



## **GeoThreat Report**

**The Future of China**

**A Strategic Roadmap**



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# **SAMPLE REPORT**

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## **Part A – Overview**

Since the demise of the Soviet Union in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world has become a more dangerous place. The bipolar international power structure of the cold war, underpinned by the United States, former Soviet Union and to a lesser extent China has been replaced by United States hegemony and shifting regional security arrangements. The stability and predictability once attributed to bipolar deterrence and ideological cohesion has transitioned into an ambiguous unipolar environment dominated by voracious globalisation and the burgeoning power of *Zhonghua* (China).

This report will analyse China's expected strategic roadmap and its ramifications upon future domestic stability. The underlying assumption of this report is that the future of China rests with its domestic stability, as influenced by external maritime strategic issues premised on a seaward looking national defence strategy. In order to do this the following three questions will be answered:

- *What is the current domestic state of China?*
- *What kind of destabilizing strategic issues will military modernization and inter and intra-regional rivalry bring about?*
- *Will China's strategic intentions cause domestic stability or domestic instability in the future?*

A likely future for China will be suggested upon answering these questions. It is recognised that the pace of international events and the short term focuses and reactionary responses this can create, such as occurred with the recent Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, has made strategic decision making at times, little more than a gamble over interests. Consequently, this report recognizes these potential destabilising factors but asserts that, these international events are temporary diversions and not withstanding a serious domestic threat, China will favour maintaining its strategic roadmap.

## **Part B – China’s Strategic Roadmap**

China’s strategic roadmap has arguably three primary ambitions: maintaining territorial integrity, attaining regional superpower status in South-East Asia and becoming an inter-regional diplomatic and military player. Historical issues, state power and state interests are inherent among all three ambitions. Historical meaning is perhaps the most powerful of these ambitions reflecting primarily on territorial integrity because of the emotional ties this embodies. China’s rise of imperial power culminating in the Great Chinese Empire and then its fall or self-described 100 years of humiliation at the hands of western imperialists, beginning from the 1842 Opium wars, underlies China’s preference for a future global multi-polar environment where no one country or region dominates. China’s steadfast irredentist policies<sup>1</sup> relating to Taiwan and the South China Sea are manifestations of this past humiliation. Moreover, its 1992 territorial waters act is indicative of the future remedying of past humiliations cementing its historical territorial claims and sovereignty rights to the fore mentioned areas as well as all maritime space and airspace adjacent to the mainland<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, its territorial interests now overlap with at least 24 other countries<sup>3</sup>, which make’s regional superpower status a highly important but ambitious goal.

Acquiring regional superpower status reflects China’s seaward looking security and economic emphasis in which the U.S. presents as a future peer competitor<sup>4</sup>. This conjecture is premised on China’s more favoured intra-regional rather than inter-regional economy and currently weak blue water navy<sup>5</sup>. Segal comments that in order for the west to engage China effectively it should be treated more like a Brazil or India than a global power. Although questionable, China’s economic data seems to favour a future potential that is intra rather than inter-regional. In 1997, China shared only 3.5 percent of the worlds gross national profit compared to the U.S 25.6 percent. Moreover, it shared only three percent of the worlds trade and represented only 10 percent of the world’s foreign direct investment. However, in 1997 China represented 11% of Asian trade, which will almost certainly grow according to Watters and McGee.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, R., ‘Navigating the Taiwan Strait’, in *International Security*, 27:2, 2002, pp. 48-85, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Chang, M and Chen, X., ‘The Nationalist Ideology of the Chinese Military’, in *Comparative Strategy*, 21:1, 1998, pp. 44-64, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Gray, C., ‘Defence and Regional Conflict: Hopes, Fallacies, and Fixes’, in *Comparative Strategy*, 17, 1998, pp. 45-62, p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> In the context of this report a brown water navy operates within 50 sq km of the coastline whereas a blue water navy operates from 50-400 sq km of the coastline. Source: Herrmann, W, ‘Chinese Military Strategy and its Maritime Aspects’, in *Naval Forces*, 2/99, 1999.

Watters and McGee have proposed that the future distribution of global technologies, including air transportation and sea freight will shift to favour the Asia-Pacific region<sup>6</sup>. This will create urban mega centres creating new nodes of connectivity integrated at the global level. By 2025, 58 percent of the world's population is expected to be living in urban centres<sup>7</sup>. Mega-urban regionalism is a likely outcome if one considers examples such as Singapore, which already accounts for one fifth of global maritime trade annually<sup>8</sup>. The Coastal regions of China, which contributed just over 50 percent to China's GDP in 1994<sup>9</sup>, are prime candidates for future mega-urbanisation. Consequently developing regional economic strength would be a practical first step while developing a strong blue water navy with intra and inter-regional leverage, which ultimately reflects upon becoming a resolute inter-regional player.

China's bid to become an inter-regional diplomatic and military player suggests a practicality that recognises a future omnipresent with sustainability issues and security concerns. China represents 22 percent of the world's population with only seven percent of the world's arable land, which is declining by up to 725 acres annually<sup>10</sup>. In 1993, it became an oil importer and by 2005, expects to be using 6 million barrels daily, up from 3 million barrels in 1998<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, by 2010 economist's estimate China will need 43 million tonnes of grain annually, which is still regarded by many as a low estimate<sup>12</sup>. In order for China to sustain its people and grow its economy it is vital China actively engages in inter-regional diplomacy to secure access to resources and transportation links and with the support of the United Nations (UN) ensure the security of the vital global infrastructure, such as sea-lanes. Moreover, inter-regional diplomacy becomes a vital asset for dealing with regional security issues such as Taiwan and to a lesser extent the South China Sea. The most important institution for China's future will be the UN, which maintains the notion of sovereignty and in most cases; the importance of state authority, but more importantly it provides a diplomatic conduit to engage perceived western interference in its domestic affairs<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, China views the UN as the ideal external instrument to manage global and regional stability, which ultimately ensues China's domestic happiness.

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<sup>6</sup> Watters, R and McGee, T., Globalisation, Urbanisation and the Emergence of Sub-Global Regions: A Case-Study of the Asia-Pacific Region, in *Asia-Pacific: New Geography and the Pacific Rim*, 1997, pp. 29-45, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Watters and McGee, 1997, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Keating, T., 'Naval Power is Vital', in *U.S Naval Institute*, 127:7:1, 1998, pp. 46-49, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Watters and McGee, 1997, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Maritime Ambition, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kane, T and Serewicz, L., 'China's Hunger: The Consequences of a Rising Demand for Food and Energy', in *Parameters*, 31:3, 1998, pp. 63-76, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Gill, B and Reilly, J., 'Sovereignty, Interaction and Peacekeeping: The View from Beijing', in *Survival*, 42:3, 2000, pp. 41-59, p. 42.

## **Part C – China’s Domestic State**

To comment on China’s future one must above all first comment on its current domestic state, namely the economy, the people and the military, chiefly to examine its tolerance for disruption caused by future strategic perturbations. Economic growth is the foundation of China’s future military power and hence is critical to its strategic roadmap. On the 4th June 1989, the events of Tiananmen Square provided the spark that prompted conservative and reformative members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to accelerate the transition from Communism to Capitalism<sup>14</sup>. By employing a policy of encouraging economic growth under tight political control, China’s transition has led to a deregulation of banks and state owned enterprises (SOE’s), and the flourishing of private enterprises. However, deregulation has resulted in SOE’s and Banks running at losses requiring the Government to prop them up in order to meet costs, such as salaries and social welfare needs. Inevitably, the process of privatisation has resulted in state agencies that once employed two thirds of the work force, having to lay people off. By the end of 1998, urban unemployed numbered approximately 17 million people. The effects of deregulation have consequently flowed into the countryside, which by 2003, out of 800 million farmers up too 120 million were unemployed<sup>15</sup>. The divisive potential of rural residents represents the pre-eminent issue in China’s domestic future. Potent sources for this potential social instability are the growing inequalities between rural and urban residents highlighted by China’s ineffective health-care system.

China’s health care system highlights the economic divisions between rural and urban residents. The health care system depends on cities and rural regions managing their own social-welfare services. Whereas 6 in 10 residents have health insurance in the cities only 10% of rural residents are able to afford healthcare. Capitalism has allowed health workers to maximise profits, which stretches the average rural earnings of \$300 annually<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, corruption is rampant among local rural officials who siphon off vast quantities of government funds annually, provoking general distrust of government officials among rural residents<sup>17</sup>. Consequently, rural townships and villages come under increasing pressure, which threatens social stability<sup>18</sup>, highlighted recently by the recent SAR’s epidemic and the ensuing protests in rural areas. Social and religious organisations that step in to fill the social-welfare gaps may potentially become conduits for political change. The government is trying to correct this problem by recruiting better-educated party members and enhancing accountability through village elections<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, the decentralisation of economic control and increasing rural and urban disparities implies a weakening of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in

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<sup>14</sup> Deng, Y., ‘Managing China’s Hegemonic Ascension: Engagement from South East Asia’, in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 21:1, 1998, pp. 21-43, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Yuhuan, H., ‘The Quarantine Blues’, in *Time*, May 19, 2003, pp. 44-45, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Forney, M., ‘China’s Failing Health System’, in *Time*, May 19, 2003, pp. 40-43, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Forney, 2003, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Yuhuan, 2003, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Massey Readings (3), 2003, p. 34.

Chinese society. The CCP is however, not benign to these issues and is cognisant of the divisive nature that could be played by China's 55 minorities<sup>20</sup> who occupy 64% of the rural land, some of which is concentrated in strategic locations, such as Xinjiang<sup>21</sup>. To combat rising dissatisfaction over economic inequalities the government has institutionalised a nationalist ideology that is designed to not only encourage social cohesion but additionally, to encourage the support of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in times of national and international crisis.

The Chinese government has promoted a Nationalist ideology to discourage individual or group self-determination and encourage national self-determination in accord with the interests of the state<sup>22</sup>. Nationalism is a group spirit that when promoted as an ideology emphasises its own self-determination or independence. Patriotism naturally follows on from Nationalism and embodies devotion and loyalty to the leaders of the state. China's great historical achievements, its exploitation by foreigners and the positive characteristics of its people combine to emphasis self-sacrifice and a national community<sup>23</sup>. Individual nationalism in this context is considered divisive. In respect to its defensive role, the PLA is particularly conducive to both nationalism and patriotism. The state has embodied the PLA with a 'new patriotism' that emphasises political neutrality emphasising the defence of the current government<sup>24</sup>. This is significant for a military of approximately 2.4 million<sup>25</sup> and made up of 56 ethnic minorities whose cohesion is vital to suppressing future ethnic and rural unrest in unstable regions, such as Xinjiang. The current domestic situation in China relies on balancing economic growth and political control against the disruptive forces of capitalism. In this sense, a long-term outlook in achieving the objectives of the strategic roadmap has potential destabilising consequences for domestic China. In order to better understand how China's strategic roadmap may positively influence China's domestic situation its principle strategic objectives, including military modernization, regional and inter-regional diplomacy and territorial integrity will be assessed against potential strategic consequences.

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<sup>20</sup> This does not include the Han Chinese who makeup approximately 92% of the population.  
Source: Chang, M and Chen, X., 'The Nationalist Ideology of the Chinese Military', in *Comparative Strategy*, 21:1, 1998, pp. 44-64, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> Russell, R., 'What if...China Attacks Taiwan!', in *Parameters*, 31:3, 2001, pp. 76-93, p. 81.

## **Part D – Strategic Ambiguity**

China's military modernisation is central to all its future strategic objectives. In this sense, command of the sea is vital in order to defend China's seaward approaches, protect ocean resources, provide strategic positioning and demonstrate a readiness to defy foreign adversaries<sup>26</sup>. In order to achieve this Chinese military strategy since 1991 has focused on periphery and forward defence by utilising island chains as natural defensive barriers<sup>27</sup>. This strategy to be effective, expects that by 2035 the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN's) range will have extended to 430 miles from the Chinese coastline, becoming a two ocean power, which includes the Pacific and Indian oceans<sup>28</sup>. Significant aspects of its modernization are an increase in its submarine fleet and the deployment of its first aircraft carrier by 2010<sup>29</sup>.

Submarines are the backbone of any substantial strategic fleet providing control over sea lines of communication (SLOC), defence of the Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ) and offshore resources. Moreover: "The Submarine is the only vehicle that can operate in an entire PRC maritime area of interest."<sup>30</sup> Ultimately the submarine provides an effective strategic deterrence capability with its long-range nuclear and non-nuclear missile standoff capability.

The aircraft carrier in contrast to the submarine is a national symbol whose pre-positioning is a national leadership decision that symbolizes military might through power projection, defined by James as the "...use or threatened use of military force at a distance to achieve a political aim."<sup>31</sup> Besides providing sea control and other benign tasks it is significant in the strategic sense as a destabiliser whose standoff capability can threaten a seaward flank<sup>32</sup>.

As China's military modernization escalates, its perceived threat increases towards U.S., Japan's and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations/Asian Regional Forum (ASEAN/ARF) countries interests in the South East Asian region. China's present lack of military transparency arguably hides its relatively weak fleet, which enhances political ambiguity regarding intra and inter-regional diplomacy. However, as the PLAN modernisation increases its military capabilities, transparency will likely improve in order to promote a conventional deterrence capability to strengthen its diplomatic kudos. Nevertheless, China's near-term lack of transparency suggests strategic rather than political

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<sup>26</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Herrmann, W, 'Chinese Military Strategy and its Maritime Aspects', in *Naval Forces*, 2/99, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Herrmann, 1999, 2/99.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> James, D., 'Carrier 2000: A Consideration of Naval Aviation in the Millennium', in *Naval Review*, 86:4, 1998, pp. 3-8, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> James, 1998, p. 8.



ambiguity leading to misinterpretation resulting in already on edge countries, such as the U.S, considering China a threat to the strength and stability of the global infrastructure<sup>33</sup>. By 2020, it is estimated container shipping will carry out 80% of all intercontinental trade<sup>34</sup>. Global trade routes are dependent on 16 super-ports that provide critical service and supply nodes that transport, most importantly oil, and feed inter modal<sup>35</sup> and just in time supply chains. The forward presence of the U.S in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines will certainly increase in the region once China launches its first aircraft carrier especially in recognition of its territorial claims on Taiwan and the South China Sea and the threat to the critical straits of Malacca, Sundra and Lowbak.

Territorial claims in the South China Sea are extremely complex and likely to be solved peacefully primarily because of ASEAN/ARF's institutional engagement of China<sup>36</sup>. Food resources, potential oil reserves but most importantly, strategic positioning makes this region extremely valuable for China. Of the 180 islands in dispute, the Spratley's is considered the most strategically important<sup>37</sup>. China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaya, Philippines and Brunei each presently contest the Spratley's<sup>38</sup>. It's positioning in the South China Sea effectively allows the Spratley's to command critical choke points into the East China sea. Consequently, as Chang and Chen comment, whoever controls the Spratley's will become a great Maritime power<sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, regional stability has greater benefits for the future of China than the costs associated with a regional conflict.

The countries of ASEAN/ARF realise China's importance to the stability and influence of the region, which encourages a policy of active engagement, including increasing interdependence through bilateral trade and encouraging cooperation through multilateral arrangements. ASEAN/ARF's emphasis on an informal, flexible and gradualist, consensus-based style of negotiation is conducive to appeasing China<sup>40</sup>. China's engagement with ASEAN/ARF over its South China Sea claims reflects a peaceful emphasis calling for joint exploration and bilateral agreements. China attaches great importance to the South East Asian region in order for it to attain regional superpower status and consequently it is in its best interests to ensure future regional stability. A multilateral agreement with Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia over Mekong river-use for which China controls the headwaters is indicative of this emphasis<sup>41</sup>. However, whereas ASEAN/ARF countries have engaged

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<sup>33</sup> James, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Keating, 1998, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Inter-modal transportation systems represent transportation chains that include more than one mode of transportation, for example sea to rail to trucking and finally to air transport.

<sup>36</sup> Deng, 1998, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 56.

<sup>38</sup> Deng, 1998, p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> Deng, 1998, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Deng, 1998, p. 24.

China through a policy of accommodation, the US and Japan have applied a more aggressive policy of containment with regard to China's claims over Taiwan<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Mulgan, A., 'Beyond Self-Defence? Evaluating Japan's Regional Security Role Under the New Defence Cooperation Guidelines', in *Pacifica Review*, 12:3, 2000, pp. 223-246, p. 244.

## **Part E – Taiwan Transparency**

Various significant strategic interests that fuel the antagonists, China, Taiwan, the U.S and Japan shape China's territorial claim over Taiwan. However, the non-historical interests that embody these strategic issues are eroding over time. China's interests are primarily historical, Taiwan's interests are separatist and US-Japan interests remain premised on cold war commitments. Japan's bilateral relationship with the U.S is particularly antagonistic to China because of Japan's active role in China's past humiliation<sup>43</sup>. Ultimately, the US agreement with Japan influences Chinese negotiations with Taiwan making peaceful reunification problematic. The complexity of the later bi-lateral relationship presents opportunities for China to resolve the re-unification issue.

Until reunification with Taiwan, China considers itself a divided nation. Taiwan's historical and hence, emotional connections to the Mainland are a dominant domestic issue for the Chinese public who arguably<sup>44</sup> favour reunification by force<sup>45</sup>. Consequently, any perceived declaration of independence by Taiwan would constitute war by China, initiated by China's leadership in order to legitimise their nationalist ideology and to meet the public's expectation of saving face<sup>46</sup>. Past long-term stability has relied on a two-pronged approach of economic engagement and deterrence, culminating in a policy of containment by Taiwan, the U.S and Japan. Taiwan's judicious strategy towards China summarised as a gradual approach of active political and economic engagement proffering interdependence, benefits China's regional superpower goal. The U.S and Japan provide the military and to a lesser extent economic deterrence factors based on a cold war ideological posture, historically premised on stopping the spread of communism. However, Taiwan's economic strength and strategic positioning in relation to international shipping are most likely the fuelling factors that now embroil the U.S and Japan in this dispute. Nevertheless, future U.S. interests in Taiwan will become increasingly incommensurate with China's.

The U.S posture towards Taiwan relies on a strategy of long-term extended deterrence in order to contain China. U.S military transparency signalling technological dominance and bilateral agreements through, increasing interoperability with Taiwan, including theatre missile defence and defence force modernizations<sup>47</sup>, and by remodelling defence cooperation guidelines with Japan<sup>48</sup>, signals U.S resolve. Moreover, recent U.S. rhetoric concerning state sponsors of terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction suggests the U.S nuclear threshold has been lowered adding a dangerous element to its

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<sup>43</sup> Taiwan ceded to Japan in 1895 for half a century.

Source: Chang, M and Chen, X., 'The Nationalist Ideology of the Chinese Military', in *Comparative Strategy*, 21:1, 1998, pp. 44-64, p. 55.

<sup>44</sup> China's lack of domestic transparency does not allow the corroboration of polled figures.

<sup>45</sup> Chang and Chen, 1998, p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Ross, 2002, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> Ross, 2002, p. 82.

<sup>48</sup> Mulgan, 2000, p. 236.

deterrence capability<sup>49</sup>. However, is long-term U.S resolve a bluff? Evidence based on past US diplomatic ambiguity suggests that in the future this may be so.

U.S ambiguity in diplomatically recognising China but not Taiwan indicates that the US is aware of two important strategic issues: first, the importance of intra-regional cohesion and second, the future military threat of China. The ASEAN /ARF non-western view of human rights prioritised as “...economic growth, social rights and community interest ahead of individuals and rights...” forms the foundation of a common ASEAN/ARF position that countries should not interfere in the relations of other countries<sup>50</sup>. Moreover, China’s viewpoint that nuclear weapons play very little part in preventing conventional wars, suggests that China sees utility in using tactical nuclear weapons<sup>51</sup>. This perception is in line with China’s recent rumblings over using asymmetric warfare as a primary war strategy. War fighting asymmetrically suggests a military transparency that on one hand offers a non-technical solution to deterring U.S forces yet on the other hand is a convincing domestic argument to stir Chinese nationalistic fever. China’s lack of concern for casualties and a non-telegraphed win quick, hold and defend strategy would without doubt significantly influence U.S domestic politics and potentially deter military intervention. In a war for which the U.S would endure the most casualties and in an Asian conflict with connotations of past wars on the Korean peninsula and in Vietnam this seems likely. Moreover, Japan faces similar domestic issues, which regardless of new defence co-operation guidelines with the U.S, domestic interpretations over collective defence, the foundation of its institutionalised anti-military identity, may favour overriding any state guarantee’s given the U.S in a Taiwan contingency<sup>52</sup>. This uncertainty is a severe weakness in this bilateral relationship. Consequently, as uncertainty persists and U.S interests gradually fade, a forced re-unification with Taiwan has enormous potential to significantly contribute to long-term domestic stability in China. In utilitarian terms the costs of not reunifying with Taiwan and the destabilising effects this would have on China and consequently the region, far outweigh the benefits of a Taiwan without China.

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<sup>49</sup> Ross, 2002, p. 58.

<sup>50</sup> Deng, 1998, p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> Ross, 2002, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> Mulgan, 2000, p. 238.

### **Part F – Conclusion**

China's future is dependent on using strategic issues as leverage to offset, rising economic disruption in rural areas caused by growing urban versus rural economic disparities. China's resource issues and the territorial claims in the South China Sea will most likely be solved peacefully through intra and inter-regional diplomatic solutions whereas an increasing Chinese military projection capability will force a U.S build up in the South East Asian region. This last action will create instability in the region but not destabilise it. The same is true of a forced military re-unification with Taiwan. This is most likely to occur essentially because it provides the key to China's domestic future by putting to rest past humiliations. Consequently, China's domestic future is heading down the path of growing capitalism, CCP decentralisation and potentially a single party state structure of one-country three systems (China, Hong Kong and Taiwan). China's strategic future consisting of maintaining territorial integrity, attaining regional superpower status and becoming an inter-regional diplomatic and military player is ultimately directed at instigating a multi-polar environment in order to degrade U.S and Japanese hegemony. China's language reflects a culture rich in tradition, history and pragmatism that defines a civilisation which when engaged by the west must be considered as central factors in identifying its developing interests and foreign policy outcomes.

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