

## V I E W P O I N T

Josef Joffe

# Getting Rich, But Not Rowdy

## Why China's rise could be more peaceful than those of other powers

**A**FTER EASTER, CHINA'S PRESIDENT HU JINTAO WILL VISIT Washington to huddle with George W. Bush. And well the two of them might, for the Chinese-American relationship will decide the course of our century just as much as the hot wars with Germany and Japan, and the cold war with the Soviet Union, determined the fate of the last one.

Why throw China in with Germany and Japan, two countries that are now as aggressive as pussycats? Because all three exemplify the oldest and meanest problem of world politics: how to deal with rising powers. History has written an iron law about such powers' trajectories: First, they become rich, then rowdy. China is but the latest instance. As states consolidate politically and then take off economically, they begin to claim a "place in the sun," as the future German Reich Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow famously proclaimed in 1897.

With the ravages of the Cultural Revolution behind it, China's economy has been growing at around 10% a year since the turn of the millennium. Its defense budget is expanding at the same clip. It routinely threatens Taiwan with war. It has staked out territorial claims in the South China Sea against lesser neighbors. It demands a seat at the table of the great powers, and it forages insistently for oil and gas around the planet. Beijing is softly signaling Washington: "Move over, the Western Pacific is our lake."

This is a familiar pattern. In the late 19th century, the rapid risers were Germany, Japan and the U.S. itself. Though oceans apart, they embarked on similar careers. The first step was national unification. In Japan, the Meiji Restoration consolidated fragmented, feudal power into a technocratic and imperial state. In Germany, Bismarck fused 25 kingdoms and duchies into the Second Reich. In the U.S., the Civil War ended with the Union restored. Step two was rampant economic growth, with all three overtaking the established powers in the production of iron, steel and energy—those industries that would soon yield guns, bombs and ships. Step three: expansion and war. The Japanese took on Russia, China and, in 1941, the United States. The Germans made two bids for hegemony in World Wars I and II. Though a democracy, the U.S. itself could not resist the lure of empire, grabbing Cuba and the Philippines from Spain in 1898.

Will China go down the same blood-soaked road? The answer depends not only on Beijing, but also on Washington.

That is why the Hu-Bush encounter is prime-time world politics. It is a meeting between the No. 1 and the would-be No. 2. While smiling into the cameras, Bush and Hu will continue to play for the highest stakes: a global order for our century that will both contain and accommodate the restless Chinese giant. Bush will have read the intelligence assessments of China's soaring defense outlays; from the newspapers, he already knows that the U.S. trade deficit with China has shot up to \$200 billion. Hu will arrive well briefed on the subtle strategic game the U.S. is playing against China. The U.S. has tightened its military bonds with Japan (which now has the world's third largest surface navy); it is forging an alliance with India; and it is expanding its economic presence in Vietnam, its former enemy, while strengthening its traditional ties to Australia and New Zealand.

It would be hard to find a more pure example of balance-of-power politics, but if Bush continues to pull the strings as delicately as the U.S. has done in the recent past, the game won't degenerate into a replay of World Wars I and II. Compared to the previous contenders, both sides have reasons to be cautious. China cannot risk its trade surplus with the U.S., and Washington must speak softly lest Beijing dump its vast reserves on the market, driving down the value of the dollar. The U.S. needs China to constrain North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and China needs the U.S. as a counterweight against a resurgent Russia.

This is why the U.S. and the new claimant to the superpower title have been walking around each other on eggshells. It's power politics, all right, but with swords practically welded into their scabbards. Yes, China is on a trajectory like the one that ended the careers of Imperial Japan and Germany. But history need not repeat itself. There is a resilient web of common interests between the U.S. and China that acts like a straitjacket on their strategic competition. Moreover, there are the lessons of history. Yesterday's would-be supremacists were so reckless because they did not know the price of miscalculation: the eventual obliteration of Berlin and Tokyo. Today, nuclear weapons have increased the price a hundred-fold. The Chinese know it, and so do the Americans. Between the two giants of this century, tempers will flare, but smiles will prevail—at this and the next Hu huddle. ■

Quelle: TIM

Montag

Nr:

Seite:

**Time (international)**

17.04.2006

16

33

*Josef Joffe is publisher-editor of the German weekly Die Zeit and a fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. His Überpower: America's Imperial Temptation will be published in June*

**Bush and Hu, in Beijing, had reasons to speak softly**

TAKANORI SEKINE—AFP/GETTY IMAGES