

**TWO PATHS TO WAR:  
THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR VERSUS THE DYNAMICS OF  
CONTEMPORARY SINO-AMERICAN CONFRONTATIONS**

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During the past year, there have been numerous and somber reflections, rather like those during a traditional period of mourning, about the great and tragic events that occurred just 100 years ago – the beginning of the First World War. And in the course of these melancholy reflections about the past, there naturally have arisen anxious concerns about the future. Is it possible that we may once again be entering into an era of great conflicts, or even of a great war, between the great powers of the time? Are there important and ominous similarities between the international situation before the First World War and the international situation of today?

In 2015, there are at least two theaters or regions where the great powers now seem to be leading toward greater conflict. Here in Europe, the most immediate theater of concern is of course that involving Russia and Ukraine, and more broadly Russia's "near abroad," where acute confrontation between Russia and the West has been occurring since February 2014. But the theater that has been the scene of

dangerous confrontations for an even longer period, especially since 2010, has been that involving China and its three literal seas – the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea (or as the Chinese often call it, the North China Sea). The topic of this particular conference panel – “Northeast Asia: The Balkans of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?” – recognizes these confrontations and their possible analogies to the events that led to the First World War a century ago.

### The Level of Geography and Geopolitics

At one analytical level, that merely of the geography, or perhaps geopolitics, of particular regions themselves, there does not seem to be any obvious and relevant analogy. If Northeast Asia is defined to encompass the countries of China, North and South Korea, Japan, and perhaps Russia in its Far East – all strong and well-established states – there is very little similarity between these states, either individually or collectively, to the countries of the Balkans a century ago, which were a motley collection of imperial territories (Croatia and Bosnia), recently-independent and fragile states (Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Montenegro, and Albania) and disputed borderlands (Macedonia). Indeed, if we are looking for a contemporary geographical or geopolitical analogy to the Balkans in Asia, it is more likely to be found in Southeast Asia or Central Asia, than in Northeast Asia. Conversely, if we are looking for an early-20<sup>th</sup> century analogy to the Northeast Asian theater today – a system composed of a small number of strong states – it is more likely to be found in Northwest Europe, where a few strong states of greatly different size (Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Britain) engaged in

growing conflict within a maritime domain (the North Sea). But even this analogy – one at the geographical or geopolitical level – is probably too strained to be very useful.

There are, however, important features of the international politics of a century ago which have similarities with some of the features of today. These are to be found at a different – and a deeper and broader—level, that of some perennial, even classical, themes in the history of international politics. In particular, we will consider two such themes: (1) the dynamics of hegemonic transitions; and (2) the dynamics of alliance systems.

### The Dynamics of Hegemonic Transitions

The first of our themes is that of the recurring drama of a rising and revisionist power confronting a dominant, but declining, status-quo power. Scholars of international relations refer to this phenomenon as “the hegemonic transition.” It is of course a phenomenon well-known and long-remembered in European history, one evoked by such examples as the Spain of Phillip II, the France of Louis XIV and Napoleon, and the Germany of Wilhelm II and Hitler. In 1914, the most obvious rising power was Germany, and the most obvious status-quo power was Britain, and more broadly the British Empire. Today, of course, the most obvious rising power is China, and the most obvious status-quo power is the United States, and more broadly the American alliance system in the Western Pacific, including its Northeast Asian allies of Japan and South Korea. By now, this analogy between Germany versus Britain, on the one hand, and China versus America, on the

other hand, has been a topic of concerned and continuing discussion for almost two decades, and this has been true both in China and in the United States. The analogy is a critical concern of Henry Kissinger in both of his two most recent books, On China and World Order.<sup>1</sup>

In the long history, the great parade, of rising powers versus status-quo ones, the final act of the drama has almost always been a great war. This of course was the case with the famous, and notorious, European examples, which we have mentioned above. In one variation on this theme, the rising power becomes so confident in its newly-acquired power that it engages in a series of revisionist and aggressive actions, which then provokes the status-quo power into a military reaction and resistance. Conversely, by a second variation, the status-quo power, observing and fearing the growing strength of the rising power, launches a preventive and pre-emptive military action against its challenger.

The alternative of containment. This dismal history gives us good cause to be concerned about the growing conflicts between China and America. However, there have been a few exceptions to this story of the hegemonic transition leading either to expansion, aggression, and war or to prevention, aggression, and war. One of these involves two powers who were in effect rising at the same time, i.e., the United States and the Soviet Union after 1945. In this case, there was no longer a truly great status-quo power, Britain having exhausted itself during the Second World War. The long, forty-five-year history of the Soviet-American conflict showed that there could be an alternative variation on the theme of the hegemonic transition, one defined by a policy of containment (coupled with a strategy of deterrence), with

the result being the long Cold War, rather than a great hot war. Although we normally think of containment as being the policy which the United States deployed against the Soviet Union (which is true), it was also a policy which the Soviet Union deployed against the United States, most obviously in Eastern Europe but also, in some respects, in regard to several countries of the Middle East (e.g., Egypt, Syria, and Iraq in the 1950s-1970s).

Containment is now seen as a great success, but it entailed two very destructive, if local, hot wars in the course of the long and general Cold War – the Korean War and the Vietnamese War (and one might add the Soviet war in Afghanistan as well). It also produced two extremely dangerous nuclear crises – the very well-known Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 and also the largely unknown but close to catastrophic “Able Archer” (the name of a U.S. nuclear exercise) crisis of November 1983.<sup>2</sup> As it eventually turned out at the end, deploying the policy of containment during the long Soviet-American conflict did succeed in displacing a hot world war with a cold one, but the international system was often perched unsteadily on the brink of the nuclear abyss.

Moreover, it will not be very easy for the United States to simply re-deploy the policy of containment from the Soviet Union of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the China of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Containing the Soviet Union was usually a matter of containing it within clearly-demarked land boundaries, and these red lines of containment also served as trip wires for deterrence. In contrast, containing China, at least with respect to its three littoral seas, entails ambiguous and disputed maritime zones and uninhabited islands and islets. It is difficult to draw a red line in blue water. In

any event, the Chinese have thoroughly studied the U.S. containment of the Soviet Union, and they have determined that they are not going to let something like that succeed against them.

The other notable exception to the normal course of hegemonic transitions involves another case of two powers who were rising at the same time, i.e., the United States and Germany in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This time, there was indeed a status-quo power, and it was Britain and its empire. Confronted by a kind of dual challenge posed by these two quite different rising powers, Britain responded in two very different ways.

Toward Germany, Britain essentially pursued a policy of containment. As the Germans rapidly built a large and advanced navy and deployed it in their two adjacent seas – the Baltic Sea and the North Seas – the British responded by building up their own navy, so that it was even larger and more advanced than it had been before. The tensions and alarms produced by this naval arms race spilt over into other arenas where there were disputes – diplomatic (e.g., alliances), colonial (e.g., the Boer War), and economic (e.g., trade competition). Britain's actions in all of these arenas were shaped by its containment policy toward Germany, and Germany's actions in all of these arenas were shaped by its determination to break out of this containment. In the end (1914), Germany did break out, Britain did try once more to contain it, but this time with military force, and the First World War was the result.

The alternative of appeasement. In contrast, toward the United States, Britain essentially pursued a policy of appeasement. As the Americans rapidly built up a

large and advanced navy and deployed it in two of their adjacent seas – the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea – a number of incidents and disputes occurred between Britain and the United States with respect to this region, culminating in the Venezuelan Crisis of 1895. In this case, however, Britain backed down, and over the course of the next decade, it steadily withdrew its military forces and ceded its leading role in the region to the United States. The mentality of accommodation provided by this military appeasement spilt over into other arenas where there had been disputes – diplomatic (e.g., new treaties), colonial (e.g., the new Panama Canal project), and economic (e.g., a new preponderant role for American trade and finance in the region). In the end (1917), the United States had come to such a mutuality of interests with Britain that it came to its aid not only in the First World War, but in the Second World War also.

Of course, the British only adopted appeasement toward the United States because they saw it as a more remote and less threatening adversary than Germany, and they had to concentrate their forces against the greater enemy. Thus, a policy of appeasement, which avoided one possible war, only came into being because there was simultaneously a companion policy of containment in the opposite direction, which resulted in another war. It seems, then, that the exceptions to the general pattern that hegemonic transitions end in a great war may really only be exceptions that prove the rule.

Given this generally dismal history of hegemonic transitions, there is ample reason based upon this theme alone to be concerned about the growing confrontations between China and the United States. And this concern is deepened

when we observe another theme which is amplifying and aggravating these confrontations.

### The Dynamics of Alliance Systems

Our second theme is that of the potentially destructive dynamics of alliance systems, and particularly of the commitments that great powers make to their allies. In the aftermath of the First World War, a vast literature grew up which focused upon the dual-alliance system, that is the alliance between the Entente Powers of France, Russia, and Britain, on the one hand, and the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. This was seen as the principal cause of turning a local crisis in the Balkans into a European, and ultimately a world, war. (The sequence or domino-effect is well-known: the Austrian attack on Serbia over a Balkan quarrel activated the Russian commitment to Serbia, which activated the Russian attack on Austria, which activated the German alliance with Austria, which activated the French alliance with Russia, which activated the German attack on France through Belgium, which activated the British alliance with France).

Today, we hardly have a dual-alliance system – China having only one ally, which is North Korea – but we certainly have a very elaborate and established one-alliance system, with the United States having security treaties with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines and having other security commitments to Taiwan. In the past four or five years, China has repeatedly challenged Japanese claims in the East China Sea and Philippine claims in the South China Sea, and therefore it has begun to challenge the U.S. security commitments and alliance system as well.<sup>3</sup>



The U.S. response to the Chinese challenge. The United States has responded to these challenges by reinforcing and even extending its security commitments in the region. In the Fall of 2012, following several incidents involving abrasive confrontations between Chinese and Japanese naval vessels near the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands in the East China Sea, the Obama administration publically announced that the U.S. security treaty with Japan applied to these disputed islands. In actuality, this was the first time that the United States had officially extended its security commitment to these territories. At the time that the Nixon administration returned the Ryukyu Islands to Japan in 1971, it extended the U.S. security treaty with Japan to that chain of islands. That extension, and therefore revision, of the treaty was duly ratified by the U.S. Senate. However, the Nixon administration officially acknowledged that Japan had never administered the Senkakus as part of the Ryukyus, that the international status of the islands was in dispute between Japan, China, and Taiwan, that the final status of the islands should be the subject of future negotiation between the disputing parties, and that the U.S. security commitment therefore did not apply to the Senkakus themselves. This remained the official U.S. position until the Fall of 2012. The extension of the U.S. commitment at that time therefore represented a substantial enlargement of the U.S. guarantee to Japan and a risky escalation in the Sino-American confrontation in that region.

A year earlier, in November 2011 and following several incidents involving confrontations between Chinese and Philippine vessels near the Spratly (Nansha) Islands and other islets in the South China Sea, the Obama administration publically announced that the U.S. security treaty with the Philippines applied to these

territories. This also represented a substantial extension of prior official U.S. security commitments to the Philippines. It is also characterized by potentially dangerous ambiguity, particularly since the actual definition of what is an islet – and therefore an included territory – and what is merely an often water-covered reef or part of a disputed maritime zone, is much less clear than it is in the case of the Senkakus.

The U.S. security commitment to Japan with respect to the Senkakus and to the Philippines with respect to the Spratlys, in the context of ongoing confrontations between China and the United States in the region, have created the risk that the U.S. could be dragged into a military conflict with China, simply by military initiatives undertaken by allies who have their own distinct political interests and practices (as well as their own operational dysfunction and incompetencies). Each issue is a potential flash point that, in the midst of a crisis confrontation, could easily escalate into a military explosion. They are accidents waiting to happen. Indeed, their combination of official commitment with ambiguous delineation and uncertain resolve make these flash points as unstable as any seen in the long history of great-power security commitments to the small and obscure interests of allies. They are, for example, potentially more unstable even than the famous and dangerous case of West Berlin during the Cold War, which at least had the stabilizing elements of a clear territorial definition and a permanent presence of U.S. combat troops, which served as a clear trip-wire for U.S. military deterrence. And these two East-Asian maritime flash points are certainly more imprecise, ambiguous, and unstable than any particular territorial issue that arose during the international crisis of July 1914.

The risks and dangers which usually come with alliance systems are accentuated and aggravated by two dynamics which are often associated with them. One is the phenomenon of arms races. When two powers confront each other, it is natural that each will try to enhance its security against the other by increasing its own armaments. But the increase in the security of the first produces an increase in the insecurity of the second – what is known as the infamous “security dilemma.” The second power then responds in kind, and an arms race is on. Since allies either can add their own arms to those of the protecting power, or they have to be secured with additional arms from the protecting power, or both, an alliance system can amplify a security dilemma.

This dynamic of an arms race involving alliance systems was clearly operating in the years before the outbreak of the First World War. And we can now see the first signs of a naval or, more broadly, a maritime race between China, on the one hand, and the United States and its ally, Japan, on the other.

Another dynamic arises from the phenomenon of successive crises. When two powers confront each other and a crisis results, it is certainly possible that this particular crisis will be managed in a way that averts a war. However, if the powers continue to engage in successive confrontations there will also be successive crises. At some point, and with some unfortunate conjunction of events, a crisis may be mismanaged and escalate into a war. Since each ally and its particular interests may become the occasion and cause of a crisis, an alliance system can multiply the number and quicken the pace of successive crises.<sup>4</sup>

Again, this dynamic of successive crises involving alliance systems was clearly operating in the years before the First World War. In particular, there was a series of crises involving both Britain and Germany for more than a decade before 1914. And during the past four or five years, we have seen those successive confrontations between China and U.S. allies, although none has yet really become a full-blown crisis involving the United States.

It seems, then, that the history of the dynamics of alliance systems is largely pointing in the same dismal direction as the history of hegemonic transitions, i.e., toward an eventual outbreak of a great war. However, following our earlier practice, perhaps we should look for exceptions to the general pattern and see if we can learn something from them.

The alternative of withdrawing a commitment. The history of alliances actually includes very few cases where a great power withdrew from its formal military commitment to an ally. The most famous, and notorious, case was of course the Munich agreement of 1938, when France abandoned its security guarantee to Czechoslovakia. (Britain, which also signed the agreement, did not actually have a formal security commitment to the Czechs.) But since the abandonment of Czechoslovakia at Munich ultimately led, within a year, to the outbreak of the greatest war in history, this particular case hardly provides a useful guide to how to avoid a war.

The Munich agreement was about the only case in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a great power backed down from a military commitment to an ally. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why that era produced not just one, but two, truly

great wars. However, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the era of the Cold War, does provide one notable example of a great power withdrawing from an alliance commitment, and therefore provides an exception to the general pattern of alliance dynamics. Intriguingly, this case involves China and a couple of islands in the East China Sea.

The Soviet Union concluded something of a security treaty with the People's Republic of China (PRC) (officially a "Treaty of Peace and Friendship") in January 1950, and this provided a degree of Soviet protection for China against the United States during the Korean War (1950-1953). Then, beginning in 1954 and continuing until 1958, China engaged in a series of military threats and actions to gain control over several islands in the Taiwan Straits, which were still held by the Chinese Nationalist regime on Taiwan (officially "The Republic of China"). The United States had concluded a security treaty with the Republic of China in 1954, and although it had persuaded the ROC to withdraw from some of these islands in 1955, the ROC still retained two very exposed islands – named Quemoy and Matsu – just off the coast of China's Fujian province, and it was intent on keeping them. In 1958, China initiated a confrontation over the islands, which soon advanced to a full military crisis, with the United States committed to defend the ROC and the Soviet Union committed to defend the PRC. There was much alarm at the time that this crisis over two extremely small islands would lead to a Sino-American war and perhaps even to a Soviet-American war. Then, with tensions at their highest, the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, let the Chinese leader, Mao Zedong, know that the Soviets would not protect China against the United States with a threat or use of

Soviet nuclear weapons. This forced Mao to back down and brought an end to the crisis. Indeed, Quemoy and Matsu remain occupied by Taiwan even today, almost 60 years after the end of a crisis that once seemed to threaten a great war. (One of the most intriguing contemporary questions in international politics is about a non-event, rather than an event: why, given all the loud and dramatic current confrontations over islands in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, has nothing been heard or done involving Quemoy and Matsu?)

At any rate, the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1958 immediately had important consequences for international politics. It was a major factor in bringing about the full and public split between China and the Soviet Union a few years later, and it was also a major factor in Mao's determination that China must have its own nuclear weapons, a goal which China achieved in 1964.

Our review of two perennial themes in the history of international politics has led to a disturbing and ominous conclusion. When we look at the contemporary Sino-American confrontations through the prism of each of these themes, the result is the same: it seems probable that these confrontations will eventually end in a great war between the United States and China. And with each of these themes leading to the same result, the combination of the two of them would seem to indicate that the probability of such a war is actually quite high. It may require heroic efforts -- or rather unprecedented wisdom -- on the part of both American and Chinese leaders to avoid it.

## Western Theories versus Eastern Realities

But of course, our review of the history of international politics has actually been a review of the history of Western international politics. With the exception of our discussion of the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1958, all of our analogies and analyses thus far have assumed that conclusions and lessons drawn from Western experience can appropriately be applied to Eastern, and particularly East Asian, realities.

However, this assumption that Western generalizations are also universal generalizations is now largely discredited in almost every other field of political analysis, be it the study of comparative politics (e.g., democratization and nation-building), political theory (liberal individualism and bureaucratic rationality), and international law (state sovereignty and universal human rights). Why should the field of international politics be any different? Is it possible, indeed likely, that there are distinct and different non-Western conceptions of international politics, or rather (since the very term “international” assumes relations between entities that are national states) world order or regional order? Indeed, this is the premise of both Samuel Huntington, in his famous The Clash of Civilizations, and Henry Kissinger, in his recent World Order.<sup>5</sup>

Since we are examining confrontations between China and America and their potential for issuing in a great war, it obviously becomes essential to examine the distinct and different ways that the Chinese themselves – both traditionally and today – have thought about what we in the West call international politics, but what the Chinese see as China’s place in East Asia and in the world. Perhaps when we look at the Sino-American confrontations through a Chinese prism, rather than through

a Western one, we may glimpse a way off the path to war. This requires us to engage in a sort of intellectual Copernican revolution, i.e., instead of putting Western conceptions at the center of our understanding of world order, we will have to suspend, for heuristic purposes, these Western notions, and put quite different Chinese conceptions at the center of our understanding. <sup>6</sup>

### The Chinese Conception of Space: The Central State and the World Order

As is well known, China's traditional conception of itself (and one that largely corresponded to reality for two thousand years from the 2100s B.C.E. to the 1700s C.E.) was as the "central Kingdom" or Central State. China was by far the largest country, the most powerful state, and the most advanced civilization in the world that was seen by the Chinese (even if that world was largely the region of East Asia and South East Asia). Surrounding the Central State was a series of much smaller countries or "tributary states," several of which were also smaller versions of the political and cultural model provided by China; these were Korean; Lu-Chu (the Ryukyu Islands, including Okinawa); and Annam (Vietnam). Together these tributary states composed a sort of "string of pearls" around the Central State. <sup>7</sup>

At the center of this Central State and Chinese world order was the capital city of Beijing ("Northern Capital"), at the center of Beijing was the imperial palace compound (the "Forbidden City"), and at the center of the imperial palace was the Emperor. The Emperor radiated authority and power, right and might, out of the imperial palace through the "Gate of Heavenly Peace" to Beijing, to China, and to the rest of the world beyond.



However, although Beijing was normally the imperial capital and center of China and the Chinese world order, the original capital and center was at Xi'an, some 600 miles to the southwest of Beijing. Xi'an was established as the capital by Qin Shohuang, the original Qin (or Ch'in) Emperor, from whom China took its name. If one draws a great circle with Xi'an at its center, it does nicely include all the lands which the Chinese traditionally saw to be included in their world order – and for the most part, only those lands (Figure 1).

### The Chinese Conception of Time: Historical Cycles and China's Destiny

The Western conception of Western history (at least the conception since the Enlightenment and the “doctrine of progress”) has largely been linear. Western history begins in a primitive state and a “dark Age” and then advances steadily upward, admittedly with occasional setbacks (such as the Thirty Years War or the two World Wars), through successive stages of higher technological, economic, and political development. The Western conception of Chinese history has been something similar: Chinese history begins admittedly with an impressive level of culture, but also with an authoritarian political system, one characterized by extensive cruelties, frequent turmoil, and periodic civil wars. The early Chinese encounters with the West issue in a long period of especially acute turmoil and war for China, but in the end – especially when America became the undisputed leading Western power – Western ideas and practices have at least put China on an upward path, similar to that which the West itself has taken before.

In contrast, the traditional Chinese conception of Chinese history has largely been cyclical (as in the theory of the “dynastic cycle”). Chinese history begins at an already civilized level and after a period of political turmoil and Warring States (475-221 B.C.E.), the Qin Emperor united China into one great Central State (221 B.C.E.). Forever after, China’s destiny is to remain one great state and one great civilization. Particular dynasties will come and go, rise and fall, according to the dynastic cycle, and there will be periods of schism (“splitting”) and disunion. But, in the end, the unity of china’s state and of China’s central place in the world will be restored.

These two conceptions of history – the Western and the Chinese – have several elements in common, but, in essence, they are different and even contradictory. They can be combined, however, into a new one, which might be described as the Chinese historical conception with Western characteristics. That is, there has indeed been a long series of dynastic cycles, but successive cycles have, in large part, played out at successively higher levels of development. At its height (the 18<sup>th</sup> century), the Qing (Ch’ing) dynasty reached a stage even higher than that reached by its predecessor, the Ming (the 15<sup>th</sup> century). The subsequent decline of the Qing was so deep and the ensuing time of troubles was so grave that it could accurately be called “the 100 Years of Humiliation.” However, in 1949, China under the leadership of the Communist Party, began a new period of unity and advance, and this period is taking China to the highest level of development in its entire history of two-and-a-half millennia. The culmination of China’s dynasties and the fulfillment of China’s destiny means that the China of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not only become more like the China of the

18<sup>th</sup> century and before. It will mean that China will become even more Chinese than it was before, because the essence of China will be realizing its potential more fully. Moreover, it will be doing so not only at an even higher level (incorporating all the benefits of Western science and technology), but on an even wider scale (extending the Chinese definition of the world order from East Asia to the world beyond, a world order which ultimately will include, in some still indistinct sense, the West itself).

#### The Chinese Conception of Military Power and Strategy: Power Projection over Land

In the traditional Chinese conception of military power, a strong and effective military force was indeed at the core of the Central State and of imperial power.<sup>8</sup> However, the idea was that the military should rarely be used in addressing a strategic problem, and never as the first resort. Rather it was best held in reserve, and used as a last resort. Again however, it would be best if other rulers and potential adversaries knew that this reserve of military power actually existed and could be deployed when the Chinese rulers deemed it necessary. In the meantime, it would also be best if the actual realities of unequal power were clothed with a symbolic veil of reciprocal respect and cooperation. The imperial military was a sort of “cannon behind the curtain,” which every party knew was there, but which was discreetly covered. In the fullest realization of this conception, military power was a center of gravity, a solid and weighty mass which radiated outward gravitational lines of force, which gently, but firmly and steadily, bent the will of other rulers --and of potential adversaries --so that they would more and more be inclined and conformed to Chinese designs and priorities.

In the long course of China's history, this concept of military power was, for the most part, only applied to the use of armies, i.e., the gravitational force lines were only projected across land. However, there had been a few rare exceptions when that power was also projected across the sea. The most important of these cases was Taiwan. (There were also two abortive invasions of Japan, undertaken by the Yuan or Mongol dynasty, and the epic, but temporary, voyages of Admiral Zheng He, undertaken during the Ming dynasty).

### The Chinese Conception of Military Operations and Tactics: Encirclement and the Sudden Blow

These ideas about the center of gravity, the last resort, and the cannon behind the curtain were elements of the traditional Chinese conception of strategy. But the Chinese also have had a traditional conception of what might be seen as operations and tactics. Here, the focus has been on the steady and persistent accumulation of positions of strength, of peripheral bases of gravity in addition to the above mentioned core center of gravity.<sup>9</sup> Over time, these accumulated bases add up and amount to an encirclement of the diminishing positions of strength of a potential adversary or target. Finally, there comes a time when the Chinese positions or bases are so strong vis-à-vis those of the opponent that everyone, including the opponent, can draw the obvious and sensible conclusion that the opponent should accept the realities and conform to the Chinese design, i.e., to accept his appropriate place within the Chinese world order. This acceptance of military realities is also clothed with the appearance that the opponent is

doing so willingly, because he sees this to be the course that is most reasonable and in conformity with the world order, an order that is best for all.

Of course, there will also be occasions when the opponent does not draw and act upon these obvious military realities. In such cases, the Chinese tactic has been to await an auspicious moment, one in which the opponent is especially weak and vulnerable, and then to strike a sudden blow, one that is both dramatic and effective. This in itself creates a new reality so that everyone, including of course the opponent, can draw the same obvious and sensible conclusion that the opponent could, and should, have accepted before. The realities have now been demonstrated with a clarity and a starkness that could leave the opponent humiliated, but the Chinese tactic will often include some element (such as the quick withdrawal of the victorious Chinese military force to nearby positions) which will allow the opponent to retain some degree of respect (i.e., “face”).

### The Chinese Conception of Economic Power and Strategy: Exchange of Goods Through Trade

The traditional Chinese conception of economic power was analogous. A healthy and productive economic base was also at the core of the Central State and of imperial power. But here, the idea was that the economy should frequently be used in addressing a strategic problem, and often as a first resort. It would be best if other rulers and potential adversaries were well aware of the advantages to them of peaceful economic relations with China, particularly the exchange of goods through trade. However, the foreign rulers, with their small economies and inferior cultures, would need Chinese goods far more than the Chinese rulers would need theirs. Therefore, it would also be best if the

actual realities of unequal attractiveness were balanced with foreign rulers also giving the Chinese signs and symbols of deference to the Chinese conception of the world order, with the Chinese Emperor at its center. This was important to the Chinese notion of imperial legitimacy. Thus, the famous “kowtow” ritual at the imperial court in Beijing. In the fullest realization of this conception, economic power was also a center of gravity, a solid and weighty mass which radiated outward gravitation lines of force, which gently but firmly and steadily shaped the will of other rulers --and of potential adversaries --so that they would more and more be inclined and conformed to Chinese designs and priorities.

In the long course of imperial history, this Chinese conception of economic power was, for the most part, only applied to the exchange of goods, i.e., the gravitational force lines were only projected through trade. However, there had been occasional exceptions, when that power was also projected through China’s supply of precious metals, i.e., through finance.

Our review of traditional Chinese conception of China’s geography, history, and destiny can be useful in interpreting contemporary perspectives and objectives in the minds of Chinese leaders and, indeed, of some of the wider Chinese population. And our similar review of traditional Chinese conceptions of the strategy, operations, and tactics needed to achieve Chinese objectives can be particularly useful in explaining recent actions of the Chinese government and anticipating its future moves. We will put a special focus on actions and moves in two arenas: The naval arena of China’s three littoral seas – the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea – and the financial arena of China’s massive holdings of U.S. currency and debt and the resulting

status of being the world's leading creditor state. These are the very arenas which many scholars think have no real precedents in China's history. Rather, naval and financial arenas are supposed to be arenas of Western history, and now universal or global reality. However, the contemporary Chinese leadership looks upon these arenas through their own distinct Chinese prism.

### The Three China Seas and Chinese Naval Power

China has not been a dominant naval presence in its three littoral seas – the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea – for more than 170 years, i.e., ever since the Second World War, the American. Instead, a succession of foreign navies has dominated these seas, first the British, then the Japanese, then, ever since Second World War, the American. Moreover, even before the arrival of foreign navies to dominate these seas, China itself for centuries had not operated much of a navy there. It has been natural, therefore, for historians of Chinese strategy and its military to not only think that China is a land power, but that it is only a land power. And this view has been largely accurate – up until now.

However, there is an alternative interpretation of the place of these three littoral seas in the Chinese mind. The reason that China for centuries did not deploy a significant navy in them was that in those times there was no significant foreign navy which posed a threat there. A Chinese naval presence was therefore unnecessary. Then, when the British navy arrived, it immediately overwhelmed Chinese forces and established a dominant presence. This dominance by foreign navies continued in an unbroken chain down until contemporary times. A Chinese naval presence was therefore impossible.

However, the three littoral seas have never been excluded from the Chinese conception of the Central State and the world order. (For example, they are included within the great circle's delineation of China's proper realm.) The Chinese have always assumed that these three seas should be understood to be "Chinese lakes," as much dominated and secured by Chinese power as is Chinese land. Of course, Taiwan – the large island which connects two of these seas, the East China Sea and the South China Sea -- must be Chinese because it is both Chinese land and central to the Chinese lakes.

And so, it is natural for the contemporary Chinese leadership to think that the proper destiny of these three seas – the seas between the Chinese mainland and the "First Island Chain" -- will only be fulfilled when they are dominated by Chinese military power (Figure 2). This will include not only naval power narrowly defined, but also land-based aircraft and missiles which can project power and denial capability over these seas. It is therefore only a matter of time – a time that could arrive with an auspicious moment and strategic opportunity – until China's destiny in these seas will be realized.

In the meantime, China will steadily and persistently seek to accumulate positions of strength in these seas, and some of these positions will add up to a kind of encirclement of sections within them. These positions will include islands – even very tiny ones – which are scattered around the seas. Such islands might appear trivial from a practical perspective (although some are in or adjacent to deep sea oil fields, such as the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea). However, from a strategic perspective, they are important symbols and can become markers or even bases for encirclement of the seas. This is particularly the case, given



the vigorous Chinese use of the international law concept of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which extends 200 miles out from recognized land territory.

This is one way to interpret the series of recent Chinese naval and diplomatic actions over such islands in each of the three seas. Beginning in the Spring of 2009 (and at the time when the global economic crisis had put the United States into substantial disarray), China created a succession of naval and diplomatic incidents, and these have continued down through the present time. These incidents have occurred over (1) U.S. naval maneuvers in support of South Korea in the Yellow Sea; (2) the Senkaku (Daiyou) Islands claimed by Japan in the East China Sea; and (3) the Paracel (Xisha) Islands claimed by Vietnam in the South China Sea, and (4) the Spratly (Nansha) Islands claimed by the Philippines, also in the South China Sea.

Each of these encounters has directly challenged some state which also claims jurisdiction over the island or surrounding section of the sea. By now, the list of these challenged states adds up to (from north to south) South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, i.e., every state which borders on the vast maritime realm stretching from the southern part of the Yellow Sea through the East China Sea, to the northern part of the South China Sea. However, we can also see that each of these encounters has indirectly challenged the United States, as a formal ally of most of these states (South Korea, Japan, the Philippines) or as a potential protector of the others (Taiwan and Vietnam). One of the Chinese purposes has been to test the U.S. resolve to protect the interests of the challenged states – particularly those interests which could be seen to be as trivial as the islands themselves – and perhaps to demonstrate to everyone –

particularly to the challenged state – that, given the new strategic realities of the current period, the U.S. is not really a reliable ally and protector after all.

By now, after several years of such incidents, challenges, and testings, China has not definitively achieved its purposes. The islands and the waters around them remain disputed and contested, and, because of its generally firm statements and consistent support, the United States remains a plausible ally or protector. At the present time, it seems that the current period has not been an especially auspicious moment for China. However, the traditional Chinese response to such developments (or lack of them) is to simply return to being patient, while awaiting the arrival – eventual and inevitable – of the next auspicious moment.

In the meantime, China is building other kinds of positions of strength. This is with a massive build-up of advanced weapons systems which can project power over, and deny access to, the three littoral seas.<sup>10</sup> These include, most dramatically, procurement and deployment of a large fleet of surface vessels, including China's first aircraft carrier. However, although this surface fleet has a good deal of symbolic meaning, it does not have much substantive importance. China's surface fleet by itself will not pose a significant threat to the U.S. Navy for many years – if ever. Instead, the real, substantive, threat to the U.S. Navy comes first from China's large number of advanced attack submarines and second, and even more ominous, from the thousands of surface-to-sea missiles which the Chinese are deploying. The most threatening of these is the rapid development by the Chinese of an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM). The U.S. surface fleet – including its magnificent and splendid aircraft carriers – now has no effective

defense against an ASBM threat, and there is no such defense in the now-foreseeable future.

### Holdings of U.S. Currency and Debt and Chinese Financial Power

China now has the largest foreign exchange reserves, and particularly the largest holdings of US. currency and debt, in the world, making it the world's leading creditor state. Yet, historically China did not see itself as a financial power, and it did not have a large and powerful financial sector within it. In this respect, it differed from a number of Western great powers, whose power included being a leading creditor state and major financial power. These have been, successively, the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States, and on occasion France has also been a major financial power (as well as, briefly in the 1980s, Japan). An important question, therefore, is how one might expect China to convert its financial power into strategic power and thereby advance its regional and global ambitions, since it has had very little experience in doing so. And here, it is once again useful to look at traditional Chinese conceptions of strategy, operations, and tactics.

First, it is natural for the Chinese to extend their historical practices in the arena of trade to the arena of finance. China's financial strength can be used in addressing a strategic problem and often as a first resort, so long as this does not contradict other strategic objectives. For example, China's setting of the exchange rate between the yuan (RMB) and the dollar steers a course between the two objectives of (1) advancing Chinese industry through promoting exports and (2) avoiding social discontent by managing the inflation rate. In the fullest realization of this strategic conception, China's enormous financial reserves become a center of gravity, a solid and weighty mass which

radiates outward gravitational lines of force, which gently but firmly and steadily shapes the will of debtor nations, and potential adversaries, so that they will more and more be inclined and conformed to, or at least accepting of, Chinese designs and priorities.

The most important of these potential adversaries, and the most important of China's debtor nations, is of course the United States. One would expect that China will not readily resort to the "financial nuclear option," i.e., quickly dumping large amounts of dollars on the global foreign-exchange markets; that would also inflict severe economic damage upon the Chinese. Rather, the most likely course is for China to use the less dramatic but still discernable option of not renewing its purchases of U.S. government debt as it matures. And these moments of non-renewal – a non-event which can have as much as an impact and influence as an event – could coincide with those moments when China is engaged in a dispute with the U.S. government on some issue in a completely different strategic arena, e.g., in one of the three China seas.

In the meantime, China will steadily and persistently seek to accumulate positions of strength in the financial arena, and some of these positions will add up to a kind of encirclement of the American financial position. In particular, one could expect the Chinese to draw the developing economies and neighboring states of Southeast Asia into a dense network of debt dependency. The debt network could even extend beyond to other regions, where historically the United States has been the major creditor state. Indeed, this is already beginning to happen in Africa and Latin America, and given the current great financial instability and vulnerability of countries in Southern Europe, it is even beginning to happen there.

## The Prospects for a Great War from the Perspective of Chinese History

Our earlier review of the history of Western international politics, and particularly of the two perennial themes of the dynamics of hegemonic transitions and the dynamics of alliance systems, had led us to the most disturbing of conclusions: There is a high probability that, sometime in the relevant future, there will be a great war between the rising power of China and the status-quo power of the United States and its alliance system in the Western Pacific. We have now reviewed a very different history, that of the Chinese regional order. Does this alternative history give us reason to hope that a great war between China and the United States can be avoided? And here, we will find that, while the components of the answer are complex, the sum of the answer is rather clear and direct.

It is obvious that China sees its three littoral seas – the three China seas – to be a natural and intrinsic part of its territory, of its great-circle realm, and that it sees itself to not be whole and complete until it has established full dominion and effective control over these seas, as well as over Taiwan, which lies between two of them. More broadly, this is the maritime realm that lies between the Chinese mainland and the “First Island Chain.” The Chinese will be persistent and relentless in pressing for dominion over this realm. At the same time, however, they will also be patient and flexible in their ways and timing in achieving this great goal.

China’s patience is enhanced by its economic strength and strategy. As we have noted, the Chinese have traditionally seen military action as a last resort, while using economic resources as a first resort. The Chinese have been practicing this approach toward many of the countries in the First Island Chain. As long as their economic strategy

seems to be gradually drawing these countries into a network of economic dependency, it will usually see no need to resort to much more risky military action to achieve their objectives.

This combination of patience in tactics and persistence in objectives will issue in a distinctive method of moving forward. The Chinese may allow a particular disputed area to be calm for a period of time, even for a long time. However, they will always be looking for some emergent opportunity, an auspicious moment, when they can quickly or even forcefully move forward and accomplish some kind of fait accompli. This means that we can expect a pattern of periods of calm punctuated by abrupt and sharp crises. Indeed, there will be a series of succeeding crises, moving back and forth through the three China seas and up and down between the Chinese coast and that First Island Chain. It is as if China itself is like one of those great rivers of China – the Yellow River or the Yangtze – flowing into the seas of China – always persistent and continuing, while always adjusting its flow around a local obstacle for now, while always pressing against this obstacle to wear it down, and to wash it away, in the very long run.

Because of the patience and flexibility of the Chinese, it is quite likely that, as any particular crisis develops, it can be somehow managed by Chinese and American leaders, so that it does not escalate into an actual war. Indeed, the probability that any one crisis will erupt into a war may be quite low. However, because of the persistence and relentlessness of the Chinese, it is very likely, almost inevitable, that this one crisis will be followed by another, and then by another and then by .... While the probability of any one crisis issuing in a war is quite low, the probability of a continuing series of crises eventually issuing in a war is quite high.

This dynamic is accentuated by other factors that are likely to be operating. In the aftermath of a particular crisis being successfully managed, and temporarily resolved, it would be altogether reasonable for U.S. policymakers to draw the conclusion that they needed to strengthen the U.S. security commitment to one or more allies. By enhancing deterrence, the U.S. might deter a future crisis. But while deterrence might be increased, flexibility would be reduced, and this could have grave consequences when the next crisis develops.

Moreover, domestic politics, and in particular leadership politics, will always be operating. China and the United States each will have their own distinct variations on this theme. With respect to China, political scientists often assert that contemporary Chinese leaders are especially reliant upon Chinese nationalism as a central source of their legitimacy with the general population. At the same time, as the Chinese military, especially the Chinese navy, gains in military strength vis-à-vis the United States, it also gains in political strength vis-à-vis civilian figures within the Chinese leadership. Both of these factors will make it more difficult for Chinese leaders to give concessions, or perhaps to even be flexible, in the midst of a foreign crisis which involves nationalist values and military forces. This will especially be the case if the foreign crisis should occur at the same time that the leadership is facing an ongoing domestic crisis or serious challenges to its authority.<sup>11</sup>

In the United States, domestic politics operates in a different way, but it points in the same ominous direction. For the most part, the U.S. political leadership, particularly the executive branch of government, no longer uses nationalism as a source of its legitimacy. Rather, it is now more likely to draw upon some kind of globalist or

universalist ideology (e.g., democratization, globalization, or universal human rights). This does not appeal much to the general American population, but it does appeal to the major donors to each of the two political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. But just like nationalism increases the Chinese leadership's drive to obtain dominion over the three China Seas, so too does the globalist and universalist ideology to increase the U.S. leadership's determination to retain the U.S. alliance system in the same region. And the U.S. military is not really a major player within the U.S. political leadership, so it is not a major cause for U.S. military action. Rather, it is the representatives of the largest American economic sectors, with their global economic interests, which are now the major and effective proponents of U.S. military action. Consequently, in both China and the United States, the effect of domestic politics is to reduce the chances for compromise over the three China Seas and to increase the probability of war.

#### Conclusion: The Immovable Object versus the Irresistible Force

In summary, when we look at the ongoing and unfolding Sino-American confrontations in East Asia through the prism of Western history, we see that the probability of a great war between China and America in the relevant future is quite high. However, when we look at these confrontations through the prism of Eastern history, we see that, while the probability of war remains high enough to be a cause for concern and attention, there can be some hope that a war can be averted. This is principally because of the Chinese quality of patience and flexibility. But there is an obvious asymmetry between the two prisms and the two powers. The Western prism should provide the best predictions of the behavior of a Western nation, i.e., the United States, and this predicts



U.S. reactiveness and inflexibility, qualities which tend toward war. The Eastern perspective should provide the best prediction of the behavior of an Eastern nation, i.e., China, and this predicts Chinese patience and flexibility, qualities which tend away from war.

Simply put, from a Western perspective, the United States has the character of an immovable object, while China is assuming the character of an irresistible force. If these two realities collide, the result will be an explosion. However, an Eastern perspective permits a more subtle description and a different vista. The immovable object, the U.S. alliance system in the Western Pacific, is like a great dyke which was erected many years ago to hold back a flood. The irresistible force, the Chinese drive to achieve dominion over the three China seas, is like a great river which has flowed for many centuries, at times flooding and at times ebbing. The dyke has held back a flood from the river for a long time. But in the truly long run, in the fullness of time, the river will steadily erode, and then finally wash away, the dyke.

## Notes

1. Henry Kissinger, On China (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011); Henry Kissinger, World Order (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014).
2. XXXXXXX
3. Robert D. Kaplan, Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific (New York: Random House, 2014).
4. A systematic study of the interaction of alliance systems, arms races, and successive crises is provided by John A. Vasquez, The War Puzzle Revisited (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
5. Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Kissinger, World Order.
6. The following discussion of Chinese conceptions is drawn from my article, "Confronting a Powerful China with Western Characteristics," Orbis, Winter 2012, pp. 39-59.
7. John King Fairbank, editor, The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).
8. Alastair Iain Johnston, Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Kissinger, On China, chapter 1. A comprehensive and excellent account of the strategic conceptions developed during the more recent Communist era is given by Avery Goldstein, Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

9. Kissinger, On China, chapter 1: David Lai, “Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China’s Strategic Concept, Shi” (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2004). Kissinger and Lai both emphasize the mindset developed by the ancient Chinese game of strategy, wei qi (more commonly known by its Japanese name, go).

Useful accounts of the Chinese military during the Communist era are given by John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); and Andrew Scobell, China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

10. An excellent history and analysis of the rise of Chinese naval power is given by Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, Red Star Over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

11. Susan L. Shirk, China: Fragile Superpower (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

FIGURE 1.

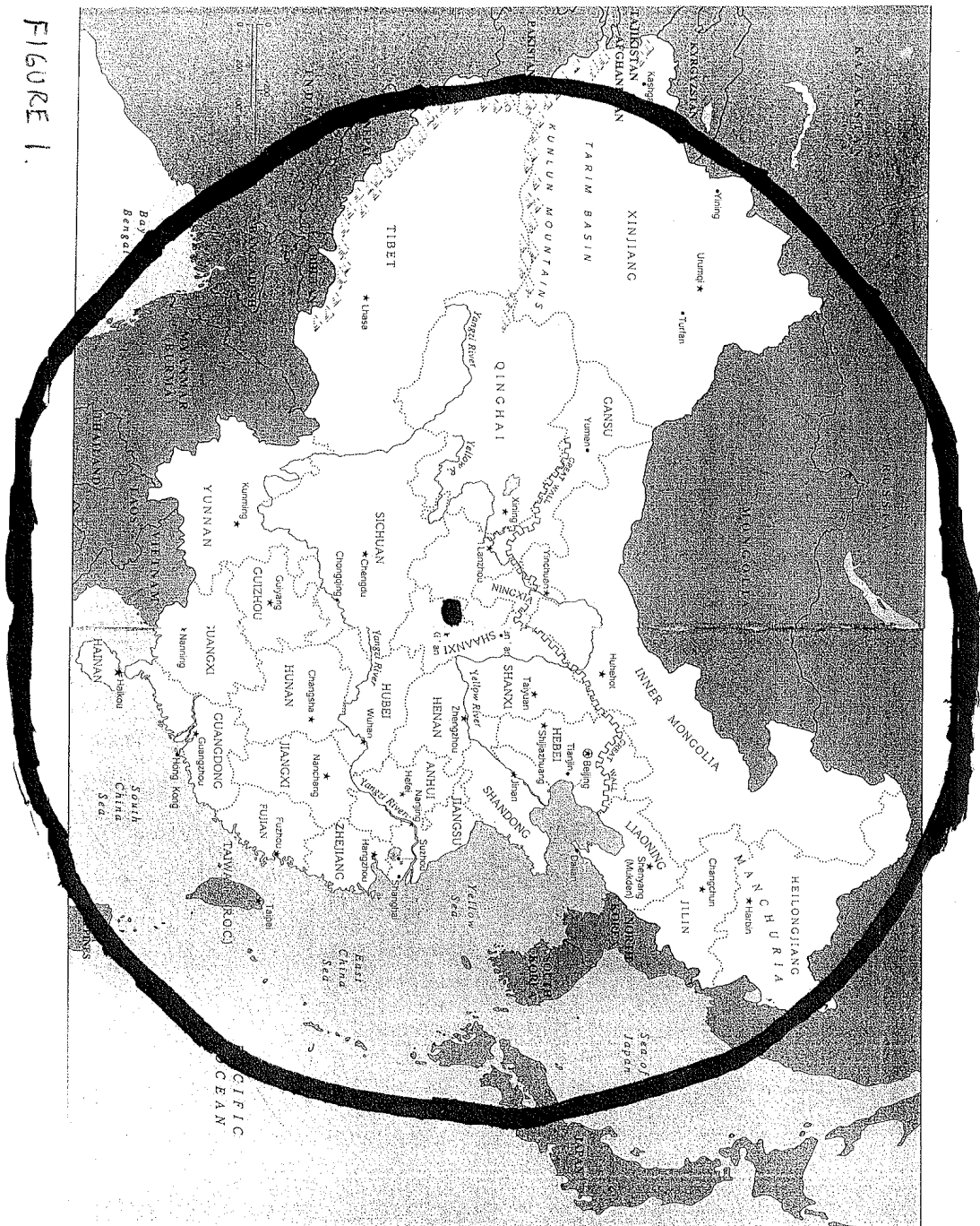
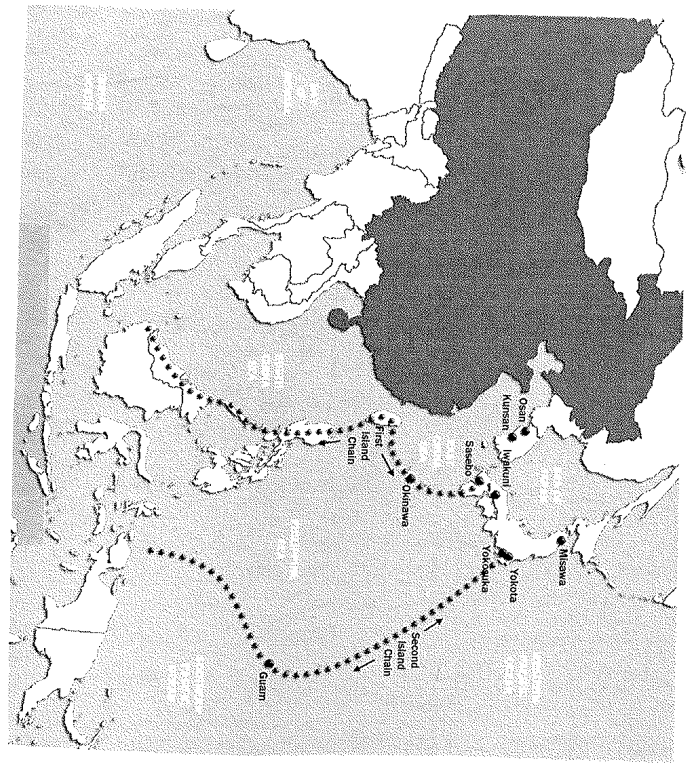


FIGURE 2. THE TWO ISLAND CHAINS AND MAJOR US BASES IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC



CHINESE CLAIMS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

