How Size Matters: The United States, China and Asymmetry

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Most discussions of the United States and China focus on the relationship between the two. This article takes a different tack. Before addressing the differences between the United States and China, we will consider an underlying similarity of their international situations. In its relationships with most other Asian countries, China is the larger player in terms of demography, economy and security. Similarly, the United States is the larger partner in most of its global relationships and in all of its European and American relationships. Are there then similarities in the basic situation of foreign policy and posture between United States as a global power and China as a regional one? If it makes a difference to be big, then the United States and China have something in common that is worth exploring.

Of course, the question of whether size matters is not an innocent one. From the Athenian response to the Melians during Peloponnesian wars\(^1\) to the neo-realists, Western theorists have generally assumed that the more powerful dominate and the less powerful comply. Asymmetry is viewed essentially as a cat-and-mouse relationship in which marginal advantage allows the stronger to dictate its terms, unless the weaker side can offset its disadvantage by balancing its power through alliances. If the weaker power is growing faster than the stronger, then anticipation of different power relations in the future might change the cat-and-mouse relationship into a relationship between older and younger cats.\(^2\) From the realist perspective, the basic question of international relations is who will dominate whom. Size, in its most general sense, gives the answer.

By contrast, other theorists from the time of Grotius to present-day globalization have argued that interdependence constrains the arbitrariness of the powerful.\(^3\) If all states are constrained by their self-interests to avoid the
opportunity costs implicit in exclusive and unilateral behavior, then size does not matter. Not only are all states regardless of size constrained by interdependence, but they are also constrained internally by the logic of the global marketplace. A country can choose to ‘go it alone’ like contemporary Myanmar, but it is in effect choosing to forego the opportunities of international trade and thus is weakening itself. Jacob Burckhardt writing in the nineteenth century noted such dilemmas even in ancient states, but at present and for the foreseeable future globalization has made interdependence infinitely more intimate. Economic interdependence is increasingly reinforced by the ease of communications and the emergence of global problems such as the environment and nuclear proliferation. Now one country’s sports utility vehicles can submerge another country’s ports, but only at the risk of submerging its own as well. From this perspective, then, the shared international context is the ultimate reality, and size is merely a question of packaging.

These two perspectives, realism and interdependence, are admirably summed up and applied to China by Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis. They argue that, until China achieves economic parity with the United States, there is no strategic difference between the perspectives. A realistic China would subordinate military growth to modernization until the economy could support a credible military challenge; likewise, an interdependent China would make economic growth its top priority. The perspectives diverge when China would reach economic parity with the United States, which the authors estimate would be no earlier than 2015–20. At this point realism would predict a shift of priorities from economics to military and China would become assertive vis-à-vis the US, while the interdependence perspective would predict that China would stick with the policies that had brought it such success and would remain cooperative in the international arena. Swaine and Tellis argue against the interdependence perspective and fully expect China to shift to an assertive grand strategic policy when the opportunity presents itself. Despite the rather dire prediction (from an American point of view, at any rate), Swaine and Tellis reject the options of preemptive containment and preemptive appeasement in favor of engagement. Clearly, the interdependence perspective would also recommend engagement. Thus, the two contradictory perspectives have the same view of the current era of China’s international presence, which should run at least 35 or 40 years from 1980 to 2015–20, and in the meantime they also make the same general policy recommendation to the reigning global superpower.

The practical expectations and the theoretical paradigm of this essay are fundamentally different from both realism and interdependence. Practically
speaking, I expect that by the time the United States and China might reach economic parity, the international standing of each and their relations with one another will have already been irrevocably shaped by the competence or incompetence of their leadership in their respective realms, and by the actual course of their interaction with one another. Neither integration nor confrontation can be assumed. If China alienates Asia, or if the United States alienates the world, the grand face-off hypothesized by Swaine and Tellis would happen under quite different terms than they imagine, if at all. If on the other hand the United States and China continue their current, relatively successful management of their existing asymmetric relationships, there is no reason to assume that China would trade a successful and relatively low-risk policy of cooperation for the high-risk glory of being king of the hill. The current era is far from being diplomatic dead space waiting for the accumulation of economic capacity. It poses profound challenges to both the United States and China that are generically similar, because the task for both lies in the proper management of asymmetric relations.

The theoretical problem is **how** size matters rather than whether or not size matters. Both the United States and China are now on the large-country side of numerous asymmetric relations. Contrary to the assumptions of the realists, it is normally either impossible or imprudent for the stronger side to subjugate the weaker. The failed attempts by France, the United States and China over the past half-century to subjugate Vietnam amount to controlled experimental proof of this thesis. Of course normally it is even less possible or prudent for the weaker to attempt to subjugate the stronger. David and Goliath stories aside, this statement may appear to be a tautology. However, even when a much smaller country is stronger militarily and is victorious, a disparity in population or economy can create insuperable problems of control and occupation. An example would be Japan’s occupation of China during World War II. Therefore asymmetric relationships are normally characterized not only by a disparity of resources, but also by mutual, if sometimes implicit, acknowledgment of autonomy. They are negotiated relationships, not simply ones of demand and evasion.

However, the disparity in asymmetric relationships does make a difference. The larger side has less risk and less opportunity in the relationship. The smaller side has more at stake, and therefore it can be expected to be more attentive. More attention does not necessarily mean a better understanding, because the smaller side tends to exaggerate its risks and opportunities, while the larger side underplays them. Dependence is a
quite different relationship from interdependence, and the insensitivity of the larger power can amplify the paranoia of the smaller and lead to conflict.

This study introduces a new paradigm for understanding asymmetric relations and applies it to the United States and China. We begin on fairly level ground with a rough empirical exploration of types and degrees of asymmetry in China’s relations with Asia and in the global relations of the United States. Three dimensions of asymmetry are considered: scale (represented by population), economic capacity (represented by Gross National Product), and military capacity (represented by military expenditures). The data show that China’s relationship to the rest of Asia is complex but in general asymmetric. The US relationship to the rest of the world is more completely asymmetric. Therefore if asymmetric relations do require special attention both China in its regional context and the United States in its global context could provide good cases for analysis.

The second section sketches a general theory of asymmetric relations. The basic point is that the disparity that defines asymmetric relations implies that the relationship of the larger to the smaller will be quite different from the relationship of the smaller to the larger. The difference in capacity creates a difference in attention and perspective, and it can lead to structural misperceptions that reinforce one another. While there are mechanisms for controlling asymmetric misperceptions, each side has different expectations even in a stable relationship. The larger side expects deference from the smaller, while the smaller expects acknowledgment of autonomy from the larger. Proper handling of asymmetric relations is especially important in multilateral situations, because a central power may not be larger than all the regional partners as a whole. In such cases, the asymmetry of the central power’s relationship to each state in a region is not true of its relationship to a potential combination of states. Hence sustainable regional or global leadership requires the maintenance of a community of interest and the avoidance of alienating other players.

The third section applies asymmetric analysis to China’s regional relations and to US global relations, concluding with a discussion of relations between the United States and China. Although China’s regional relationships are complicated by the immediate presence of Japan, India and Russia and the looming global presence of the United States, its adjustment to leadership in Asia is eased by its heritage of imperial China, its identification with the Third World, and the non-predatory character of its current economic success. As the world’s sole superpower the United States is in a less complicated position globally than China is in regionally, and its
role is eased by the magnitude of its asymmetric advantages, the experience of Cold War leadership, and its universal values. On the other hand, these advantages increase the risk of alienating other countries if the United States is not sensitive to the perspectives and concerns of the less powerful.

The fourth section concludes by analyzing US-China relations in terms of asymmetry. Clearly the different postures of each country during incidents such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade can be related to the insensitivity typical of stronger powers and the paranoia typical of weaker ones. An issue such as Taiwan is further complicated by Taiwan’s insecurity vis-à-vis China, which encourages it to pursue a balancing stratagem of enmeshing the United States in its defense.

If we look beyond the bilateral relationship of the United States and China and the problem of Taiwan, recent experience has demonstrated that the next 15–20 years will be marked not only by incremental growth, but also by unforeseeable crises and problems that will have multilateral consequences. In the long term the rest of the world – and especially Asia – will not be passive observers of the US-China relationship. If they are alienated by China’s regional leadership and reassured by the American global leadership, China will never reach effective parity with the US because the rest of the world will also stand against it. If other states are reassured by China’s regional leadership but alienated by American global leadership, then China might be the first among equals of America’s potential enemies, but it would not stand alone, and the parity point will depend as much on alignment of forces around a precipitating crisis as it would on China’s economic capacity. If China and the United States both sustain their current patterns of credible leadership, then the parity point anticipated by Swaine and Tellis might some day be reached, but by then the track record of at least 35 years of competent diplomatic leadership on both sides might suggest alternatives to hegemonic confrontation. In contrast to realism and interdependence, attention to the management of asymmetric relations suggests that the diplomacy of the current era will be decisive regarding future options.

THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA AND THEIR NEIGHBORS

While there is no doubt that both the United States and China are the larger partners in most of their significant relationships, there are major differences in the parameters of their international situations. China has a total land border of 22,143 km with 14 neighbors, and close sea neighbors as well. The United States has land borders of 12,248 km with two
neighbors, and is also the major economic and political power in a global neighborhood.

The purpose here is to sketch briefly and to discuss the dimensions and magnitude of disparity between China and its Asian neighbors and between the United States and its regional and global partners. The three dimensions addressed are demographic scale, economic capacity and military capacity. For the sake of simplicity each of these are reduced to a single indicator. Population is an obvious indicator of demographic scale, but it should be remembered that scale also involves the inertial magnitude of a state. Economic capacity is indicated by gross national product (GNP), though there are certainly other factors, such as degree of self-sufficiency in natural resources, that should be factored in to a more complete comparison of economies. Military capacity is perhaps the most difficult dimension to measure since in order to be comprehensive it should involve questions of equipment and mobilizational capacity. Moreover, military expenditure, our indicator for military capacity, is difficult to estimate in consistent, comparable terms. World Bank’s estimates are used here, supplemented where necessary by those of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in the hope that estimate biases will at least run in the same direction. The analysis here concentrates on existing disparities rather than on growth rates and anticipated disparities for two reasons. First, forecasting adds another order of magnitude to the uncertainties of comparison. Second, the focus of this contribution is not future asymmetries, but current ones.

In the three basic categories of population, economy, and military there are significant differences in the relative situations of the United States and China. Both are major world figures in at least one category. China is not only more populous than its neighbors, but also comprises 21 per cent of the world’s population (the US is 5 per cent). Similarly, the US GNP comprises 27 per cent of the world total (China is 3 per cent), and its military budget in 1999 was 36 per cent of the world total (China is 3 per cent). Because population does not have the international ‘reach’ of economic and military capacity, China is only a statistical global presence, while the United States is the central figure in the two more interactive categories. Nevertheless, population creates an inertial mass of societal scale that affects regional relations. The closer the neighbor, the more a difference in demographic scale matters.

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate generic similarities and important differences between the United States and China as large countries. The disparity between the United States and its continental neighbors is great in every category, and even if we include the major hemispheric neighbors the
population disparity remains clear and the economic and military disparities are overwhelming. If we move to the ‘global neighborhood’, which is appropriate given the economic and military relations of the United States, the US retains a great disparity in economic capacity and close to an overwhelming disparity in military budget. Since the disparity in military budgets is probably a conservative measure of difference in military capacity, it is obvious that the world’s only superpower is indeed in a league by itself in this category. Only in population, and only if one includes China or India in the global comparison, is the United States smaller.

China’s situation vis-à-vis its neighbors is more complex than that of the US. On the one hand, China certainly has a large population. Except in comparison to India there is an overwhelming demographic disparity. In GNP China enjoys in general a less but still great disparity. The one regional exception is Japan, but it is an exception of such magnitude that it turns the tables. China’s GNP is only 22 per cent of Japan’s, so the current magnitude of China’s economy has the same ratio to Japan as China’s population does to the rest of the world.
Looking at military expenditures the situation becomes yet more interesting. Japan spends a smaller percentage of its GNP on the military, and this lowers its disparity in military budget to roughly twice that of China’s. However, most of China’s neighbors spend a higher percentage of their GNP than China on military, so Russia’s military budget is almost double that of China, while India, Taiwan and South Korea are each in the 50 per cent range. Although that remains a significant disparity, it is interesting to consider that China’s disparity in military budget vis-à-vis Taiwan is roughly comparable to Japan’s military advantage vis-à-vis China.¹¹

By these three simple measures, then, China’s regional neighborhood is considerably more complicated than even the global neighborhood of the United States. In global terms, China has the seventh-largest GNP and thus is a significant but by no means a leading player. Militarily China’s budget puts it in a fourth-tier group at 3 per cent of the world’s military expenditures, along with Italy and Russia, and significantly behind the second tier of Japan and France (7 per cent each), and the third tier of the

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United Kingdom (5 per cent) and Germany (4 per cent). China’s military budget is only 7 per cent of that of the world’s only superpower.

China’s global shortfalls in economic and military capacity are more impressive than its regional advantages, and therefore China can perhaps best be described as a regional presence on the way to becoming a regional power. Given China’s relative prospects for economic growth one can expect that global economic and military gaps will be lessened, but they will not be overcome in the foreseeable future. One can also anticipate that China’s current regional advantages will increase, though because of the linkage between its economy and the region its growth will be less remarkable relative to the region than to the developed world in general.

The general implication is that the management of regional relations will be far more important and problematic for China than the comparable regional questions are for the United States. China is in no position to declare or enforce a Monroe Doctrine. China has quite significant local partners in every quadrant of its regional relations, the most obvious being Japan, Russia and India, and in turn these partners have relations with others beyond. Where it does have a preponderance of economic and military weight in bilateral relations, the complexities of third-party and multilateral relations act as countervailing considerations. The case of Taiwan is only the most obvious example, since it directly involves the United States. Therefore regional foreign policy strategy for China based on domination rather than on perceived mutual interest would be self-isolating and self-defeating.

The American situation seems quite different. Individually and collectively the rest of the hemisphere is no match, and the United States continues to intervene unilaterally in the affairs of neighbors. The 1989 invasion of Panama in order to capture General Noriega is a post-Cold War example. Unlike interventions elsewhere in the world, the question of group support – NATO or the UN, for example – does not arise. Even at the global level, the United States is much more clearly the big power than is the case for China in Asia.

Paradoxically, the American preponderance does not make US foreign relations less problematic. Rather, the disparity creates a set of relationships in which the US position is profoundly different from that of its partners. America’s global and hemispheric partners are acutely aware of both the opportunities and the risks presented by the United States. Their attention to the United States does not necessarily lead to compliance, nor does it necessarily yield an accurate understanding of American policy. Cuba has withstood the unrelenting hostility of the United States for more than 40
years. To be sure, its fate is as much a teacher by negative example as it is proof that resistance is possible, but in fact Castro has demonstrated that opposition to domination by the United States can create domestically a sense of threatened community and national cohesion. The case of Cuba – and of Vietnam, Iraq, Iran and many others – demonstrate that the foreign policy challenge that the United States faces in the post-Cold War era is not how to dominate asymmetric relations, but how to negotiate them.

By the same token, though smaller in scale, the challenge that China faces with most of Asia is how to provide opportunities to less powerful neighbors and allay their fears. The tension over the Spratly Islands is symbolic of a sense of insecurity that China’s growing economic and military presence creates in its smaller neighbors. As the next section explains, the difficult problem of asymmetric relations for the larger side – whether the United States in its global role or China in its regional role – is how to sustain the relations by reinforcing mutual interests and diminishing the partners’ sense of vulnerability.

**HOW SIZE MATTERS**

In order to analyze the effect of asymmetry on the international relations of the United States and China we must first sketch a general theory of asymmetry that can be applied to these cases. Although the sketch will be presented with the cases in mind, its claim to plausibility rests on its generality and on its logic. What we eventually apply to relations between China and Vietnam or between the United States and Mexico, for example, should apply in turn to relations between Vietnam and Cambodia and between Mexico and Guatemala. Therefore, at the risk of becoming uncomfortably abstract for the moment, this section will present the paradigm of asymmetric analysis while the next applies the paradigm to the United States and China.

We begin with an analysis of bilateral asymmetry, since the relationship between two states is the basic dyad from which more complex situations are built. Disparity in capacities leads to different patterns of attention in the relationship. In turn, the fact that the relationship look different depending on whether one is at the large or the small end leads to a characteristic structural pathology of misperception in which the insensitivity of the larger and the paranoia of the smaller can amplify one another. Fortunately mechanisms exist that control structural misperceptions, but even in stable relationships there are differences in the basic expectations of each side. Having sketched dyadic relations, the
section moves on to multilateral situations of asymmetry. Although multilateral situations are constructed from dyadic relations, the relationship of the central power to the whole is different from its relation to each part. In the best of worlds, an order is structured by the central power that each participant feels is beneficial or at least less risky than imagined alternatives. In the worst of worlds, each participant feels that its vital interests are threatened by the erratic and self-serving behavior of the central power, and thus they may see no alternative to fighting desperate battles or to combining forces against the center.

It may appear that asymmetry is a solution rather than a problem in international relations. The more imbalanced the relationship, the more natural it might seem that the stronger side dominates. In fact, however, disparity is not the same as vulnerability. It is rarely the case that the stronger side is free to exercise its full power against the weaker, and even in such struggles the weaker side’s more urgent motivation of survival often eventually prevails against attempted domination. But even in a situation of coexistence, strong and weak are in profoundly different positions in the relationship.

Asymmetry is defined by disparity. An asymmetric relationship is one in which the disparity is great enough so that it shapes the structure of the relationship. Of course, all of the terms of this definition are problematic: what is ‘disparity’, what is ‘great’, what is ‘enough?’ However, for the purposes of clarifying the analytical model we will avoid these sticky empirical questions for the moment, returning to them when we apply the model to the United States and China. And it should be noted that there are many cases that are so obviously asymmetric that these empirical boundary questions do not arise. For example, in the US-Canada relationship or the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, one does not have to pick apart the dimensions of asymmetry, stipulate a metric, and define a threshold in order to perceive an asymmetric structure.

Disparity implies that the larger side (A) has less to gain or lose in the relationship than does the smaller side (B). Not only does B occupy a smaller share of A’s international horizon, but A’s greater domestic capacity tends to raise the general salience of domestic concerns relative to international concerns. In normal times, A’s attention to B will tend to be sporadic and partial, because the leadership of A will have more important matters to attend to. A’s misperceptions of B are likely to be errors of inattention. A is likely to respond slowly to moves by B, or to respond with blunt instruments that it intends to be limited sanctions but are perceived by B as mortal threats.
By contrast, the opportunities present in the relationship are more important and more vivid to B, because they represent a larger percentage of B’s international outlook and of its total activities. Risks are even more vivid to B than opportunities. Regardless of A’s intentions, disparity creates a situation in which B is exposed to A’s preponderance, whether it be demographic, economic or military. From A’s point of view, B will seem hypersensitive to encroachments and to threatening behavior. From B’s point of view, any incident not only raises the question of ‘why did this happen?’ but also ‘where will it end?’ B’s errors are those of over-attention. It assumes that A is as interested in the relationship as it is.

Unfortunately, the errors of inattention by the larger side and over-attention by the smaller side reinforce one another in crisis situations. From B’s side, mounting paranoia precludes attempts to mollify A, and as the crisis mounts those in the leadership who are perceived as friendly to A are sidelined. From A’s side, the failure of a minor sanction leads easily to a more severe one, and as the leadership unwillingly turns its attention to ‘the B problem’ they do not want to hear from their experts about B and its troubles, but about how to prevail in punishing B. A typical train of events might be the following. Sanctions that A intends as a limited gesture of displeasure are interpreted by B as a mortal threat. B then allies with another large power, an action that A interprets as an offensive alliance. The downward spiral of the relationship proves the hawks on both sides correct, and a conflict that was unnecessary becomes inevitable.

A good example of the negative complementarity of misperceptions is the conflict between China and Vietnam in the 1970s. Because both sides had illusions of victory and there was no history of a ‘normal’ bilateral relationship, Vietnam flouted China’s expectations of gratitude and deference and China responded with sanctions. Vietnam felt threatened and reluctantly agreed to an alliance with the Soviet Union, which from China’s perspective made Vietnam a threat. China saw even the invasion of Vietnam in February 1979 as teaching Vietnam a ‘lesson’, although it is hardly surprising that Vietnam saw the destruction of its northern five provinces as a mortal threat. On the more positive side, the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations since 1991 is firmly founded on the mutual experience of a costly and unproductive hostility. Many frictions remain in the relationship, but both sides strive to maintain stability and to contain disagreements.

The major tasks in managing asymmetric relations are those of preventing and containing vicious circles of misperception. Prevention is accomplished by neutralizing issue areas, whether through inclusive...
rhetoric or through routinization. If one side’s public posture on an issue is perceived to exclude the interests of the other side, then it is likely to become politically charged and to generate a counter-posture. Inclusive rhetoric on an issue, especially inclusive rhetoric that both sides officially endorse, can create a sheltered space in the relationship where cooperation rather than conflict is expected. Likewise, the routinization of an issue area can convert an arena of potentially incendiary high politics into one of low politics. Border commissions are an example. Routinization does not require that a problem be solved by the experts, but that frictions in an issue area be handled first in a non-confrontational arena in which continuity with the relevant policy history will be a prime desideratum. Together, inclusive rhetoric and issue routinization permit the creation and expansion of a neutralized core in an asymmetric relationship. A neutral core stabilizes the relationship not only by removing fuel from the fire, but also by creating an inertial interest in a smoothly running relationship that can buffer the nervousness of B and the inattention of A.

Not all issues can be neutralized, and those issues that are neutralized at one time might pick up and politicized under different circumstances. If a confrontation cannot be prevented, what measures can contain the cycle of misperceptions? If the fire is started, what can control the flames? The most basic constraint on misperception is the history of the relationship, because that sets the common sense expectations in interpreting the present. Of course, examples from distant history can also be used to demonstrate the aggressiveness or perfidy of the other side, but the existing inertia of the relationship should create horizons of plausibility that make extreme interpretations less likely. Sometimes the continuity of expectations is so disrupted that anything seems possible, and this is a particularly dangerous time for asymmetric relations. Recent examples of novel contexts would include the Balkans in the 1990s and Indochina in the 1970s. In these cases instead of providing a well-trodden path of common sense expectations, history fired the ambitions and fears of participants.

States can strengthen expectations of mutual benefit by using diplomatic ritual. The exchange of official visits and common pronouncements of mutual respect contribute to a bilateral political atmosphere in which alarmist interpretations of the other’s behavior appear less plausible. The most important aspect of visits of state is not the specific problems solved and contracts won through summit negotiation – the ‘deliverables’ – but the general affirmation of the importance and stability of the relationship. For example, the exchange of visits between Jiang Zemin and Bill Clinton in 1997–98 was not very productive in terms of ‘deliverables’, but it did move
the relationship beyond the situation in which a minor event like the arrest of Harry Wu could appear to endanger the whole relationship. The function of diplomatic ritual should also be distinguished from the opportunity visits provide for personal friendship among individual leaders. The temporary advantage of a personal friendship among leaders is offset on the one hand by the risk of them not liking each other and on the other by the inevitable change of personnel. Precisely because it does not stress concrete accomplishments or personal friendships, diplomatic ritual confirms the stabilizing effect of historical continuity by involving both leaderships in an explicit, though general, commitment to stability.

It might appear that security would be a one-sided question in an asymmetric relationship. But A does have security concerns relative to B. What A needs from B is deference, that is, the implicit commitment by that it will act in awareness and acceptance of the bilateral power disparity. Deference implies that B will not endanger A’s security by foolhardy actions or by alliances hostile to A. Perhaps the most elaborate manifestations of deference were the tribute missions of the Chinese empire, but in modern times deference is usually more evident in the restraint shown by smaller countries in their pursuit of activities that they know would be sensitive to their larger partners. Deference does not require submission. A magnificent example of armed deference was the Vietnamese gesture after defeating the Ming occupation army of sending the Chinese generals and 100,000 men unharmed back to Beijing in 1427. Had the Vietnamese celebrated their triumph by slaughtering the army that had occupied their territory for 20 years, the Chinese would certainly have launched reprisals. The Vietnamese gesture showed China that it had nothing to fear from Vietnam, but also nothing to gain by further invasions.

For the weaker side, bilateral security is of course a larger concern, and it requires that A clearly acknowledge the boundaries and autonomy of B. Since A does not need protection from B, it might look on territorial and economic boundaries as irrational limits. But to the extent that A pushes against B’s space, the disparity of capacity becomes a threat to B. Therefore B can be expected to be hypersensitive to gestures by A that imply a subversion of the barriers between them, and conversely it will appreciate gestures that acknowledge sovereign autonomy.

The relationship between A’s expectation of deference and B’s expectation of acknowledgment is delicate, but not in itself contradictory. It is certainly possible for B to be autonomous and yet act in awareness of its asymmetry with A, and it is possible for A to acknowledge and abide by limits in its influence on B and still expect that it will be treated with all
due respect. Most asymmetric relationships manage to join the two most of the time. However, the more emphatically A demands deference, the more contradictory deference and autonomy appear to B. Conversely, the more assertive B is concerning autonomy, the more it appears to A that B might become dangerous. At the extreme end, an attempt by A to force deference by military means is a denial of autonomy, and a decision by B to do whatever it takes to preserve autonomy from A is likely to deny deference.

If we look beyond individual asymmetric relationships to clusters of relations, to what extent can we speak of asymmetric systems? It should be noted first that bilateral relations are not derivative from systems. Each state looks out over its own walls. This point requires emphasis because large, distant states are tempted to view smaller ones only in terms of their alliances or their regional clusters. That being said, it is true that the world beyond the walls of the individual state is a matrix of interacting states rather than a collection of unrelated bilateral relationships. In terms of asymmetries, the matrix that any state confronts is not rigid, but it is also not easily changed. Except for the occasional Genghis Khan, one’s neighbors are not optional. And it is rare for states to leap ahead suddenly in their capacities, though the experience of the last 50 years is proof that situations can be transformed over time. From the vantage point of any particular state at any particular time, therefore, there is an international order in which it confronts an array of familiar actors of different potencies and at different distances. The largest power plays a particularly important and central role in the matrix, but each state from its particular location confronts its own situation.

The strongest state in a region – and a fortiori a world superpower – confronts a situation in which each state in its system or subsystem will be especially attentive to its behavior. It is in a leadership position not because it can simply command compliance within the system, but because all within the system, friends, foes and in between, will be watching closely and will behave in response to a central initiative. Not only will the bilateral relations of the strongest with each state be among the most important relations for each partner, but even its actions addressed to other states will be scrutinized by all the rest for its implications. Clearly all sides have an interest in controlling their own misperceptions, but it is the responsibility of the stronger power to take the lead in providing structure to new relationships. Especially in multilateral situations, the fact that the strongest power occupies center stage makes it very difficult for others to take the lead. Perhaps in some cases of routinizing issue areas other states could take
the initiative, but in diplomatic ritual and inclusive diplomacy the strongest power must play the major role. However, being at center stage means that the strongest state does not have a dominant external referent for its own foreign policy, so its external relations are likely to be driven by domestic considerations.

Credibility becomes a primary value for the effectiveness of the strongest state. In a multilateral asymmetric situation the difference between disparity of capacity and actual vulnerability is even greater than in a bilateral relationship. Imagine a situation in which nine equally weaker states are in a system in which the strongest is three times the capacity of any of them. Each of them individually would be in a relation of great disparity with the central power, but collectively the smaller states would exceed the strongest by the same ratio. Moreover, if the strongest state began to commit its capacity in two or three relations, it would greatly change the ratio of its deployable resources to the remaining states. To rephrase Machiavelli’s famous saying that the appearance of virtue is more important than virtue itself, we could say that the appearance of power is more important than power itself. On the other hand, if the strongest power is not responsive to challenges then its will to deploy its capacity might be doubted. The credibility dilemma, then, is that both capacity and responsiveness must be believable. The acme of diplomatic skill for the strongest power is to limit the situations in which its will to commit might be tested.

A final characteristic of an asymmetric system is the degree to which compliance is the result of a community of interests rather than the result of prudence in the face of a preponderance of power. To the extent that a given matrix of international relations stabilizes expectations and allows the pursuit of ones own ends, then the order serves the interests of the weaker state even if the order is originated and shaped by the strongest. It might seem that the strongest would be indifferent to the motive for compliance, but in fact a community of interests would be more favorable for cooperation and reduce the likelihood of defection. The strongest power will certainly be tempted to pursue exclusive rather than inclusive aims and to attempt to maximize its power advantages in individual transactions. Not to drive a hard bargain from a position of strength means to forego the most favorable result. But if the central state acts only for its own interests then weaker states will feel entrapped and vulnerable, and while they might comply under duress, they will scheme to limit their exposure to domination.

In sum, the position of the strongest power in a region may be an enviable one, but it is not easy to sustain. As a state becomes habituated to
center stage it may tend to project its domestic politics as foreign policy, which would erode international confidence in the quality of its leadership. The credibility of capacity must be preserved without lessening it through unnecessary engagements. A community of interests must be sustained by providing leadership that includes common goals and that in bilateral transactions is sensitive to the concerns of weaker states. These challenges are especially difficult because they are not embodied in a powerful and threatening opponent, but rather are the admonishments of prudence in a unipolar situation. It is easier for a strong state to deal with an alien evil empire than to run its own empire well. A strong state can make up in brawn what it lacks in brain, but by doing so it is lessening its advantage of disparity, decreasing the potential for cooperation, and increasing the possibility of defection and collusion.

BEING BIG AFTER THE COLD WAR

Both the United States and China are in novel asymmetric situations in post-Cold War world. As the previous analysis suggests, novelty is a dangerous situation in asymmetric relationships because the routines and habits that controlled misperceptions in the past become out of date. It is easy for the strong to be unaware of the threat to the weak posed by their actions, and for the weak to lose a sense of proportion in judging their actual vulnerability. The negative complementarity of such misperceptions is difficult to control in a new context.

Rather than narrate China’s Asian diplomacy and American world diplomacy, this section will concentrate on some broad features of each that are especially relevant to asymmetric leadership.

China

In general, China is well positioned to handle a leadership role in Asia gracefully. First, the traditional Chinese empire was arguably the world’s most successful case of sustained unipolar leadership. Its patriarchal structure was avowedly hierarchical and placed China at the center, but its relations with other states were based more on legitimation and mediation rather than on conquest. China considered itself culturally and morally superior, but the principles of rule were construed as universal human principles rather than as national or racial prerogative. Traditional China was content to receive deference from kings rather than to rule directly over alien peoples. Commercial relations were based on mutual advantage, and government involvement in trade was more concerned with controlling
domestic disruption by restricting channels and levels of trade rather than forcing China’s advantage in transactions.

Second, from the Opium War in 1840 until China ‘stood up’ in 1949, China had its own traumatic experience of being a weak state at the mercy of the strong. Two strands of foreign policy resulted from this experience. The first was revolutionary activism, which strengthened its relations with liberation movements but by the same token threatened non-communist governments. The second is best symbolized by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. These principles were first proposed in 1954 in joint statements with Zhou Enlai and Nehru in New Delhi and then with U Nu in Burma shortly thereafter. They were incorporated into the declaration of the First Afro-Asian Conference (the Bandung Conference) in 1955. After taking a back seat to revolution in the 1960s and (anti-Soviet) anti-hegemonism in the 1970s, they were incorporated into the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China in 1982. These principles provide an excellent ideological underpinning for inclusive rhetoric, and along with other policy principles (such as the unilateral declaration of no first use of nuclear weapons) they show a fraternity with the Third World and sensitivity to their concerns.

Third, China’s current era of reform has combined rapid economic progress with major improvements in its relations with neighbors. In 1980 relations were tense on most of China’s borders and it did not have economic relations with South Korea or Taiwan. Twenty years later, the Spratly Islands are the most significant remaining sovereignty dispute and open economic relations are well established. Although China certainly raises concerns among its neighbors as a competitor in trade, aid and foreign investment, these concerns are balanced by opportunities that it presents for trade and investment. In any case, it is clear that China’s economic growth has not been based on the domination of its neighbors or of colonies, in contrast to both Western and Japanese imperialism.

China’s behavior during the Asian financial crisis is an example of China’s regional responsibility at its best. China’s decision not to devalue its currency was widely viewed as an important measure in preventing a currency devaluation war in Asia. In contrast to the US and Japan, who were seen as more self-interested in their reactions, China’s currency peg and its assistance to the Hong Kong currency peg were seen as actions that demonstrated a regional consciousness and an ability to take and hold strategic policies despite short-term losses.22
Despite such gestures, it is hardly surprising that China’s neighbors are concerned about China’s rapid growth. As China’s economic and military capacity expand to fill its demographic scale, other states in the region are looking at a disparity of capacity that tends to put the initiative in the relationship in China’s hands. Even if China’s national aims do not involve an encroachment on other regional interests, China’s interests are different from its partners. A good example of different sensitivities was an aborted Chinese proposal in 1994 to build and staff a major construction site in Cambodia. From the Chinese perspective the proposal was part of an active aid and investment program in Cambodia. From the perspective of some Cambodians, however, it amounted to creating a Chinese city in their country, and reminded them of how attractive their land might be to immigrants. Even in relationships that are apparently close and friendly, for instance, current relations with Myanmar, the bilateral disparity leads to underlying anxieties. Burmese reservations are indicated by the joke that if all Chinese urinated at the same time Burma would be flooded.

The Spratly Islands are the most prominent point of controversy between China and Southeast Asia. Not only do they involve China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Brunei in a sovereignty dispute, but they also raise more general concerns about China’s relationship to Southeast Asia and about China’s behavior in situations of major disagreement. Claims of sovereignty are by their nature contradictory, and island claims are more difficult to compromise than land borders. At present all states are working to maximize their specific holdings and this has led to minor confrontations. Since the islands are extremely small and inhospitable and there is wide variation in estimates of mineral resources, it is unlikely that the controversy would become serious. Nevertheless, the persisting conflict brings the image of China’s military might deep into Southeast Asia, providing a cause for concern in the region and for encouraging a continued American presence in the region.

China exists in a complex ecology of foreign relations, and it is less successful in relations with Japan and the United States than it has been with smaller powers. Relations with Russia are the exception that prove the rule, in part because of Russia’s rapid decline and a mutual interest in stabilizing Central Asia, and in part because the primary problem for both countries is the United States. To quote from the most recent Joint Communiqué:

China and Russia support forces of peace, stability, development and co-operation in the international arena, while defying hegemonism, power politics and group politics, and oppose attempts to amend the
basic principles of international law, to threaten others by force or to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs.24

Meanwhile the Central Asian cooperation of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that began in Shanghai in 1996 with discussions of border relations has grown into annual meetings of presidents and foreign ministers and has expanded beyond issues of border security to include economics and the environment.25

While the US presence simplifies China’s relations with Russia by giving both countries a common problem, China’s relations with Japan are complicated by the US-Japan alliance. In any case, however, Sino-Japanese relations would be ambiguous. China and Japan are in a situation of countervailing asymmetries. China is strong in demographics and growth rate; Japan is far greater in economic capacity. Of course, Japan compensates for the economic disparity by being the largest contributor of official development assistance (ODA) to China.26 The economic structures are quite different as well. The Japanese economy is radically dependent on external resources and markets, while the Chinese economy is one of the most self-sufficient in the world. The military situation is mixed because Japan’s budgetary and naval superiority is at least made more problematic by China’s nuclear arsenal. The Japanese history of militarism until 1945 and yet pacifism for the past 55 years contrasts with China’s century of victimization followed by 30 years of ideological aggressiveness.

These countervailing asymmetries mean that each side is sensitive to different aspects of the relationship and correspondingly less sensitive to issues that the other side is most aware of. On the other hand, each looms large in the regional view of the other, and it is unlikely that either side would sacrifice the entire relationship to a partial misunderstanding. There is no bottom line to the relationship. The extremes of either hostility or intimate friendship are the least likely resting points on the spectrum of general possibilities.

China’s relation with Taiwan is perhaps the best example of asymmetry. China’s One China policy can easily be seen as a demand for deference, while Taiwan’s reluctance can be construed as a suspicion that a meaningful acknowledgement of autonomy requires recognition of separate sovereignty. Moreover, Beijing’s treatment of Taiwan as a domestic issue excites Taiwan’s fears, and Taiwan’s pragmatic diplomacy affronts China’s dignity. The 1996 confrontation over Lee Tenghui’s visit to Cornell University and the ensuing saber rattling in the Taiwan Strait is
the best of many possible illustrations of the asymmetric character of the standoff.

China should be credited with a masterstroke, however. The change in China’s Taiwan policy from ‘liberation’ to ‘peaceful reunification’ in 1979 had two profound effects on the relationship. First, the unilateral opening to Taiwan attracted Taiwanese business and undermined governmental resistance. Secondly, while the idea of ‘liberation’ denied any autonomy to Taiwan and defined the relationship as a mortal struggle, the policy of ‘peaceful reunification’ implied acknowledgment of the existing realities and a process of convergence based on inducement rather than on force. While ‘peaceful reunification’ has not eliminated the possibility of hostility, it has created a possibility for peaceful convergence that otherwise would not have existed.

In general, then, China’s diplomacy has dealt rather well so far with a complicated regional environment. Of course, it is possible that China will become arrogant as its power increases and it becomes accustomed to regional prominence. It is also possible that future confrontations with Taiwan, Japan or the United States could force China’s regional relations into rigid alignments, derail its economic development, or worse. But while asymmetry makes these scenarios possible, it does not make them inevitable.

United States

The United States is in less familiar territory as the world’s only superpower than China is as a (returning) regional power. It is very familiar with world leadership in the bipolar situation of the Cold War, and it has been the world’s largest economic and military power for even longer, but the US has never in its history faced the task of unipolar world leadership. It does, of course, bring some major advantages to the task, but each of these advantages has a negative side as well.

The first American advantage is the size of the disparity with its regional neighbors and with the rest of the world. In contrast to China’s position in Asia, the United States has clearly asymmetric relations with every state in its region and in the world. It is therefore foolhardy and self-isolating for other states not to be deferential. The negative side of such complete asymmetry is that it allows a large margin for error. The problem of being a ‘hyperpower’ is that it can become convenient to maximize one’s own interest and to dismiss the growing alienation of other countries as mere peripheral noise. There are an increasing number of cases – US withdrawal from the Kyoto treaty on global warming and US policies toward Cuba, for instance – where world opinion is unanimously critical of the United States.
The danger is that of alienation producing evasion and collusion in the medium and long term. Even in the short term a vicious circle of sanctions and paranoia could drive individual countries to desperate confrontations. While one might take the continued success of the US in hemispheric relations as proof that effective resistance is not possible, it should be recalled that the world is a much bigger and more complicated place, and even in military matters the American advantage could be much reduced by multiple simultaneous engagements.

The second American advantage is that of established Cold War leadership. Since the United States was already the leader of the non-communist world before 1989, post-Cold War leadership merely means the expansion of its existing domain to include former communist countries, and they are in general quite receptive and deferential. For instance, there is little need for change in the American presence in Asia or in Western Europe. The negative side of Cold War continuity is that the habit of bipolarity dies hard. Cold War leadership was an alliance against communism. It could justify harsh measures against particular states because of the threat to the alliance as a whole. In the post-Cold War world, harsh policies such as continuing sanctions against Iraq appear to be unilateral exercises of American power against weaker states, and since all other states are weaker states, world sympathies can lie with the victim. For this reason it is even more important in the post-Cold War era for sanctions to be multilateral, such as in the 1991 Gulf War and in the Balkans.

The third American advantage is the habit of conducting foreign policy according to universal principles. Since the time of Jefferson the United States has thought of itself in universal terms, and as a result it is not difficult ideologically to adjust to unipolar leadership. Although during the Cold War American foreign policy was often formed in response to Soviet actions, American ideology was always formulated in terms of such values as freedom and democracy, and these transcend their Cold War framework. These values have general support from the developed world and from elements within developing countries as well. However, to many countries the American effort to instill the values of freedom, the free market and democracy appear to be impositions of American values. Especially in Asia, the counter-concept of ‘Asian values’ has been used to highlight the greater sense of community in Asian cultures, but more importantly to object to the domination of American values. From the other side of the spectrum, many developed countries consider the United States behind the times morally in issues regarding foreign aid, the death penalty, and the environment.
In general, the American advantages over its partners create a situation in which the disparity is great, the habit of multilateral leadership is well established, and there is self-confidence in leadership direction. On the other hand, these factors contribute to a material, political and ideological distance between the United States and its partners that could result in alienation. Erratic or exclusively self-serving behavior could unsettle the exchange of deference and autonomy. Partners could become paranoiac, the United States could react with sanctions that would only increase the paranoia, and confrontations could occur. An American victory in such confrontations might be Pyrrhic to the extent that there were broad sympathies with the loser and the American preponderance were reduced by the struggle. The possible problem can become vivid if one recalls the alienation of many European states from the US involvement in Vietnam, and then transposes this situation into one where there is no overarching alliance against a common global opponent. One might adapt Nietzsche’s terms and ask if the US in the post-Cold War era might have become asymmetric, all too asymmetric.

**China Vis-à-Vis the United States**

Having discussed the situation of both the United States and China as strong powers in asymmetric situations, we can conclude with an analysis of the prospects of relations between the two. The US-China relationship is especially interesting because it is itself asymmetric but the smaller side is a regional leader in its own right. China cannot afford to ignore the US because its regional role and more generally its foreign policy as a whole are profoundly affected by its relations with the United States. On the other side, China’s demographic scale and rapid economic growth make it unusually important to American policy and especially to long-term prospects.

An optimist might conclude that the implicit interdependence would create a center of gravity for the relationship that would self-correct minor crises and keep the relationship within the bounds of normalcy. This has been the case with the relationship thus far, and 20 years of robust normalcy is strong evidence for continuation. From the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act in March 1979 to the spy plane incident of April 2001 – and undoubtedly beyond, by the time this analysis is being read – normal relations between the United States and China have been buffeted by numerous high-profile crises which appeared serious at the time and have bent but not broken the continuity of the relationship. While the relationship
has been robust, it has never appeared to either side to be unproblematic. It is therefore worthwhile to consider the asymmetry of the US-China relationship and what the effects of asymmetry might be.

The danger in an asymmetric relationship is that each side perceives and reacts to the other in a manner that in turn heightens the concerns of the other side. If the United States views China as another, smaller US, then it will project its global expectations into China’s behavior, and perceive a risk of challenge that does not in fact exist. Alarmist concerns about China fit into this category, and they are most easily explained by the need for a new Cold War enemy than by China’s capacities or behavior. There is nothing China could do to allay these fears because it is not the origin of them. To be sure, actions by China such as establishing closer relations with Russia can be interpreted as part of a grand design aimed at the United States, and it is true that common concerns about the United States play a part in Sino-Russian relations. But sufficient explanations exist for this behavior that involve defensive and hedging motives rather than grand malevolent schemes, and these are more appropriate to the situation of a smaller power.

On the other side, if China perceives the United States as China writ large it would view the United States as far more coordinated and China-oriented than it actually is. China is likely to perceive (or misperceive) an intentional pattern of containment in scattered American actions, and then extrapolate the pattern into a mortal threat. The Chinese reaction to the bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in 1999 shows the potential for paranoia. It is clear to a disengaged observer that the bombing was infinitely more likely to be an accident rather than a signal of American hostility, but the weaker side in an asymmetric relationship is not a disengaged observer. The bombing was an existential experience of the disparity of power between the United States and China and the possibility that that power could be used against China. The initial American insensitivity to China’s perspective on the bombing helped turn shock into anger, but the root of China’s reaction was the fact of its vulnerability.

While it is to the interest of both sides to maintain a friendly relationship, mutually reinforcing misperceptions may preclude that option. Although the notions of ‘engagement’ and ‘international openness’ are intended to promote mutually beneficial relations, they cannot guarantee them. If deference to the real power of the United States appears to China to compromise its autonomy, then China will be more confrontational. If China’s demands for autonomy appear to the United States to be denying American global leadership, or if China appears to be creating or organizing
a counter-force to the United States, then the United States will be more assertive. Foreseeable trends do not mitigate the possibility of serious misunderstanding. As China becomes stronger it may worry less about the US advantage, but the United States is likely to worry more about Chinese deference. If public opinion becomes more influential in Chinese foreign policy, it is likely to amplify rather than reduce Chinese sensitivity to autonomy. The concrete diplomatic challenges will remain those of making structural misperceptions less likely and minimizing crises that can occasion vicious circles of misperception.

The mechanisms discussed earlier for controlling structural misperceptions can be applied to the case of the United States and China. An excellent instance of issue neutralization is the granting in 2000 of Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) to China, replacing the annual Congressional review of Most Favored Nation (MFN) status. More generally, China’s entry into the World Trade Organization should help move many trade issues to multilateral frameworks. Another, less successful, example is the annual review of China’s human rights record at Geneva. While it is undoubtedly frustrating for the United States not to have its views prevail in a multilateral context, the UN forum provides some triangulation on issues of fundamental disagreement. Perhaps a bilateral commission could provide more satisfying results.

The importance of diplomatic ritual was recognized by the first Bush administration in sending Secretary of Commerce Barbara Franklin to Beijing and Hong Kong in December 1992. This visit broke the ban on official Cabinet-level contact with China imposed after Tiananmen. It was very important for controlling Chinese concerns about the sale of 150 F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan that had been announced in October 1992, and it provided the incoming Clinton administration with a diplomatic platform which otherwise would have been considerably more ambiguous. More prominently, President Reagan’s visit to China in 1984 and the exchange of visits between President Jiang Zemin and President Clinton were of fundamental importance in officially confirming a framework of normalcy for the relationship. Thanks in part to such efforts, the relationship now has a 22-year track record of self-stabilizing survival that makes its own contribution to the common sense and common expectation of normalcy.

While many possible triggers of misperception might be imagined (and the embassy bombing in Belgrade as well as the spy plane incident off Hainan demonstrate that occasionally the unimaginable happens), at the present time and for the foreseeable future Taiwan is the most likely vortex
for confrontation. Despite its diplomatic recognition that Taiwan is a part of China, the United States tends to perceive China’s interest in Taiwan as part of a general aggressiveness. For its part, China sees continued and increasing US involvement in Taiwan’s defense not only as unwarranted interference in internal affairs, but also as evidence of a larger American containment policy. Meanwhile, to the extent that Taiwan is itself paranoiac concerning China’s intent to reunify, it has reason to encourage American and Chinese misperceptions in order to confirm that Taiwan would be the trigger to a larger confrontation. If Taiwan can achieve this identification, then it is no longer a small power confronting a large one, but instead the front line of an even larger power. Of course, to the extent that Taiwan strives for such an alliance with the United States it is heightening its bilateral tension with China, and it might well discover, as many small states have in the past, that promises made by large powers in peacetime are rethought in crisis. Thus Taiwan’s risk-avoiding strategy of seeking to nail down American guarantees might be a serious danger to its security.

In more general terms, the fate of relations between the United States and China rests on the general context of regional and global relations. If China is the only exception to generally healthy relations of the US with the rest of the world, it is less likely to be an exception. If American global leadership remains well accepted then the risk to China of individual confrontational behavior is increased, and there would be no peer support for its position. If, on the other hand, there would be a general perception that the US is dangerously erratic and high-handed in its behavior, then it would be more likely that China would feel paranoiac and would engage in confrontational behavior, and that there could be a community of support for a Chinese confrontation. If China is seen as aggressive by its Asian neighbors and disrespectful of their autonomy, then it would undercut the possibility of support in confrontations with the United States.

The difference between these expectations does not rest on a profound change in the balance of power between the United States and China, but rather on different scenarios of how each country manages its asymmetric relations.

NOTES

1. The Athenian answer to the plea for mercy from the defeated island of Melos in 416 BC was, to translate freely, ‘Of men we know, and of the gods we believe, that the strong rule when they can and the weak serve when they must.’

3. As Grotius puts it, 'There is no state so powerful that it may not at some time need the help of others outside itself, either for purposes of trade, or even to ward off the forces of many foreign nations united against it.' Hugo Grotius, Prolegomena to the Law of War and Peace (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs Merrill Library of Liberal Arts 1957; original 1625) p.16.


5. Jacob Burckhardt, Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen (Berlin: Ullstein Bücher 1966 (first published posthumously in 1905 from materials dating from 1864 to 1893) p.79.


7. This thesis is similar in result to Alexander Wendt’s Lockean model of anarchy in Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge: CUP 1999) pp.279–97. The difference is that Wendt makes a cultural argument for the modern respect for sovereignty, while I am merely asserting that a marginal advantage in capacity does not necessarily mean that domination is possible or convenient. I would expect that a Lockean culture would develop from such experiences, and along with Wendt I would think that a Kantian culture would ultimately be the most rational adjustment to long term coexistence.


9. Let me suggest a standardization of disparity adjectives. Disparity is ‘clear’ when the larger exceeds the smaller by half (smaller is less than 67 per cent), it is ‘great’ when the larger is double (smaller is less than 50 per cent), and it is ‘overwhelming’ when the larger is ten times the smaller (smaller is less than 10 per cent).

10. The marginal utility of a better weapon can exceed its marginal cost.

11. If one takes into account the dispersion of military expenses necessary in a large country, then China has a smaller percentage of possibly deployable resources vis-à-vis either Japan or Taiwan and therefore its relative position is weaker than the aggregate numbers would suggest.


14. These questions are infinitely more important in defining parity than in defining disparity, because parity requires the drawing of a thin line of equality, while disparity points to the vast spaces on either side.

15. Demographic risk here refers to problems affected by the demographic scale of the countries involved. For instance, forest fires in Indonesia might seriously threaten air quality in Singapore, but forest fires in Singapore would be merely a curiosity to Indonesia, since Singapore has only three million people and far fewer trees.


18. An example would be the American interpretation of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s as a ‘proxy war’ between the Soviet Union and China. The reality was not simply more detailed than this stereotype, it was far more complex.

19. ‘Order’ not in the strong sense of an enforced world rule of law, but in the sense of what Max Weber calls a system of ‘sozialen Chancen’ (social likelihoods).


22. For a detailed description of Southeast Asia’s opinion of the behavior of the United States, Japan and China during the Asian financial crisis, see Wimonkan Komumas, ‘Half a Hegemon: Japan’s Leadership in Southeast Asia’ (Charlottesville: Foreign Affairs PhD dissertation, 2000).
27. The term ‘hyperpower’ was coined by French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine (with Dominique Moisi) in Les Cartes de la France a l’heure de la Mondialisation [The assets of France in the era of globalization] (Paris: Fayard 2000).
29. At the time, this visit was unfairly lampooned in the press as a post-election boondoggle.