

THE WORLD: China Loses Credibility

U.S. Policy Change Toward Beijing

BY J. MICHAEL WALLER

Once valued as a stabilizing force in Asia, China now is seen by official Washington as a fomentor of fear and a disruptive force determined to change the political map.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is losing its hard-won image as a force for stability in Asia as key thinkers in and around the Bush administration are beginning to view it as a dangerous and often reckless power that is fomenting fear and instability. If this change sweeps through the government leadership like other recent paradigm shifts — for instance, the quickly spreading view that Saudi Arabia no longer is a stable force in the Middle East but a corrupt and unpopular financier of terrorism — Sino-American relations will be headed for the rocks. That's bad news for the Chinese Communist Party leadership and the U.S. and other companies that have built their fortunes on it.

The stakes are tremendous. Much of the U.S. economy now depends heavily on the Chinese status quo. The nature and aspirations of China's government could do to the region what the Soviet Union had done to many of its neighbors: combine subtle or actual threats and subversion with positive instruments of economics and diplomacy to intimidate or "Finlandize" the region into submission.

In practically every category — from human rights to border disputes, weapons proliferation to terrorism, free navigation of the seas to control of satellite orbits in space — official Washington sees the unelected Chinese government as being more of a problem than a solution. This view is gaining acceptance in part because of the work of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, a bipartisan, congressionally chartered panel that issued its first report last year. It is preparing a follow-up under the chairmanship of former



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Keep an eye out: President Bush may decide to keep his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao, at arm's length.

National Security Council official Roger W. Robinson (see "New Reports Detail the China Threat," Aug. 19, 2002).

Critics of the China skeptics say the PRC is militarily incapable of projecting its power and presents no short-term threat. A recent Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) study concludes, "The Chinese military is at least two decades behind the United States in terms of military technology and capability," and the advantage will "remain decisively in America's favor beyond the next 20

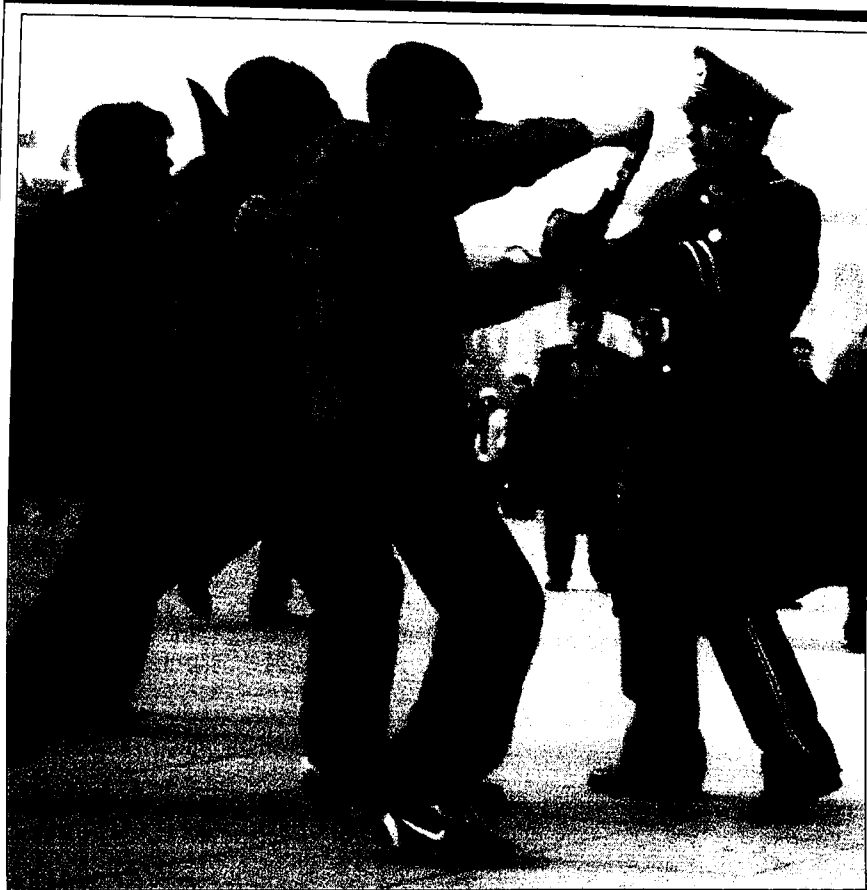
years" if U.S. military-acquisition and spending trends continue. However, even the CFR admits that its conclusions might be premature.

Military experts are paying attention. Richard Fisher, editor of the Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief* and an adjunct Asia scholar at the Center for Security Policy, credits the CFR report with addressing current and potential Chinese threats, but says the conclusions are premised on faulty assumptions about the risks of predicting what Beijing will do and the means by which the PRC obtains high-tech assets to modernize its forces.

Advances in military hardware and communications aren't the only keys to the PRC's growing arsenal. Beijing has invested considerably in psychological coercion of other countries, preying on the fears of its smaller neighbors, subverting some from within through business deals and payoffs, and offering the carrot of trade deals, favorable loans and military cooperation. Its economic policy of building and selling weapons of mass destruction to any customer with enough cash has an added benefit, in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party, of threatening the interests of its enemies — the United States and its European and Australasian allies, as well as emerging democratic rivals such as India. China has been a principal supplier of advanced technologies in communications, nuclear weapons and missiles for Iran, North Korea and the late Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq — the triad President George W. Bush calls the "Axis of Evil."

At the same time, Beijing calls itself an ally in the fight against weapons proliferation and terrorism, but with less and less credibility. A recent closed-door meeting of sinologists and defense experts in Washington underscored the evolving shift. "What has China done as an ally in the war on terrorists?" one participant asked. The rest looked at each other around the table. No one could think of a thing.

"They support our position on Xinjiang," quipped a participant, prompting a round of head-shaking and chuckling. Xinjiang province, whose ethnically Turkic population has been seething with resentment and resistance against Beijing's political, cultural and ethnic controls, is the site of strong, underground, anticommunist activity. For decades the central government harshly has repressed the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang, much as it has the conquered peoples of Tibet. But because the Xinjiang



ANDREW WONG/REUTERS



Fighting on two fronts:
Beijing uses the war on terrorism as justification for suppressing dissent at home and modernizing its nuclear-missile force.

population is mostly Muslim, Beijing has tried to justify its repression in the name of fighting al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden. Incredibly, the U.S. State Department voiced support for the PRC's get-tough approach in Xinjiang, prompting the ironic quip.

The Chinese leadership has used its "partner" status in the world war on terrorism to crack down even further on religious, political and social movements. According to Al Santoli, editor of the American Foreign Policy Council's *China Reform Monitor*, "Beijing is using the war on terror as an excuse to imprison and execute political opponents and religious leaders," including underground Roman Catholic clergy, democracy activists and the outlawed Falun Gong spiritual movement.

Even the State Department responded to this, at least expressing "deep concern" over the life sentence imposed on Wang Bingzhang last February, stressing that "the war on terrorism must not be misused to repress legitimate political grievances or dissent."

The sheer volume of evidence presents a damning indictment of the PRC as a fomenter of instability and fear, a purveyor of weapons of mass destruction to the world's most dangerous state-sponsors of terrorism, a supplier of nuclear-missile technology to the planet's most tense hot spots and a unilateral force

committed to changing the world's political map. Analysts see Beijing pursuing a two-track strategy of sustained, low-level military pressure with positive inducements of trade, loans, development assistance and even security cooperation — which combined create a sense of fear and dependency on the part of China's neighbors.

A survey of countries shows the pattern that is causing some in Washington to reassess their perspectives about the PRC's role in the world.

- **Burma:** Chinese support for the military junta in Burma, now known as Myanmar, is crucial to the survival of that diplomatically isolated regime. Beijing is seen as dominating the Burmese economy through massive infrastructure projects, large loans, debt forgiveness and the upgrading of naval port facilities and electronic intelligence outposts on the Bay of Bengal — prompting India to worry that China will use Burma to open up a "west coast" to the Indian Ocean.

- **Cambodia:** Beijing is stepping up its military relations with Phnom Penh, has begun training Cambodian military officers and appears poised to replace the World Bank as a major lender to the Hun Sen government's programs. Beijing continues to oppose genocide trials for leaders of the former Khmer Rouge regime.

- **India:** China's nuclear-weapons buildup, and its proliferation of nuclear-

weapons and missile technology to Indian archenemy Pakistan, are among the reasons India is deploying a nuclear-missile arsenal of its own. "To tackle the situation today we must have the same strength that our neighbors have," Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes told reporters last fall. "China is not only economically stronger, but has conducted nuclear tests much before us. They are also well-armed. Pakistan's arrogance is because of China's backing."

- **Japan:** China's new assertiveness in the context of its own nuclear-missile modernization and naval expansion, and its unrelenting support for North Korea's nuclear-missile program, have prompted Japanese leaders publicly to consider amending their constitution to allow building of an independent nuclear force.

- **Korea:** Arguably the tensest hot spot in the world, the Korean peninsula remains divided, with the heavily militarized Communist regime in the north kept in power largely from PRC aid and technology. Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, sees Pyongyang capable of building a nuclear-missile force capable of striking Japan, U.S. military bases in Okinawa and Guam, and much of the Pacific. In recent months the North Korean government openly has threatened "war" against the United States and its allies, with Beijing alter-

nating between obstruction and conciliation. Earlier this year the PRC blocked an attempt at the United Nations by the United States, Britain and France to condemn North Korea for selling weapons of mass destruction.

- **Pacific Islands:** Small islands in the Pacific, so vital to the Allies in World War II and to U.S. national security today, are coming under increasing Chinese influence. The island nation of Kiribati, near the U.S. missile-defense testing site in Kwajalein, Marshall Islands, erupted in controversy in December 2002 when former president Ieremia Tabai accused the PRC of meddling in his country's elections. President Teburoro Tito, who was re-elected amid the scandal, had allowed the Chinese military to build a satellite base on the island, which intelligence sources say lets Beijing spy on U.S. missile-defense tests.

- **Philippines:** Beijing calls for antiterrorism cooperation with Manila in the Asia-Pacific region, but it continues to occupy a Philippine reef it militarized in the South China Sea off Palawan province.

- **Singapore:** This staunch U.S. ally, which recently completed port upgrades to host U.S. Navy warships, including aircraft carriers, announced it is withdrawing its military-training facilities in Taiwan and moving them to the PRC.

- **Sudan:** Through oil deals and sales of military hardware, Beijing is propping up the Islamist regime in Khartoum, helping it to wipe out the country's Christian population in the south. Sudanese Christians and animists have been resisting government brutality in a civil war, driven in part by the regime's attempts to clear huge swaths of land to enable the state-owned PRC oil company, Petro China, to drill in a multibillion-dollar deal.

- **Taiwan:** The PRC slowly is escalating the prospect of a military attack on Taiwan, maintaining the view that the independently governed island is a renegade province to be "reunited" with the mainland under Communist Party rule. Beijing continues to emplace CSS-5 and CSS-6 medium-range ballistic missiles within striking distance of Taipei. Through a combination of threats, business incentives and infiltration of Taiwan's new multiparty democracy, the PRC leadership works to squeeze the island country into an unwilling merger.

- **Thailand:** Longtime ally Thailand is becoming more anti-American and pro-Beijing. The Bangkok newspaper *Matichon* recently accused the Thai government of moving closer to the PRC and Burma, while acting "as though the U.S. is an adversary." The paper observes, "Through the government's

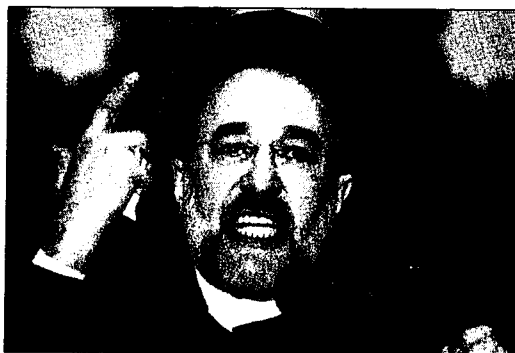
propaganda campaign, the Thai public is led to believe that the United States is bent on taking advantage of Thailand. ... Since we hate the United States [according to government logic], we now turn to another superpower, China."

- **Venezuela:** Beijing finds a new Latin American friend in the regime of Col. Hugo Chavez, the anti-U.S. strongman who fancies himself a 21st century Simón Bolívar. U.S. defense sources tell *INSIGHT* that, following the withdrawal of American Special Forces trainers from Venezuela, Chavez invited China to send in about 100 special-operations experts to train his army.

Pentagon officials tell this magazine that other trends also worry U.S. strategists. Beijing continues to make illegal, unilateral claims on international waters that threaten freedom of navigation, specifically in the South China Sea. Despite the near-constant presence of U.S. military aircraft to show a commit-

saw the exhibition of three new solid-fueled space-launch vehicles he says "are intended to form the basis for a direct-ascent antisatellite ballistic missile and the DF-31 intercontinental ballistic missile." Combined with miniature antisatellite weapons the PLA already has developed, and an emerging doctrine to blind the United States by destroying key satellites in the event of a conflict, the development has U.S. planners fearful of a threat against which the United States has no defense. "If the PLA is able to disable or destroy enough critical U.S. military satellites," Fisher says, the "20-year [U.S.] technical advantage would be rapidly diminished."

Meanwhile, U.S. counterintelligence sources say Beijing's extremely aggressive espionage operations continue unabated. "The Chinese remain fully focused on collecting intelligence on all aspects of American political, economic, industrial and military technology, and



Exporting terror: Iran's Khatami, top left, Saddam Hussein, and North Korea's Kim, left, sought weapons of mass destruction courtesy of China.

ment to freedom of the waters in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, the Chinese military continues aggressively to attempt interceptions of reconnaissance aircraft, similar to that which provoked the May 2001 incident that forced down a U.S. Navy EP-3 plane and its crew.

Chinese ambitions to challenge U.S. domination of space are another worry at the Defense Department. Fisher, author of a forthcoming book on the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), attended the recent Zuhai Air Show and

maintain a host of political-warfare capabilities in place to limit the U.S. ability to respond," one official says. U.S. counterintelligence remains in disarray over the disclosure of major Chinese penetrations of the FBI, in which an alleged PRC agent maintained affairs with two FBI agents on behalf of Beijing's spy service. The case against the alleged spy and the two former agents now is in federal court.

Beijing's "long-term strategic objective is to drive American bases and influence out of the Pacific region and to exercise hegemony over it," according to Australia-based sinologist Peter Zhang. "I wrote those words nearly four years ago," he said in a recent essay for the *New Australian*. "Since then events in the region have only strengthened my assessment."

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