

**New York University China House Lecture  
NYU School of Law, 40 Washington Square South, Greenberg Lounge  
Tuesday, February 12, 2008, 5:30 pm – 7:00 pm**

**China and the International Political Landscape  
Remarks by J. Stapleton Roy**

We are living in interesting times. We have already completed seven percent of the 21st century. From our experience thus far, it is clear that the world remains a dangerous and troubled place, marked by sharp contrasts between areas of progress and regions mired in conflict and instability. There are too many of the latter for comfort.

Despite this, there are grounds for optimism. Over the last half century, East Asia has changed remarkably for the better as it has moved from backwardness, revolution, and conflict to growing prosperity and openness. Hundreds of millions of Asians now enjoy the benefits of more prosperous economies and more representative political systems. The key question is whether this positive record can be extended through the rest of this century.

A strong case can be made that the principal clash in the world today is not between civilizations but between two contrasting views of the purpose of governance.

- On the one hand stand the countries and ideologies that offer hope for human advancement, that understand the role that science, education, and openness in sharing knowledge must play in improving living standards, and that are capable of mobilizing themselves to unleash the forces of productivity and growth.
- On the other stand those countries and ideologies that are hostile or unreceptive to the factors that make modernization possible.

East Asia offers striking examples of the benefits that flow from successful modernization strategies, and the negative consequences produced by leaders who ignore these lessons. China is a relatively recent entrant to the first group with the adoption of its reform and openness strategy at the end of 1978. Despite the severe strains this strategy underwent during the three years following the Tiananmen incident in 1989, these policies have served China well, giving Chinese

better living standards and more exposure to the outside world than ever before in modern history.

Throughout East Asia, modernization has been the indispensable element in producing current levels of prosperity. Unfortunately, advanced societies have been less successful in curbing the wars and conflicts that have marked the course of human history. On the contrary, scientific knowledge and industrial might have not ensured peace but have rather made wars more destructive. In addition, too frequently the emergence of new powers has inexorably precipitated tests of strength with established powers that have devastated regions and created widespread human misery. We saw this pattern in Europe and Asia during the first half of the Twentieth Century.

Against this backdrop, I would argue that there are two defining characteristics of the world today.

- The first is the US role as the sole superpower.
- The second is China's precipitous rise to a position of global power and influence.

In a sense, we are witnessing a high-stakes competition between two different approaches to governance:

- On the one hand is a wealthy, powerful, and self-indulgent United States, whose principal articulated long-range goal is to remain the sole superpower for as long as possible. As expressed in the 2002 National Security Strategy Report, our stated goal is to ensure that our military forces ". . . will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."
- On the other hand is a rising, determined, and focused China that has set ambitious goals for increasing its wealth and power.

How this competition plays itself out will determine, to an important degree, the nature of the 21st century. This high-stakes competition poses a number of critically important questions:

- Is it feasible or desirable for the United States to sustain its position as the sole superpower?

- Can China's breakneck record of economic growth continue indefinitely, or will China begin to stumble over the problems, domestic and international, generated by its growth?
- Third, can this competition be kept peaceful, or will it lead inevitably to military conflict?
- Finally, how will China change if it is successful in continuing to raise the living standard of its people under conditions of openness to the outside world?

Regardless of how we might try to answer these questions, we need to be prepared for the possibility that within the next twenty-five years China will have:

- The second largest economy in the world.
- Significantly expanded military capabilities.
- Influence in East Asia and the world that is unprecedented in modern times.

Here are some of the relevant considerations. China's economy today is ten times larger than it was in 1978. It is continuing to grow at roughly ten percent a year. To give you a base point for comparison, the economy of Latin America grew a total of ten percent over that same 25-year period. To illustrate the magnitude of what is happening in China, I might also note that the increase in China's energy demand between 2002 and 2005 was equivalent to Japan's current annual energy use.

China's rise poses a number of fundamental challenges for the global system in general and for the United States in particular.

- The first is how to manage the growing resource needs and environmental impact of a rapidly developing China within a global community.
- The second is how to assess and respond to China's growing military capabilities, which are an inevitable aspect of a China that commands the resources of a much larger economy.
- The third is how to deal with the economic consequences of China's rise, that is, the impact on jobs, investment flows, and trade balances, both in the United States and globally.
- The fourth is the impact on US foreign policy interests of China's growing influence and heft in international councils.

We do not have time this evening to give all of these questions the attention they deserve. Instead, I will concentrate on trying to provide a coherent framework for thinking about them.

East Asians know well that rapid increases in power can produce inflated ambitions that lead to conflict rather than cooperation. Indeed, Chinese themselves are keenly aware that their country was a principal victim of the means that Japan used in its quest for great power status during the first half of the Twentieth Century; and that Japan suffered a devastating defeat because of the approach it adopted.

Conscious of these dangers, Chinese leaders have articulated a strategy of peaceful development. This strategy explicitly links the preservation of a peaceful international environment to China's modernization objectives. This is a wise and far-sighted approach. Nevertheless, it leaves unanswered the question of whether an increasingly more powerful China will continue to demonstrate restraint in defining its objectives and in using its growing capabilities.

As Karl Deutsch has pointed out: "The larger and more powerful a nation is, the more its leaders, elites, and often its population increase their level of aspirations in international affairs. The more, that is to say, do they see themselves as destined or obliged to put the world's affairs in order." China's leaders state confidently that China will not follow this pattern, but this remains to be seen.

Moreover, China's future behavior will not depend simply on the intentions of its leaders. A key determinant of Chinese conduct will be whether nationalistic or even chauvinistic sentiments seize hold of the broad masses of Chinese as China gains in wealth and power. Ironically, the more democratic China becomes, the more difficult this problem may be to manage.

At the same time, we need to distinguish, as best we can, between chauvinistic aspirations and the pursuit of legitimate interests. As China has gained in global stature, it understandably wishes to:

- wield greater influence over events in East Asia and the Western Pacific;
- enhance its ability to defend its interests; and

- gain greater assurance that formidable US military capabilities cannot be used against China at acceptable cost.

From China's perspective, such objectives are natural. However, it is equally understandable that China's neighbors will have a different perspective and will increasingly worry about China's intentions as its capabilities grow. It would be an unhealthy situation if actions which Chinese consider natural and prudent are viewed by other countries as provocative and dangerous. And yet this potential exists.

Given these considerations, a critical determinant of whether China can develop peacefully is not simply China's own conduct but how other countries behave, and particularly how they react to a rising China. If the United States or other major powers feel threatened by China's rise, their reactions could raise tensions or precipitate conflict as easily as the conduct of the emerging country.

Clearly then, the behavior of the United States will be an important factor in determining whether China can develop peacefully. If this is the case, as I believe it is, perhaps we should pause in our consideration of China to look at ourselves since we are the single most important factor affecting China's position in the international political landscape.

Understanding how the United States can and should use its power responsibly in a world where we have uncontested military supremacy is the number one challenge facing our country. Anyone who reads the morning newspapers knows that we are facing many difficult trials, both domestically and abroad. Terrorists have dealt the United States the most damaging blow on our soil since Pearl Harbor. We have committed our power to transforming the situations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Success is far from assured. Failure could have serious downstream consequences.

In North Korea and Iran we are facing dangerous nuclear challenges. Many of our traditional allies are skeptical of the terms in which we are defining our goals and of the means we are adopting to pursue them. Public opinion in countries such as South Korea that have been close

US allies for over fifty years is now prone to view unilateral use of American power as a bigger potential threat than an attack from the North. Of particular concern, anti-Americanism around the world is stronger than ever before, and is not being artificially fanned by a Cold War opponent.

Americans quite rightly are troubled by this phenomenon. As the hands-down winner in the Cold War showdown between the side favoring freedom and democracy and the side mired in the repressive misconceptions of communism, we should, by rights, be acclaimed by a grateful world. And yet this is not the case.

Some attribute this to the petty envy of less successful nations. According to this school of thought, it is natural for people to resent the wealth and power of others. They dismiss such envy as an inevitable consequence of leadership. Others don't care and argue that the opinions of other countries are irrelevant.

In a sense these attitudes skirt the real question. Is it the fact of leadership or the style of leadership that is feeding anti-American sentiments in the world? We all know wealthy and powerful individuals. Some are arrogant, demanding, and abusive. Others do not flaunt their wealth and are modest, generous, and considerate. Most people respond differently to these two extremes. If so, we could be deluding ourselves if we blame our unpopularity on our power and leadership alone.

What we need, I would argue, is a different conceptual framework for thinking about these issues. It may be helpful first to take a broader look at our current foreign policy environment.

It is an indisputable fact that we are the preeminent nation in the world today. Most if not all Americans want and expect us to be a force for good. Our problem is that we have been cast into this role without a consensus, either nationally or within the administration, on how we should use this power. In that sense, we have not yet adapted our foreign policy to our new role in the world. This is important, because a foreign policy, to be effective, must be based on a strategy that integrates our goals with a realistic understanding of the constraints on what we can

accomplish. Successful foreign policies must also achieve the proper balance between our ideals and our interests.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War produced a situation where we now have fewer constraints on use of our power because of the absence of a superpower competitor. This has created two related problems:

- How to use our power wisely in the absence of constraints on use of our power.
- How to handle the balance between domestic and international drivers of our foreign policy.

To put it bluntly, we are not handling either of these problems well.

In a sense, the end of the Cold War did not represent the end of history, as some have argued, but rather the end of geo-politics in the United States. What I mean is that with the removal of the Soviet threat, domestic considerations have become more important determinants of our foreign policy. Obviously, domestic factors are always relevant to foreign policy in a democracy. Policies cannot be pursued effectively if they lack the necessary domestic base of support. We have seen numerous instances of this in recent decades.

However, domestic factors should not be the drivers of foreign policy. To be effective, foreign policies need to be grounded in a sound understanding of the real world with which we have to deal. As you would expect, Americans do not pay sufficient attention to our international interests to provide informed guidance on how we should behave in the world. Nor should they try to do so; this is what governments are for. The international interests of the United States should be the drivers of our foreign policy.

Domestically driven foreign policies are usually misguided and vulnerable to the law of unintended consequences. It is the responsibility of government to ensure that properly conceived policies secure and/or retain the domestic base of support necessary for their effective implementation. This, in turn, suggests that we should pursue our interests with due regard for our values. When we face severe threats, Americans are prepared to set aside our values as necessary to deal with the threat. When threats recede, the values reassert themselves. The most effective policies result when our interests and values are in congruence.

The problem for our foreign policy is that much of the time this is not the case. This confronts us with contradictions that need to be managed effectively. Throughout our history we have been confronted with the challenge of reconciling the discrepancies between our ideals and the actions we take in pursuit of our interests.

A few years ago, Henry Kissinger published a book entitled *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* In it he noted: "In the face of perhaps the most profound and widespread upheavals the world has ever seen, [the United States] has failed to develop concepts relevant to the emerging realities." This is not an indictment of us, since he also notes that "The United States finds itself in a world for which little in its historical experience has prepared it." Nearly two decades into the post Cold War period, we have still not developed a coherent vision of how we should use our power to promote our ideals and advance our interests. We reject the concept of empire as applying to us, but in much of the world we are perceived as peremptory and domineering - imperial, in fact.

At the core of my argument is the proposition that we the people of the United States are essentially unprepared for the role we have been thrust into in the world? This is not due to any deficiency in our capabilities as a people but because of two intertwined considerations.

- First, as Henry Kissinger noted, our historical experience has not prepared us for the situation we face.
- Second, we were thrust into the role of the world's sole superpower not by conquest but because of the unraveling of our principal opponent, the Soviet Union.

This second consideration did not emerge at a time of confrontation between the two superpowers. On the contrary, it occurred during a period of *détente* when Gorbachev was pursuing policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* that were opening up the Soviet Union to outside influences as never before.

In looking back through history, I have been unable to identify a comparable case in which the dominant country achieved its position of preeminence by the domestically driven collapse of its

principal rival. The net result is that we are still struggling to define how we should use the sudden increase in our relative power position in the world. This confronts us with a number of conceptual challenges.

The first challenge lies in how to apply American political principles to foreign policy. A good place to begin is with the debate that accompanied the establishment of our nation. The genius of our founding fathers, as expressed in *The Federalist Papers*, lay in their understanding that power is dangerous and corrupting and that unchecked power in the hands of government will inevitably lead to improper use of that power. They applied this concept to the formulation of our system of government, and their insight forms the basis for every modern system of government in the world.

In theory, that concept should be just as relevant in international as in national affairs. Curiously, our thinking about our global role seems to attach no importance to this concept. On the contrary, many Americans are proud of our role today as the sole superpower. It is all too easy to glory in our ability to stamp out evil regimes with only token support from friends and allies. Our defense budget already exceeds the collective defense budgets of all other major countries in the world. What is missing is recognition that American political theory suggests that being a "sole superpower" will lead inevitably to abuse of that power in the absence of appropriate checks and balances.

At present, my sense is that we are giving too little attention to this issue. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves: What is the nature of the international political landscape that can, in the no-longer-bipolar post Cold War era, ensure that extended US preponderance will not lead to improper use of US power? This is in our own interest, since if we are seen as using our power wisely, other nations will be comfortable with our leadership and will not attach high priority to challenging us. Conversely, if we are seen as abusing our power, this will inevitably hasten the emergence of countervailing checks on our power in forms that we may not like.

Our second challenge lies in finding the right style of leadership. This challenge is, perhaps, even more difficult than the first. An Asia Foundation Task Force report on Asian views of the

American Role in Asia five years ago was replete with references to a flawed US style of leadership, which Asians characterized as heavy-handed, lacking consistency and sensitivity, and prone to unilateralism. The problem is not restricted to Asia, since we find such attitudes in Europe as well. Most countries in Europe and Asia still want and expect the United States to provide leadership. But as the Asian report makes clear, they want more consultation and sensitivity. Nearly two decades into the post Cold War era, the United States has not yet adjusted its leadership style to the type of leadership required by the different world situation within which we now operate.

The third challenge is defining the type of world that we would like to see emerge, and the role that the United States should play in it. Our efforts to address this challenge are complicated by the divergent views within the US policy establishment over how we should be using our power in the world. One way to visualize this problem is to think of it as a struggle among different schools of foreign policy thinking, elements of which are all present in the Bush administration. The debate within the administration has not yet been resolved, nor has a public consensus emerged on the question of how to use US power. This lack of consensus undermines our ability to convey a coherent message, whether to friendly ears or to those skeptical of our intentions.

Our final challenge is to prepare ourselves to play this role effectively. To put it bluntly, as a nation we are insufficiently informed of the world around us.. Our media do not provide adequate coverage of foreign policy issues. Our foreign language skills are inadequate. Our schools of higher education are second to none, but they do not teach Americans enough about the rest of the world in terms of geography, history, and culture. This is an intolerable situation for a country that bears the responsibility of being the world's sole superpower; and that has the ability, as President Bush has put it, "to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world."

As many of us have learned from personal experience, it is dangerous to delve into dark corners unless we know what we are doing. The United States cannot afford to have a brain intoxicated by inadequate knowledge of the world in which we are now playing such a dominant role.

Why does this matter? Because how the United States defines its own objectives is of critical importance to the future of our relations with China.

If the United States defines its national security goals in terms of preserving unchallengeable supremacy for the indefinite future, as we are now doing, there will be several inevitable consequences:

- First, none of the world's other power centers will support the central objective of US national security strategy. Successful foreign policies are based on finding common interests with other countries. Defining our goals from the narrow standpoint of US interests alone places a heavy burden on our foreign policy.
- Second, if our goal is perpetual hegemony, China's rise, or the rise of any other country, will inevitably become threatening at some point. Sooner or later, regardless of Chinese behavior, the United States would have to adopt a policy of containment toward China. Depending on whether other countries share our concerns, this could have a divisive impact in Asia and elsewhere.

If, on the other hand, the US goal is defined as ensuring the security and well-being of the American people, then we are likely to see a different set of consequences. Most importantly, this would signal US acceptance of the concept of a world in which other countries have an equal right to pursue the prosperity and security of their people through means other than force and conquest. In this case, the United States need not feel threatened by a stronger and more prosperous China that behaves responsibly. The goal of US China policy, then, would be to maximize prospects for a good US-China relationship and responsible Chinese behavior.

These are two very different foreign policy goals. The first presupposes an eventual confrontation with China not because of its behavior but because of the increase in its wealth and power. The second assumes that a strong and self-confident United States can coexist with a stronger China as long as it behaves responsibly.

Either way, China's growing strength and influence do pose a daunting challenge for the United States. In essence this is because of the major powers, China has the greatest potential to

compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages. Like it or not, we must take into account the fact that PLA military modernization is accelerating, and it is preparing military options for Taiwan scenarios. Clearly, then, we cannot afford to neglect the factors that keep us strong as a nation.

The irony is that a time of rising concern in this country about China, China is benefiting from its shared interest with virtually all other global power centers in balancing the preponderant US position in the world. Everywhere we look, we can see some of the consequences of the way in which we are defining and executing our foreign policy. We see this in:

- The improvement in Chinese-Russian relations.
- The failure of East Asian countries to include the United States in the East Asian Summits that have taken place over the last three years.
- The improvement in Sino-Indian relations.
- The European desire to develop an independent security and defense identity.

I will only touch briefly on the resource question, but it is one that we should keep in mind. The Asian economic miracle was produced by the sustained high growth rates of East Asian economies, first Japan, and then the four Asian tigers of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The combined populations of this group totaled less than 200 million. Now China has been growing at an equal or higher rate for fifteen years, averaging 10 percent. But China has a population of 1.3 billion people, nearly seven times greater. In addition, India, with a population of a billion people, is achieving high rates of growth and is likely to have a population larger than China's in the short space of a few decades.

The net result is that China now consumes more grain and meat, more coal and more steel than the United States. Clearly then, this issue poses stark choices for an advanced country like the United States that consumes a disproportionate share of global resources because of our high standard of living. Should we seek to hold back the growth of countries like China and India because of their giant populations and the pressure their rapid development will put on global

resources? Or should we seek a cooperative approach aimed at accommodating these needs through mechanisms that provide for a fair allocation of these resources?

If we were to adopt the former approach, what are the implications for US ideals and principles of a policy aimed at denying other peoples the ability to better their lives? Conversely, if we were to seek to accommodate the rise of China and India by promoting greater efficiency in our use of global resources, are we capable of displaying the domestic will and discipline this would require within the time frame that would make this relevant? These are genuine issues, even if we can avoid facing up to them for some time.

The hard reality is that environmentally friendly economic growth is more expensive growth in the short term. Rightly or wrongly, there has been no inclination in the advanced countries of the world: to constrain domestic consumption in order to accommodate the development needs of other countries; or to help finance the incremental costs of environmentally sound development, even though they themselves would share in the benefits. It should hardly be surprising, then, that people in countries such as China with rapidly growing economies are prone to interpret our environmental policies, and even our human rights policies, as cynical efforts to slow their development.

Turning to military factors, as China grows stronger, we also see a tendency to view a more powerful and prosperous China as an emerging security threat. What is too often missing in presentations on China's defense spending is any context for assessing what China is doing.

**First**, there is no historical context. Perhaps it will not surprise you to learn that most Chinese think of their country as peace-loving and as the victim, not the perpetrator, of foreign aggression. Admittedly, their neighbors have a different perception of China. Nevertheless, in considering their threat environment, Chinese strategists certainly take into account the fact that over the last 70 years China has been in military conflict with many of the world's most formidable military powers, including Japan, the United States, India, Russia, and Vietnam.

**Second**, there is an absence of discussion about the external considerations that affect China's determination of the military capabilities it needs, other than occasional references to the Taiwan strait. These considerations include:

- The demonstrated prowess of US advanced military technology in two wars with Iraq.
- The US deployment of a missile defense system that has a potential impact on China's own strategic deterrent.

**Third**, one rarely sees any effort to calculate what size of defense budget would be appropriate for China. After all, China is surrounded by major powers, several of whom have nuclear weapons, while several others are well on the way to getting them. Moreover, like the United States, China has enormous land and sea borders to defend.

**Fourth**, discussions of Chinese defense spending routinely fail to provide any context for assessing what other countries are doing on defense spending and how this may impact on China's own decision process.

**Fifth**, the analyses often reduce the quality of Chinese defense decision-making to simplistic levels. Here's a country that by any standard is far weaker than the United States, that will remain so for the indefinite future, and that has set a twenty to thirty year goal of concentrating on economic development so it can reach moderate developed country status. And yet this country is assumed to have leaders who are prepared to sacrifice these economic gains by rashly risking military conflict with global military titans.

All this is disturbing not because we shouldn't be concerned about China's rising defense spending. We should be concerned. But these issues require intelligent discussion. The danger is that unbalanced presentations will affect the way that US opinion-molders think about China. That inevitably would affect the outlook for US-China relations in the century ahead of us.

In wrapping up my remarks, let me briefly outline the case for optimism about prospects for positive political change in China.

- China's rapid growth has produced a sizeable middle class in the coastal areas.
- Chinese society is much more open than in the past.
- China's dependence on the outside world has grown immensely.
- Elsewhere in Asia, authoritarian governments that have remained open to the outside world and been active participants in the global economic system have, without exception, given way to representative forms of governance after thirty to forty years of rapid economic development; China is only part way along this path.
- China's fifth generation leaders who will come to power in 2012 will be the first to have reached their political maturity during China's period of reform and openness to the outside world.
- China's top priority goal is modernization, in a world where virtually every modern country has a representative system of government and a market-based economic system.
- Finally, within the bounds of greater China, as defined by Beijing, we already have three forms of governance. Two of these are more democratic than the system on the mainland. Mainland Chinese are well aware of this fact.

These factors do not make political liberalization in China inevitable; China will develop in its own way. But pessimists about China over the last quarter century have consistently been wrong.

What the debate about China illustrates is that much of the time we cannot even agree on the nature of the country we are talking about. We see in China what we choose to, and the debate is often more emotional than rational. This is dangerous, because the issues generated by China's rise ultimately involve the global balance of power, US interests in East Asia, questions of war and peace, and arguably the health of the US economy. That is why it is so important for Americans to be as informed as possible about developments in China. Only then can we have soundly based expectations about how the 21st century will be shaped by the vitally important relationship between the United States and China.