China as great power: from red menace to green giant?

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Abstract

China’s standing in the world—whether it is, or is seen to be, a great power—is a question of signal importance because of what great powers are capable of doing, what effects their actions and words have on others, and what is expected of them. By most conventional measures, China is at least on the verge of being a great power. Yet the country also occupies a pivotal global position in terms of its present and expected future impact on the environment. In the final analysis, because greatness is so much a function of a willingness to shoulder responsibility and demonstrate leadership, China’s standing as a great power may well be determined by the country’s response to the acute environmental stresses it faces. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd on behalf of The Regents of the University of California.

Keywords: China; Environmental protection; Environmental security; Great power; Superpower

One aspect of a country’s greatness, notes Yale University’s Jonathan Spence, is its capacity to attract and retain the attention of others. This capacity has been evident from the beginnings of the West’s encounter with China: “The sharpness of the feelings aroused by China in the West, the reiterated attempts to describe and analyze the country and its people, the apparently unending receptivity of Westerners to news from China, all testify to the levels of fascination the country has generated” (Spence, 1998, pp. xi–xviii).

Based on the “sightings” of China observers over the course of seven centuries, Spence concludes that the impact of China need have little or anything to do with the literalness or precision of actual experience, and that individual experience rarely
matches the allegedly universal trend. “We must imagine our [China-watching] pilots and navigators”, he says,

…holding rather simple instruments in their hands as they make those sightings. Furthermore, the hands that hold the instruments are often chapped with cold or sleek with sweat. Our guides are standing on sloping decks that shift angle without warning, and are often blinded by a burst of spray or dazzled by an unexpected dart from the previously beclouded sun. And the target of their curiosity remains distant and often somber… And then, too, they cannot even be sure that they have come to the right place (Spence, 1998, pp. xi–xviii).

Indeed, they cannot even be sure they have come to the right place. Thus it is that in considering China, present and future, we do well to view with a healthy skepticism the contemporary sightings of even the most expert observers in our midst. There are those who contend, for example, that China is, if not already a great power, destined for great-power status in the years ahead. Henry Kissinger, for one, argues that “China is on the road to superpower status… Of all the great, and potentially great, powers, China is the most ascendant”.

At the same time, there are those who point to the fact that China sits atop — and is itself the perpetrator of — some of the most massive environmental problems the world has ever known. In referring to “China’s environmental crisis”, investigative reporter Mark Hertsgaard has offered this appraisal: “China’s huge population and grand economic ambitions make it the most important environmental actor in the world today, with the single exception of the United States. Like the United States, China could all but single-handedly make climate change, ozone depletion, and a host of other hazards a reality for people all over the world”. What happens in China, he contends, is therefore central to one of the great questions of our time: “Will human civilization survive the many environmental pressures crowding in on it at the end of the twentieth century?” (Hertsgaard, 1997).

It seems axiomatic that the state of the environment is in fact vital to the future of civilization. How central a role, then, can a China that is — or is alleged to be — a great power be expected to play in that future? More importantly, to the extent that there is a fundamental relationship between environmental conditions and security — individual, national, regional, and global — what are the environmental security implications of China’s rise to great-power status?

**China as an object of strategic interest**

China’s standing in the world — whether it is, or is seen to be, a great power — is a question of signal importance. Why? Because of what great powers are capable

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1 See Kissinger (1994, p. 826, 829). Kissinger envisions the international system of the twenty-first century as containing “at least six major powers — the United States, Europe, China, Japan, Russia, and probably India” (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 23–24).
of doing, what effects their actions and words have on others, and what is expected of them. Great powers, once they have achieved such exalted standing in the eyes of others, must always be reckoned with, taken into account, and, in the extreme, deferred to. They get their way in this world in large part because they are great; and they are great in direct proportion to their ability to get their way.

At one level, great powers are identified as such by virtue of the fact that their status is accorded formal recognition — by their participation in international concerts and congresses and their permanent membership in the UN Security Council. In this formal sense alone, China, as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, is indeed a recognized great power.

At another level, great powers owe their standing to less-formal forms of recognition by others. Here, perceptions, credibility, and rhetorical bestowal of the appellation “great power” or “superpower” are the coin of the realm. Official US policy documents and public statements — such as the annual White House national security strategy report to Congress — typically steer clear of such anointments in the case of China. Somewhat less cautiously, the most recent United States Security Strategy for the East Asia–Pacific Region (US Department of Defense, 1998, pp. 30–31), issued by the Pentagon, refers to “China’s rise as a major power” and to China as “a nuclear weapons state, a leading regional military power, and [a] global player with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council”. The State Department’s December 1996 “China 2000” plan for the US Embassy in Beijing refers to China as “a major political power” and “a nuclear power” that “is becoming a global economic giant whose economy will soon rank among the world’s largest” (US Department of State, 1997).

Less official, but nonetheless telling characterizations of China that reflect the thinking of elements within the US defense establishment are contained in the recent annual strategic assessments published by the US National Defense University. The 1997 assessment speaks of “the emergence of China as a great power [one of five in the world] and its large influence on the affairs of the Asia Pacific region” due to its size, location, and potential. Within a decade, the report contends, “China could

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2 John Spanier (1990, pp. 53–54) offers this as one of three measures of great-power status. The other two are (1) recognition by other states and (2) possession of great military power (as a particular component of a state’s power that, more generally, also includes geographic location, size, population, industry, and wealth).

3 See the December 1999 (pp. 36–38), October 1998 (pp. 43–44), and May 1997 (p. 24) editions of A National Security Strategy for a New Century. There are, nonetheless, some countervailing, more forthcoming official examples. In February 5, 1997 testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet acknowledged “China’s reemergence as a world player” and specifically observed: “China stands poised to compete as a dominant regional military power, and it can aspire to be the first new great power since World War II”. Likewise, in December 1, 1998 remarks to the World Affairs Council in Reading, Pennsylvania, John Gannon, chairman of the National Intelligence Council, noted: “Scholars can and do debate what constitutes great power status. The intelligence officer at CIA who oversees most of our work on Asia argues for a simple test: a nation is powerful to the degree that it is a valued friend or a feared foe. By this measure China has been a potential power for some time. Now, however, we are starting to see that potential realized”. Both statements publicly released by Central Intelligence Agency.
become a power that is a peer to the U.S. in the East Asian theater” (National Defense University, 1997, pp. 45–55).

The 1998 and 1999 assessments take a different approach in portraying China, along with Russia and India, as a transition state. “Of all the transition states”, the 1998 report states, “China is the most significant, because it will eventually develop a degree of comprehensive national strength sufficient to challenge the values of the core [the United States and its free-market, democratic partners in Western Europe and Northeast Asia], should it choose to do so”. The 1999 report, in turn, says that although the other transition states will remain regionally influential, “only China has the potential to become a global power”. If China integrates with the Western community, the report notes, regional stability will be enhanced; if not, “China could become a major security problem and eventual military threat in ways that affect the entire region, as well as U.S. relationships with key allies” (National Defense University, 1998, p. 12, 37; National Defense University, 1999, pp. xiii–xix).

Much of the image we have of China’s strength and standing in the world is shaped by the authoritative views of both China watchers and geostategists, whose perceptions create the “reality” the rest of us accept. Alone among recent US presidents in his credibility on international affairs, Richard Nixon said that China “is destined to be one of the world’s leading powers in the twenty-first century… The potential of a billion of the ablest people in the world will inevitably make China into an economic giant and also a military giant”.4

Similarly, former Japanese prime minister Kiichi Miyazawa has observed: “By the year 2020, China will be a huge economic power as well as military power. It is bound to become the other giant power that, with the United States, will have the main say in the world 20 or 30 years from now” (Anon., 1997b).

Many others have echoed these views. Former presidential national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, for example, calls China “an emergent great power”. Murray Weidenbaum, former chairman of the president’s Council of Economic Advisers, has noted: “Of all the fundamental global changes the 21st century will bring, China’s rise to great power will be one of the most dramatic”. Richard Haass, a former senior member of the elder President Bush’s national security council staff, concurs: “No relationship may prove as fateful as that between the United States and China. Indeed, managing China’s emergence as a great power could well prove to be the defining foreign policy effort of this era”. President Carter’s national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, more measured in his assessment, suggests that although it is quite unlikely, even under the best of circumstances, that China could become a truly competitive global power, the country “is well on the way to becoming the preponderant regional power in East Asia”.5

One of the most provocative and tendentious treatments of the subject is the 1997

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4 Nixon (1988, p. 242, 246). Subsequently, Nixon would further observe (1992, p. 163): “China…has not only become a key political player but could also become a major global economic power in the coming decades… China’s emergence as a global heavyweight is inevitable”.

book, *The Coming Conflict With China*, by long-time journalists and China hands Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro. They argue that China, armed with growing military and economic strength, combined with the nation’s ambitions and xenophobic impulses, seeks to achieve regional hegemony that could challenge American global supremacy and even lead to military conflict with the United States:

China, after floundering for more than a century, is now taking up the great power role that it believes, with good reason, to be its historical legacy... China is an unsatisfied and ambitious power whose goal is to dominate Asia, not by invading and occupying neighboring nations, but by being so much more powerful than they are that nothing will be allowed to happen in East Asia without China’s at least tacit consent.⁶

Such views both reflect and further feed prevailing popular opinion on China’s standing in the world. The most recent Gallup–Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey of foreign policy opinion leaders and the general public offers a number of important findings in this regard. Nearly equal percentages of the general public (57%) and leaders (56%) consider China’s development as a world power to be a critical threat to US vital interests; 95% of leaders and 74% of the public consider China a vital interest of the United States; and 97% of leaders and 69% of the public believe China will play a greater role in the world in the next 10 years than it does today. A late-1997 Gallup poll likewise found that 22% of the American public consider China a current economic and military superpower, while 49% think that China, though not now a superpower, promises to become one.⁷

Perceptions play heavily in the great-power game. To be perceived as a great power or superpower is, in some sense, to be a great power. Thus, when George Washington University’s David Shambaugh (1996a) notes, “That China will emerge as a superpower early in the twenty-first century has achieved the status of conventional wisdom”, it forces us to a third level of great-power analysis — the level of actual capabilities, possessions, and potential. Such considerations provide ostensibly objective grounds for adjudging whether China — or any other country — deserves to be called a great power.

In terms of physical size, China is the fourth largest country in the world — about 3.7 million square miles, placing it behind Russia, Canada, and (when Alaska is

⁶ Bernstein and Munro (1997, p. 4). The most recent alarmist tract of this genre is Washington Times reporter Bill Gertz’s *The China Threat: How the People’s Republic Targets America*. Gertz characterizes China as “a new superpower threat to world peace and stability in the decades to come” and opines that “serious internal problems — widespread corruption, social unrest, and economic instability — might combine with [China’s] long-standing ambition to dominate the Pacific region and tempt Beijing into the dictator’s historic strategy: military aggression” (Gertz, 2000, pp. xi–xii).

⁷ See Rielly (1999) and *The Gallup Poll Monthly* (November 1997, p. 27). For more thorough, recent coverage of polling results concerning the generally negative attitudes of the American public toward China and “the China threat” over time, see http://www.pollingreport.com/defense.htm and http://www.pollingreport.com/china.htm.
included) the United States. It shares borders with 15 other countries, ranks third in the world in its reserves of natural resources, and has the highest hydropower potential in the world. With over 1.26 billion people, it is the world’s most populous country, accounting for one-fifth of the planet’s total; best current estimates have the country’s population growing to 1.48 billion (about 18% of the world total) by the year 2030. Its labor force (53% of which is in agriculture and forestry) is roughly 2.3 times the entire population of the United States.

China’s economy is the second largest in the world (in purchasing power parity terms), having quadrupled and grown at an average annual rate of about 9.5% since 1978. Although growth slowed to 7.8% in 1998 and 7.1% in 1999, many observers subscribe to estimates that China’s economy will overtake that of the United States early in the next century to become the world’s largest. Although China remains a predominantly agrarian economy, industry constitutes 49% of GDP. The country ranks 10th globally in international trade volume and enjoys sizable trade surpluses with most of the world’s major economies.

But what about China’s military capacity and potential? By the traditional definition, Edward Luttwak (1994) argues, great powers have been states strong enough to successfully wage war without calling on allies. However overstated this might be in the contemporary context, it nonetheless reminds us how central the military element historically has been and continues to be among the traditionally minded in determining great-power status.

Francis Lees, of St. John’s University, contends that a superpower today must possess four attributes: (1) a large, diversified national economy; (2) a major conventional military force; (3) a nuclear weapon capability; and (4) strategic geographic location. By these measures, he says, “Greater China (including Hong Kong) will attain superpower status early in the 21st century, based on its strategic geographic position in the Eurasian land mass, possession of a large conventional military force, a large national economy, and nuclear weapon capability” (Lees, 1997, pp. 39–40).

Clearly China meets these criteria. It is strategically located in what Zbigniew Brzezinski calls “the world’s axial supercontinent [Eurasia]” (Brzezinski, 1997b); it has one of the world’s largest, most dynamic economies; and it has the largest military force under arms (some 2.47 million active-duty personnel, almost twice that of the United States) and the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Yet the most vocal skeptics of the thesis that China poses a threat to regional stability and US preeminence invariably point to the underlying quality of China’s military — especially its ability (or inability) to project and sustain appreciable force over time and distance — as the ultimate determinant of its greatness.

Shambaugh, for example, asserts: “China will lack the military capabilities to [dominate and become the paramount power in East Asia] for at least a quarter century”. Brookings Institution analysts Bates Gill and Michael O’Hanlon voice similar criticism: “The PRC’s armed forces are not very good, and not getting better very fast... The numerous defects of its military establishment notwithstanding, China is a rising power that could one day significantly challenge the United States
and its allies in East Asia. But that day will not come anytime soon; it will be at least twenty years before China can pose such a threat.8

Such pronouncements are meaningful if we subscribe to the proposition that truly great powers must have militaries whose strength is measured by their ability to successfully wage conventional war and to seize and hold territory at considerable distances from their own shores. Both militarily and strategically, though, it remains to be seen whether such considerations are necessarily relevant to a China that continues, as in the past, to march to its own tune.

Militarily, China may not even be playing the same game as the West. It may instead be seeking to achieve advantage over the United States and others on its own terms, rather than theirs. As Arthur Waldron, director of Asian studies at the American Enterprise Institute, notes: “When approaching military tasks, the Chinese look above all else at the vulnerabilities (material and psychological) of their opponents. That means fighting asymmetrically — seeking to cripple and intimidate and confuse, to obtain a respectable payoff for a small risk.”9

The wording in China’s 1998 white paper on defense is especially telling in this regard:

A profound reform in the military field led by the development of high-tech weapons is taking place throughout the world. This reform, which is developing rapidly, will exert an important and profound influence on weaponry, military system and setup, combat training and military theory… During the new historical period, the Chinese army is working hard to improve its quality and endeavoring to streamline the army the Chinese way, aiming to form a revolutionized, modernized and regularized people’s army with Chinese characteristics (Anon., 1998b).

Thus, China could be embarked on a true revolution in military affairs that is little more than rhetoric elsewhere. Such a possibility has led Princeton University’s Aaron Friedberg to suggest: “The Chinese…may be looking for ways not simply to catch up with where we are now but to exceed where we are likely to be in twenty years. In the meantime, they seem to be searching for shortcuts: forms of military capability that will permit them quickly to counter our current strengths and to exert a greater political influence throughout East Asia” (Friedberg, 1999).

Strategically, it isn’t at all clear that military force projection is, or ought to be, the ultima ratio of great-power behavior in the postmodern media age we live in — especially if one places much stock in non-military “soft power” as a defining feature of post-Cold War international relations (see Nye, 1990). We might better acknowledge the importance of strategic reach in its postmodern context — that is, of projecting influence abroad in various forms cultural, economic, and technological,

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8 See Shambaugh (1996b) and Gill and O’Hanlon (1999a). For similar views, see Montaperto and Eikenberry (1996) and Ross (1997).

9 See Waldron (1998). For further discussion of such asymmetrical preferences, see Gill and O’Hanlon (1999b).
rather than military. Judged in these terms, China has strengths that more than compensate for any military deficiencies it might be said to suffer. Economic market potential alone endows China with great leverage over others. Orville Schell observes, for example:

The [Chinese communist] party has long mastered the art of controlling what its own people say and think. What is new is the way it has succeeded in controlling expressions of opinion from abroad as well. Its trump card in this global manipulation is, of course, its new ability to withdraw access to China’s swelling market and to put pressure on foreign businessmen, politicians, diplomats, academics and even some journalists to be silent or even to polemicize China’s brand of market Leninism (Schell, 1997).

Probably the most significant reflection of China’s strategic reach is the pervasiveness and impact of the country’s overseas population. Estimated to number more than 50 million, these diaspora Chinese are said to produce some $600 billion in goods and services, control more than $2.5 trillion of wealth (roughly equal to the combined GDP of France and the United Kingdom) and account for 75–80% of all foreign investment in China. In Malaysia, they constitute 30% of the population but control more than half (some say up to three-quarters) of the economy. In Indonesia, they are 4% of the population controlling 70% of the economy; in Thailand, 3% controlling 60%; in the Philippines, 3% controlling 70%; and in Singapore, 75% of the population dominating all walks of life (see Naisbitt, 1996, pp. 19–20; Waldron, 1996; Kwong, 1996).

Because the patriarchal kinship networks that link the overseas Chinese to one another are “a moral community whose members feel bound to each other and, more so than most ethnic groups, responsible for each other’s survival” (Seagrave, 1995; quoted in Schwalje, 1996), they are seen by some as constituting a new supranational economic superpower to rival Europe, Japan, and the United States. In the words of one analyst, “Greater China has become an economic force of global significance” (Crane, 1996).

Others believe, even more radically, that the ethnic Chinese identity could even supersede the need for states, producing a new “Chinese Commonwealth” and a reduced role for interstate activity in the region (Goodman, 1997). In the extreme, this extended Chinese community is the core of the Sinic civilization that Samuel Huntington sees as one of seven or eight that will contest with one another to define the multipolar, multicivilizational, post-Cold War international order. Citing Lucian Pye’s memorable characterization of China as “a civilization pretending to be a state”, Huntington believes the Chinese government considers mainland China the core state of a Chinese civilization toward which all other Chinese communities should orient themselves — “the worldwide representative of Chineseness”.10

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10 Huntington (1996, pp. 168–169). Somewhat more alarmist in its tone is Huntington’s subsequent article, ‘The erosion of American national interests’ (Huntington, 1997), in which he inveighs against diasporas — including Chinese-Americans — in the United States that exert increasing pressure on US foreign policy, while remaining loyal to and providing continuing support to their homeland.
It is China’s special sense of self — the belief in its own uniqueness and centrality, the notion that there is a transcendent galvanizing Chineseness — that is unquestionably the nation’s greatest source of strength, that makes China so resilient to change by others, that distinguishes it as perhaps the ultimate falsification of the thesis that the arrival of liberal, democratic capitalism signifies the end of history (see Fukuyama, 1992).

The University of Colorado’s Steve Chan offers the perceptive insight that China commands our attention not just because of its huge size, ancient legacy, or current or projected relative national power. It does so because it is the first non-western power since Japan to demand status recognition while showing itself not especially malleable to external efforts to influence its domestic arrangements or political agenda:

The importance of China has to do with perceptions, especially those regarding the potential that Beijing will become an example, source, or model that contradicts Western liberalism as the reigning paradigm. In an era of supposed universalizing cosmopolitanism, China demonstrates the potency and persistence of nationalism, and embodies an alternative to Western and especially U.S. conceptions of democracy and capitalism (Chan, 1999).

This brings us, then, to yet a fourth level of analysis for determining what constitutes a great power: the normative level. Here the question is whether a country that, by other measures, may be considered great, is willing to shoulder the responsibility and demonstrate the leadership required for true greatness. Samuel Kim, in a penetrating analysis of China’s standing as a great power, puts the point well:

The concept of a great power has always implied a synergy of two kinds of power: material power and normative power. To say that China is a great power is to say not only that it has special rights and privileges and commands formidable muscle power, but also that it has corresponding special duties and responsibilities and behaves like a responsible great power (Kim, 1997).

On the one hand, as an extension of the Mao-era idea of a “three-part world”, China persists in calling itself a developing country — and in fact is officially designated as such by the International Monetary Fund. Beijing’s 1996 white paper, “Environmental Protection in China”, begins with these words: “China is a developing country” (Anon., 1996a). At the same time, the Chinese leadership steadfastly denies any superpower aspirations — a position most forcefully enunciated a quarter century ago by Deng Xiaoping before the Sixth Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly:

China is not a superpower, nor will she ever seek to be one. What is a superpower? A superpower is an imperialist country [like the United States or the Soviet Union] which everywhere subjects other countries to its aggression, interference, control, subversion or plunder and strives for world hegemony. If capitalism is
restored in a big socialist country, it will inevitably become a superpower (quoted in Larkin, 1980).

On the other hand, China’s every action reflects a country that seeks the recognition and respect due a great power. There is even a passage in the Chinese constitution that reads: “The future of China is closely linked with that of the whole world.” Discerning observers realize that the so-called “rise of China” is really a “re-rise” or “re-emergence”. In the words of a 1996 Newsweek special report: “After 500 years of humiliation, a surging China is about to reclaim its historical position as one of the world’s great powers”.

For the most part, the “three-part world” theme has been superseded in Chinese foreign-policy discourse today by talk of “one superpower and multiple big powers” — an increasingly multipolar world in which the United States is the one (albeit declining) superpower, and China is one of a growing number of big powers that have become bold enough to say no to the (by definition, hegemonic) superpower.

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, codified in the Chinese constitution, continue, as they have for the past quarter century, to be the doctrinal centerpiece of China’s foreign policy: “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 in developing diplomatic relations and economic and cultural exchanges with other countries”. These principles provide the ideological rationalization by which China’s leaders try to maintain a strict demarcation between the country’s domestic and international affairs. The fact is, though, that the internal affairs of any great power cannot help but be everybody else’s business, while everybody else’s business becomes the acquired concern of a great power. So when economist and former vice presidential candidate Pat Choate observes that “China wants the privileges of a great power but without the obligations”, it is a reminder that the ultimate measure of China’s greatness will be (a) the country’s ability to recognize that its handling of such ostensibly internal matters as the environment and human rights cannot be insulated from the rest of the world, and (b) its willingness to act accordingly (see Choate, 1997).

China as a subject of environmental concern

In the final analysis, what truly distinguishes great powers from one another and from lesser powers is not merely their wherewithal and capacity to act but, more importantly, their normative behavior. We expect more of great powers — even though they frequently get by on muscle without fulfilling their obligations. And we generally tolerate more from lesser powers — ignorance, incompetence, oppression,
waste — even though they are regularly pressured by the more powerful to do more with less.

By declaring itself a developing country, China seeks to lower the threshold of expectation and responsibility it must measure up to. This, in fact, is a central consideration in China’s proposed accession to membership in the World Trade Organization, since Article XI of the WTO charter specifies that “the least-developed countries recognized as such by the United Nations will only be required to undertake commitments and concessions to the extent consistent with their individual development, financial and trade needs or their administrative and institutional capabilities” (Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization, April 15, 1994).

At the same time, by aspiring to great-power status (or being perceived as such), China heightens external expectations and focuses unwanted attention on its handling of otherwise internal conditions. Even if we were to concede what really can’t be conceded — that the environment is something that can be contained within national borders — China’s size, aims, and reach ensure that the country cannot help but have a significant impact on the environment in the years ahead. We do well, therefore, to ask whether China also is an environmental great power or superpower that thereby shoulders special regional and global responsibilities.

To begin with, China is one of eight countries the Worldwatch Institute has designated the E8 — states whose possession and consumption of resources, economic performance, and production of pollution disproportionately shape global environmental trends. Even more than the Group of Seven (G7) — the industrial states that have dominated the global economy since World War II — the E8, Worldwatch asserts, will help shape the future of the entire world. China, in particular, is expected to be “increasingly pivotal in any efforts to protect the global environment”.13

In making the claim (cited above) that, except for the United States, China is the most important environmental actor in the world today, Mark Hertsgaard further portrays China as “a greenhouse giant” whose particular impact on global warming could end up “plunging the world into potentially catastrophic territory” in the years ahead.14

*China Trade Report* characterizes China as an environmental superpower: “In light of China’s natural resource base, population, and rate of industrialization, it is not hyperbole to state that the leadership’s approach to deteriorating environmental quality will be decisive in determining a sustainable future for humanity”. Precisely because China’s demographic, economic, and industrial impact on the environment is and will continue to be so significant, the fear of such a prospect by others endows

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13 Flavin (1997). The other members of the E8 are the United States, Russia, Japan, Germany, India, Indonesia, and Brazil.

14 Hertsgaard (1997). In October 26, 1996 remarks at the Second High Level Roundtable on China’s Agenda 21, in Beijing, Eileen Claussen, then-assistant secretary of state for oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs, similarly observed: “Sustainable development in China is of particular interest to the United States because of China’s potential to transform the global environment through its own actions. Our two countries, perhaps more than any others, can determine whether issues such as climate change will ever be solved”. Remarks publicly released by US Department of State.
Beijing with leverage it can use — and already has used — for purposes of diplomatic “greenmail” to elicit negotiating concessions and financial and technological assistance from the world’s wealthier nations (Egan, 1997).

In their recent study, The Pivotal States: A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Developing World, Yale University’s Paul Kennedy and associates attempt to identify those countries, their futures poised at critical turning points, that are likely to affect regional and global security — and thus US interests — significantly in the years ahead. Daniel Esty, director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, suggests three criteria for determining how pivotal a state is environmentally: (1) the capacity for environmental issues in that country to affect both national and regional stability; (2) the potential for environmental spillovers onto the United States; and (3) the country’s centrality to global environmental negotiations. Based on these criteria, he concludes that China and Russia “stand out as the pivotal states” environmentally in the world of today and tomorrow:

China will soon be the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and its rapid economic growth is causing a range of other environmental harms to its neighbors. Thus, the country’s potential for causing serious transboundary environmental spillovers is unmatched. China’s unique position as the world’s most populous country and as the possessor of vast coal reserves gives it an indisputably central role in international environmental affairs (Esty, 1999).

Thus, China’s pivotalness environmentally is a function of, as much as anything, the country’s current and projected impact on global climate change — what Esty adjudges “the most potentially serious global environmental challenge”. China currently is the second largest emitter of carbon dioxide globally, contributing 13.5% of the world’s total (although its per capita emissions are but one-seventh those of the United States). Most estimates agree that, depending on the actual pace of economic development, the country could surpass the United States by as early as 2020 (see Zhang, 1998).

At the root of this greenhouse potential lies the confluence of two factors that also are at the heart of China’s more general strategic importance: the country’s massive and growing population, and the relatively steep trajectory of national economic growth. Both bear a direct relationship to China’s reliance on coal to meet national energy demands. China possesses about 13.5% of world coal reserves (behind only the United States and Russia), leads the world in both production and consumption of coal, uses almost 1.4 billion tons a year in accounting for three-quarters of its commercial energy needs, and seems certain, in light of economic imperatives, to continue such relatively heavy reliance in the future.

Global warming aside, though, China also is pivotal for the more general state of widespread environmental degradation it suffers. Allen Hammond, director of strategic analysis at the World Resources Institute, offers this succinct appraisal:

Environmental conditions in China could become intolerable if present trends continue. Urban air quality is already unhealthy, with pollution levels well
exceeding the World Health Organization’s guidelines in many of China’s cities, largely because of the country’s reliance on coal. But even midrange economic growth is expected to require a sixfold increase in energy consumption over the next half century, and high growth would mean even more. If expanded energy consumption were to translate into a comparable increase in urban air pollution, many cities would be literally unlivable... Uncontrolled dumping of toxic chemicals is already an important environmental issue in China, creating significant health problems, and the country’s industrial sector — and thus, potentially, its output of toxic materials — is projected to increase more than tenfold over the next half century... China also faces the prospect of increasingly scarce farmland and water... Already, water clean enough for drinking or even for industrial purposes is in short supply in many parts of the country (Hammond, 1998, p. 155).

Official US awareness of the importance of China’s environmental situation and its impact on the world is perhaps best reflected in remarks President Clinton made during and prior to his 1998 summit visit to China. In July 2 remarks to the people of Guilin, he noted: “More and more environmental problems in the United States, in China and elsewhere are not just national problems, they are global problems”. Earlier, in an address before the National Geographic Society in Washington, he had observed: “China and the United States share the same global environment... China is experiencing an environmental crisis perhaps greater than any other nation in history at a comparable stage of its development... It is a fool’s errand to believe that we can deal with our present and future global environmental challenges without strong cooperation with China” (Clinton, 1998a,b).

Just as the distinguishing feature of a truly great power in the strategic realm may be less its wherewithal and capacity to act than its normative behavior, so too the ultimate measure of an environmental great power is perhaps less the global impact of its environmental practices and conditions than its deeper philosophical stance toward the environment. Two documents, in particular, provide signal points of reference for understanding China’s underlying attitude toward environmental matters and thus the country’s potential for achieving greatness environmentally. The first is the 1991 Beijing Declaration, the result of that year’s Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development, which was hosted by China and attended by delegates from 40 other developing countries. The second is the June 1997 National Report on Sustainable Development, prepared by the Chinese government for that year’s Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Environment and Development (Anon., 1991; Anon., 1997c).

Each of these documents contains a set of principles that, as such, clearly reflect Beijing’s policy preferences on environmental matters. These principles (enumerated in Table 1) seem to portray a China that in reaffirming its self-proclaimed standing as a developing country, therefore thinks it: (a) should be free to pursue more-or-less unfettered economic development as a first priority; but that (b) nonetheless should be treated as an equal with the developed states (who continue to bear primary responsibility for the state of the environment); while (c) allowed to deal with environmental matters as it sees fit without outside interference or sanction; but (d)
Table 1

Principles of environmental protection

1991 Beijing Declaration

- Environmental problems must be addressed together with the process of development, by integrating environmental concerns with the imperatives of economic growth and development.
- The right to development of the developing countries must be fully recognized, and the adoption of measures for the protection of the global environment should support their economic growth and development.
- The special situation and needs of the developing countries should be fully taken into account. Each country must be enabled to determine the pace of transition, based on the adaptive capacity of its economic, social and cultural ethos and capabilities.
- It is imperative to establish a new and equitable international economic order conducive to the sustained and sustainable development of all countries, particularly the developing countries. Countries should be able to determine their own environment and development policies, without any barriers or discrimination on trade against them.
- International cooperation in the field of environmental protection should be based on the principle of equality among sovereign states. The developing countries have the sovereign right to use their own natural resources in keeping with their developmental and environmental objectives and priorities. Environmental considerations should not be used as an excuse for interference in the internal affairs of the developing countries.
- The developed countries bear the main responsibility for the degradation of the global environment.
- The developed countries must take the lead in eliminating the damage to the environment as well as in assisting the developing countries to deal with the problems facing them.
- The developing countries need adequate, new and additional financial resources to be able to address effectively the environmental and developmental problems confronting them. There should be preferential and non-commercial transfer of environmentally sound technologies to the developing countries.
- The developing countries will contribute to the process of environmental protection and enhancement by, inter alia, stepping up technical cooperation and transfer of technology among themselves.

(continued on next page)

with the financial and technological assistance from the developed world necessary to make environmental protection and sustainable development feasible.

If accurate, this assessment reads as an attempt by China to avoid responsibility or shift the burden of responsibility for the environment to others. This might lead us to accept Samuel Kim’s appraisal of China as the final word, for now, on the country’s standing — strategically and environmentally: “By conventional measurements…, China is a rising great power. Yet it remains an incomplete great power in a rapidly changing world where transnational challenges to and soft sources of power are becoming increasingly important. Thus, China’s future as a complete great power remains indeterminate, if not foreclosed” (Kim, 1997).

On the other hand, the principle stated in the 1997 national sustainable development
While environmental protection is a common task of humankind, the developed countries have greater responsibilities. The developed countries should honor their commitments on providing new and additional financial resources and on transferring advanced environmentally sound technology to developing countries on preferential terms.

International cooperation on environment and development must be based on mutual respect for the sovereignty of states. Respect for national independence and sovereignty should be taken as a fundamental principle in solving global environmental problems. Each country has the right to formulate, according to her national conditions, her own strategies, policies, and measures for addressing environmental protection and development. Meanwhile, each country should refrain from damaging the environment of other countries in the exploitation of its own natural resources.

World peace, stability, environmental protection, and development are indivisible. In the course of promoting global environmental protection and development, each country should strive to maintain her national stability and to safeguard regional and world peace. Each country, moreover, should seek to solve all disputes through peaceful negotiation and should oppose the threat or use of force.

Each country’s current practical interests, as well as the world’s long-term interests, should be taken into consideration simultaneously in dealing with environmental problems. While paying attention to some global environmental problems, priority should be given to regional environmental problems.

Global and regional environmental problems affect global and regional safety. They, at times, even play a decisive role. For instance, rivalry with each other for common natural resources may cause friction or even conflicts; and ecological disaster in one area may produce large numbers of environmental refugees. As for global environmental problems such as climate change and ozone layer destruction, etc., they threaten the safety of all countries in the world. This demonstrates that environmental pressure is indeed a source of safety concern (Ye, 1997).
If we give Dr. Ye the benefit of the doubt and infer that he was conceding (a) the effect *national* environmental problems may have on regional and global security, and (b) China’s share of responsibility for global environmental problems, it may suggest a China finally prepared to accept the obligations of a truly great power. Only time will tell.

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