



The Asia Mess: How Things Did Not Turn Out As Planned

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By Arthur Waldron

Arthur Waldron is the Lauder Professor of International Relations in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania, and a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is author, editor, or contributor to more than twenty books.

Abstract: Clearly, something has gone wrong with the U.S. Asian policy that has now been in place for more than forty years. Today, China possesses military and economic power undreamed of in the 1970s. And it has embarked on a course that seeks fundamentally to alter the political and territorial status quo in Asia while using military force as she seeks to acquire territories she claims, far from her continental territory. This article surveys how this new situation developed and details the problems it poses. It concludes that neither we nor our allies understand the present situation and are caught unprepared. The situation can be managed and retrieved to be sure, but not without some major and quite unexpected changes.

When President Richard Nixon travelled to China in 1972, he sought to restore balance and usher in an era of peace and friendship. Americans, at least, viewed this as a “week that changed the world.” Neither side, one suspects, envisioned the possibility of conflict. On the Chinese side Zhou Enlai was notably enthusiastic, as were nearly all Americans. The hopes were for long-term cooperation.

Patently, however, these hopes have failed to materialize, both in the relatively uneventful three decades after establishing relations between Washington and Beijing, and even more so in the period since 2010, when inexplicable actions by the Chinese, as they adopted a more forward policy militarily and a deeply revisionist one diplomatically, forced the discarding of many long-standing assumptions.

Indeed, the U.S. and our allies are confronted by a China that is militarily and economically strong; that seeks to overturn and revise in her favor the international order that has prevailed in Asia since the 1950s; and that has proven quite willing to use military force against her neighbors to claim, what they have

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Richard Nixon meets with Mao Zedong in Beijing, February 21, 1972.
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long considered, their sovereign territories. It is a most worrying situation, for instead of the long-anticipated peace, the diplomacy of the 1970s seems, unintentionally, to have created the conditions for serious hostility between China and her neighbors, many of which are American allies, and thus with the United States. This article contends that this situation is the result of two factors.

The first factor is U.S. misunderstandings of what China's true goals were in the 1960s and 1970s. Misperceptions then led to an uncritical adoption of a policy that believed it was creating a great-power equilibrium among the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The goal, after decades of hostility in Asia, was for genuine peace. Many of the policy's drafters expected that a fundamental agreement about geopolitics would cement a strong relationship between Beijing and Washington that it would displace as an axis for Asia the then-existing net of security treaties, dating from the 1950s, that linked Washington to Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei, Manila, and so forth. Finally, it was believed that contact with the world, and the United States in particular, would lead China to become a more open society, abiding by both international and domestic law, and even quite possibly democratizing. Some policymakers still adhere to this framework, history lessons to the contrary.

The second factor was China's growing ability to understand American illusions. China used this understanding with great skill to promote her own goals, effectively making Washington an unintentional enabler of her attempt to rise to regional hegemony. Thus, dangerous actions of territorial seizure from the 1970s

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