xvii, 9–12, 17–20.
32. Babiarz, "The People's Nuclear Weapon," p. 426. *People's War* refers to a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political-military mobilization strategy for defeating larger or better-equipped forces during China's civil war period. For primary source background on the genesis of these ideas, see Mao Zedong, *Collected Works of Mao Zedong* [in Chinese], vol. 2 (Beijing: People's Press, 1991), pp. 439–518. See also Ralph L. Powell, "Maoist Military Doctrines," *Asian Survey* 8, no. 4 (April 1968), pp. 250–52; Morton Halperin, "Chinese Attitudes toward the Use and Control of Nuclear Weapons," in *China in Crisis,* vol. 2, *China's Policies and America's Alternatives,* ed. Tang Tsou (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 137–38; Alastair Iain Johnston, "Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics,* ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 236–43; Alice Langley Hsieh, "Communist China and Nuclear Force," in *The Dispersion of Nuclear Weapons: Strategy and Politics,* ed. R. N. Rosecrance (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 161–62; Alice Langley Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy in the Nuclear Era* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 9–14; Arthur Huck, *The Security of China: Chinese Approaches to Problems of War and Strategy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 53–61; and Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950–1953* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1995), chap. 2.
33. Between 1978 and 1980, Deng Xiaoping asserted that China faced an international environment characterized by a low likelihood of great-power conflict for years to come. This characterization presaged a domestic focus on economic development along with the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) reform from Mao's People's War model emphasizing mass-mobilized manpower to a smaller, more professional force trained to use modern equipment. For example, see the following sources: "A Strategic Shift of the Guiding Ideology for Our Country's Defense Construction" [in Chinese], *Zhongguo minbing* [Chinese militia], no. 1 (1987), esp. p. 20; Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping wen xuan,* vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Beijing: People's Press, 2007), esp. pp. 111–12 (Deng's references to the need to modernize and economically develop) and pp. 394–95 (Deng's references to military modernization); John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China's Strategic Seapower: The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 100; and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Defense Modernization in China,* SR-80-10138 (National Foreign Assessment Center, 1980).
34. This shift in emphasis was linked to broader economic reforms during this period as China began shifting state investment away from the military and toward civilian industry, while Beijing asserted that while the country sought to develop and modernize, it did not seek hegemony (Deng, *Deng Xiaoping wen xuan,* vol. 2, p. 112). As part of this transition, the PLA was downsized by one million soldiers and China's military regions were reduced from eleven to seven. Yitzhak Shichor, "Demobilization: The Dialectics of PLA Troop Reduction," *China Quarterly* 146 (June 1996), pp. 336, 340, 346; Lewis and Xue, *China's Strategic Seapower,* p. 100. For more on PLA troop reductions during the 1980s, see also John Frankenstein and Bates Gill, "Current and Future Challenges Facing Chinese Defence Industries," *China Quarterly* 146 (June 1996), p. 395; Xiaobing Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2007), pp. 246–47; and James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N. D. Yang, eds., *The People's Liberation Army as Organization: Reference Volume v1.0* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002). Further, China's military bureaucracy periodically was reorganized as civilian leadership took a greater role in policy development. See Michael D. Swaine, "The PLA and Chinese National Security Policy: Leaderships, Structures,

Processes," *China Quarterly* 146 (June 1996). Overall military spending declined for most of the decade. See Shaoguang Wang, "Estimating China's Defence Expenditure: Some Evidence from Chinese Sources," *China Quarterly* 147 (September 1996), pp. 893–94; China's manufacturing industry began demilitarizing and expanded into civilian markets as state funding decreased; Frankenstein and Gill, "Current and Future Challenges Facing Chinese Defence Industries." See also Arthur S. Ding, "China's Defence Finance: Content, Process and Administration," *China Quarterly* 146 (June 1996), pp. 428–42, and Evan A. Feigenbaum, *China's Techno-warriors: National Security and Strategic Competition from the Nuclear to the Information Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 74–75.

35. For example, see Deng's 1981 speech introducing modernization reforms for the PLA—in response to Soviet "hegemony." Deng, *Deng Xiaoping wen xuan,* vol. 2, pp. 394–95.

36. An informal term, *paramount leader* refers to the person with the greatest influence over policy. For the last thirty years (since Deng Xiaoping retired from political life), the paramount leader has occupied the roles of general secretary of the CCP, president of China, and chairman of the Central Military Commission concurrently. Teng-Chi Chang, "China's Soft Footprint in the Arena of Foreign Policy: Not 'Hiding Light' Anymore?," in *China's Footprints in Southeast Asia,* ed. Maria Serena I. Diokno, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, and Alan H. Yang (Singapore: National Univ. of Singapore Press, 2019), p. 31. The maxim Chang references has been a significant point of debate in recent Chinese foreign-policy scholarship; translators have rendered it into English in various ways, including "hiding light" and "keeping a low profile."

37. Ye Zicheng, *Inside China's Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People's Republic,* ed. and trans. Steven I. Levine and Guoli Liu (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2011), pp. 187–89.

38. During the early 1990s, partly in response to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, China assessed that any future wars would be localized, high-technology conflicts requiring advanced command and control and integrating air and missile capabilities. This assessment guided ongoing military reforms during the Jiang and Hu periods. For example, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Search for Military Power," *Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008), pp. 125–41, and Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye, eds., *The Science of Military Campaigns* [in Chinese] (Beijing: National Defense Univ. Press [Guofang Daxue Chubanshe], 2000), p. 379. Again, noninterventionist does not entail being pro-West or pro–United States; rather, it entails an emphasis on not engaging in military action against other countries. Michael Metcalf, *Imperialism with Chinese Characteristics? Reading and Re-reading China's 2006 Defense White Paper* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Press, 2011).

39. Jason G. Tower, "Belts, Roads, and Battlegrounds: Chinese Outbound Initiatives in Conflict and Post-conflict Settings," *Stimson Center,* January 2017, www.stimson.org/.

40. As Glaser and Medeiros note: "Indeed, the leadership's final decision to use the term 'peaceful development' reiterated the core goal of reassuring other nations that China is not a revisionist state that will destabilize the international system as it revitalizes itself." Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, "The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of 'Peaceful Rise,'" *China Quarterly* 190 (June 2007), p. 309. Note that debates about the "real" intent behind this rhetorical shift underscore the authors' emphasis on uncertainty.

41. Ling Wei, "Striving for Achievement in a New Era: China Debates Its Global Role," *Pacific Review* 33, nos. 3–4 (2020), pp. 413–37, esp. p. 420.

42. Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018); David Sacks, "What Xi Jinping's Major Speech Means for Taiwan," *Asia Unbound* (blog), *Council on Foreign Relations,* 6 July 2021, www.cfr.org/; Chang, "China's Soft Footprint," p. 48. See also Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Mariner Books, 2018), pp. 116–17.

43. Camilla T. N. Sørensen, "The Significance of Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' for Chinese Foreign Policy: From 'Tao Guang Yang Hui' to 'Fen Fa You Wei,'" *Journal of China and*

International Relations 3, no. 1 (2015), pp. 57, 60. For a comprehensive overview of the "China model" political economy debate, see Matt Ferchen, "Whose China Model Is It Anyway? The Contentious Search for Consensus," *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 2 (2013), pp. 390–420.

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45. U.S. Defense Dept., *The Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy: Achieving U.S. National Security Objectives in a Changing Environment* (Washington, DC: 2015), p. 17; Ben Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications and Policy Options,* CRS Report no. R44072 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015). It should be noted that despite these shifts, outcomes are not guaranteed. Moving from Opening Reform toward seeking "national rejuvenation" also could foster aggressive responses from other states, especially as China's leadership asserts national-sovereignty claims on disputed territories and overtly seeks to engage in competition against other great powers. For example, see Alex Lockie, "China Has Jamming Equipment in the South China Sea—and the US May 'Not Look Kindly on It,'" *Business Insider Australia,* 19 April 2018, www.businessinsider.com.au/, and Michael R. Gordon and Jeremy Page, "China Installed Military Jamming Equipment on Spratly Islands, U.S. Says," *Wall Street Journal,* 9 April 2018, www.wsj.com/.

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Cambodia, Western Officials Say," *Washington Post,* 6 June 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/.

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