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Climate change: the China Challenge

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Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge. China's Grand Strategy and International Security*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, Studies in Asian Security, 2005, 274 pp

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- 1 The central thesis of this book is that beginning in 1996 China put in place a grand strategy designed to create an environment that would be favourable for its economic development and to reduce the risks of a backlash to its rise as an economic, diplomatic and military power. In fact, many changes set out by Avery Goldstein—particularly the maintaining of very close and, in the end, relatively stable working relations with the United States—are testimony to the solid foundation of his analysis. However, this book also raises quite a few questions, both about the precise date of this new strategy and the nature of the changes observed in Beijing's foreign and security policy as a result.
- 2 The author's demonstration is in many respects convincing. It is true that 1996 was the climax of Sino-American tension over Taiwan and more broadly of the difficulties between China and the West in the post-Tiananmen period, and the beginning of a new approach by Beijing to its relations with the outside world. In its realisation that the world was going to remain dominated, at least militarily, by a single superpower—the United States—for a long time to come, and would consequently evolve towards multipolarity more slowly than it had hoped initially, that is, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China decided to open up more markedly to multilateralism and to establish with the other major countries (Russia, France, United States) or groupings of States (European Union, ASEAN) special partnership relations.
- 3 It is abundantly clear that the growth of military pressures on Taiwan, the many gesticulations and shows of military muscle by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the South China Sea and the acceleration in the modernisation of Chinese defence

system,—all of which was supported by a rhetoric that was at once anti-Western, nationalist and irredentist—could but favour the rise of the “Chinese threat” syndrome, not only in Japan but also in the United States, South-East Asia and to a certain extent Europe. As Goldstein well shows, the tightening of strategic links between Washington and its main allies in the Asia-Pacific region (Tokyo and Canberra in particular) has been one of the most direct factors in the “realignment” of Beijing’s international policy.

- 4 Why 1996? For the author, the year of the “missile crisis” is also that—inferred—of a reassessment by the Chinese Communist Party of its external strategy. In support of this thesis, Goldstein refers to a number of diplomatic initiatives taken by China in 1996. Among them he cites the setting up by China, Russia and three newly independent Central Asian republics of the “Shanghai group”, the first regional multilateral structure that Beijing not only joined but to which it also gave an impetus, transforming it in 2001 into the Shanghai Organisation for Co-operation. He also discusses a strategic partnership with Russia put in place by China in April 1996, and its intention, which it made public in August of the same year, to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and its openness to multilateral discussions with ASEAN, particularly concerning the disputed islands in the South China Sea. Mention is also made of Beijing’s attitude, at the time of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, which met with regional approval.
- 5 Yet, in spite of all this, we may wonder whether this was a real turning point. Everyone agrees that China’s global strategy has evolved since Tiananmen, and a fortiori since 1979 and the start of the reform process. Moreover, through the study of many source documents, analyses by Chinese researchers and interviews conducted in China, Japan and the United States between 1998 and 2003, Goldstein sheds light on a whole set of gradual but profound transformations in Beijing’s policy. These changes underscore both the Chinese Communist Party’s capacity to react and adapt and to initiate a slow but apparently irreversible process of integration into the international community, marked, for example, by China’s accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. The difficulty in analysis comes from the fact that the actor “China” has not stopped pursuing two fundamental objectives: 1) modernise the country without jeopardising the one-party political system in place today; 2) restore its status as a major power on the international stage. While these two priorities do lead the writer to discuss the relevance, and limits, of China’s Bismarkian tendencies today, they do not lead him to conclude that the country is a “revisionist power” as opposed to being a supporter of the status quo, judging this to be an over-simplified debate.
- 6 In fact, it is. Nonetheless, how can an economy which is developing at the pace and to the extent it is in inter-dependence with the outside world remain a power that contributes to the status quo (although it is often officially in favour of it)? We see this every day — in Asia, Africa and Latin America as well as in international organisations—as the rise of China directly contributes to changing the rules of play and forces the other powers to adjust their own strategy.
- 7 Furthermore, can we say that the “diplomacy of partnerships” heralds a more clear-cut opening up by the Chinese government to regimes that are politically different? This is far from being certain. On the contrary, these partnerships were set up by Beijing first and foremost in the hope of neutralising any direct criticism of its domestic system and of channelling any such criticism into “non-confrontational” dialogues which would

allow it to impose both its own view of international relations and its own strategy. It is not surprising therefore that China has experienced some difficulties in establishing such a partnership with the United States (once the Clinton era had passed, this partnership, albeit still “under construction”, was buried).

- 8 Finally, this idea of partnerships was put forward by the Chinese government with the aim of finally moving beyond the isolation of the post-Tiananmen period. While they may well have got underway in 1996, they came about under the auspices of diplomatic efforts at reintegration into the international community, which began, multilaterally, with China's active participation in the UNO negotiations in Paris on the future of Cambodia (1990). Beijing's signing up to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (1992) or on the contrary the tensions in 1999 (the stalled Sino-American negotiations over the WTO, the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, anti-American demonstrations, Lee Teng-hui's two-state theory) show that this process of integration is a slow and rocky one.
- 9 If there was one identifiable turning-point, it seems to me to have come out of the domestic policy debate during the winter of 1999-2000. Indeed, this debate (to which Goldstein refers, p. 155) led to a change both in Beijing's international policy and in its discourse. The failure of China's Taiwan policy (the election of Chen Shui-bian) and the arrival in power of an American president ill-disposed towards it have confirmed this development. We had to wait until this period for the Chinese government to really abandon a defensive and adversarial posture and to prefer instead a policy of participation and negotiation. Its denunciation of “hegemonism” disappeared from the Communist Party's charter; its criticisms of the American alliances in Asia and the enlargement of NATO gradually toned down; in place of its policy of accelerating the process of unification was substituted a strategy which made maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait a priority; and above all the great change in its foreign policy style and discourse, henceforth promoting “win-win” solutions and taking a pro-active approach in international fora. It was, moreover, in this context that the short-lived debate over “the peaceful emergence of China” appeared in 2003-2004.
- 10 It remains to be seen whether these changes are strategic or tactical in nature. Goldstein suggests that they have an important strategic component, adapting China to the international environment of the post-Cold War era. There has been some adaptation and it would be wrong to underestimate this capacity and talent of the part of the Chinese government. However, the major choices were already made back in 1979. While they were adjusted after 1989, particularly in 1992 with the relaunching of reforms, the dual objectives referred to above remain intact.
- 11 Lastly, Goldstein refers little to the internal-external nexus and the multiple economic, demographic and environmental constraints impinging on the Chinese government. Furthermore, these constraints can only take the People's Republic of China even further from the Bismarkian model, as the challenges to Beijing's international strategy could well come not from abroad, in particular the United States or Japan, but from within. In other terms, while the Chinese Communist Party has shown an exceptional capacity to adapt to the post-Communist world, it is not certain that it will be able to keep as successfully its stranglehold over the society that it governs and controls.
- 12 In spite of these reservations, anyone with an interest in Chinese foreign policy has much to gain from the very valuable contribution made by *Rising to the Challenge*.

13 Translated by Peter Brown