

Is the West turning on China?

Posted By [Daniel Blumenthal](#)

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Back in February, Robert Samuelson, one of America's top economic commentators, began his *Washington Post* column with a critique of China:

It's become apparent from recent events that America's political, business and scholarly elites have fundamentally misjudged China. Conflicts with China have multiplied. Consider: the undervalued renminbi and its effect on trade; the breakdown of global warming negotiations in Copenhagen; China's weak support of efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons; its similarly poor record in pushing North Korea to relinquish its tiny atomic arsenal; the sale of U.S. weapons to

Taiwan; and Google's threat to leave China rather than condone continued censorship.

Samuelson is neither an alarmist nor a reflexive China basher. He is calling it like he sees it. And I think he is correct. American elite opinion has been, for the most part, dead wrong about China. The People's Republic is not liberalizing and it is not aligning itself with the West to resolve the world's most pressing problems. Its military build-up is destabilizing and, in many cases, it is not playing by the rules of international trade.

But does Samuelson's piece reflect a change in elite opinion about China -- and if so, what is going on in China that has led to this change in opinion?

John Pomfret of the *Washington Post* may have found an explanation - the nature of Chinese politics. In a recent article, he describes the annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's rubber stamp legislature. While there are no real legislators who can pass real laws in China, the NPC is a forum for Communist cadres and pretenders to the throne to leak stories to the press, make statements, and jockey for political advantage. This year, Communist Party leaders have taken a decidedly anti-American, anti-Western tone.

The tone of the leaks and public statements is revealing. It seems that in China's domestic politics today, it pays to be populist, nationalistic, and anti-Western. It also shows that political leaders in China believe there is still room to jockey for power before the upcoming 2012 succession from Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang. This succession may not go as smoothly as did Hu's ascension in 2002. As Cheng Li, a typically accurate China scholar, has written:

As many as seven of the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the highest decision-making body in the country, are expected to retire. Within the full 25-member Politburo, at least 14 leaders will vacate their seats to make way for younger candidates. Consequently, the principal figures responsible for the country's political and ideological affairs, economic and financial administration, foreign policy, and military operations will consist of newcomers after 2012.

No Chinese leader today holds the "mandate of heaven": they are all very far removed from the legitimacy bestowed upon past leaders by their participation in the Communist Revolution. Moreover, waiting in the wings are ambitious party leaders, such as Bo Xilai and Wang Yang, who may take advantage of an economic crisis, for example, to challenge Hu and Wen's hand-picked successors.

Two recent opinion pieces argue that China is basically weak internally, but still troublesome.

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard of the U.K.'s *Telegraph* says that China is "spoiling for a showdown with America." Why? Because it is badly misperceiving the global balance of power. Given the PRC's crippling domestic problems, its arrogance toward the

United States is pure hubris. "There are echoes," Evans-Pritchard says, "of Anglo-German spats before the First World War, when Wilhelmine Berlin so badly misjudged the strategic balance of power and over-played its hand."

Evans-Pritchard's basic point is that if Beijing believes that it is overtaking the United States and that Washington, in turn, is willing to accept that fact, we may be in for a Chinese miscalculation of colossal and extremely dangerous proportions.

Another leading American China scholar, Minxin Pei, has been sounding a contrarian note against the "China is ten feet tall" line of argument for some time. Pei has argued that China is not that strong, has almost paralyzing economic troubles, and has a calcified political system that is unable to respond adequately to its people's needs.

See for example Pei's "Why China Won't Rule the World" in a December 2009 issue of *Newsweek*. Pei examines both the tremendous amounts of waste in China's stimulus package (many analysts asserted that China "did everything right last year"). He also notes the ongoing challenge to the CCP's rule by Uighurs and Tibetans, which in 2008 and 2009 resulted in the bloodiest ethnic crackdowns in China in decades. The CCP is consumed by these problems and unable to find effective solutions. If Pei is correct, and I believe he is, then China's desire to pick a fight with the United States may be driven in part by the need for its leaders to create a distraction from its multitude of regime-challenging internal problems.

On the other hand, two keen observers argue that what in fact explains China's newfound assertiveness is its strength, not its weakness. Its military modernization program continues apace. As King's College's Harsh Pant points out, though China's announced defense budget increase is less this year than it has been in a while, the lower numbers will not reflect what China actually spends. For example, the Chinese never account for foreign purchased weapons systems in their publicly announced budget, even though these systems make up a significant proportion of China's military equipment inventory. Pant adds that China is increasing its power projection capabilities, and its anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden may reflect ambitions to project military power globally.

Like Pant, Martin Jacques, author of *When China Rules the World*, does not see China as driven by weakness. Instead, he argues that China will one day rule the world and, when that day occurs, its rule will not be benign. According to Jacques, China will become the pre-eminent world power without becoming democratic. Its hegemony will be based on a menacing racist-nationalist ideology.

Jacques hit on some of these themes in a recent *New York Times* piece. He argues that China is on the rise, America is in decline, and that the PRC will be a much more "formidable adversary" than was the Soviet Union. Perhaps most noteworthy in Jacques' *Times* piece is the latter point: he implicitly argues that China and the United States are on their way to a global rivalry akin to what took place during the

Cold War. Only this time, the United States is declining, and the PRC is far more sophisticated than the Soviets.

What to make of this small sample of articles -- all by influential writers and analysts -- recently printed in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *Telegraph*?

All of these pieces were published during a time of demonstrably heightened Sino-American tension. But unlike past periods of Sino-American tension, when opinion-makers blamed America as much as China for bad relations, all of these writers put the blame for tense relations squarely at China's feet. They just disagree on whether China's arrogance is based on strength or weakness. Perhaps it took the departure of Bush-Cheney, so unpopular with elites, for these writers to begin to see China for what the American people know it to be: a growing threat to the United States.

So the answer to the first question is that for a variety of reasons -- including the end of the Bush presidency, the financial crisis, and aggressive Chinese behavior -- there seems to be a trend in elite opinion towards viewing China as a problem.

But what about the second question? Why is China a problem? The sample above provides a range of answers. I believe each writer has a point: China is a rather combustible mix of weakness and strength, arrogance and fear. On the one hand, China has been dealing unevenly with its manifold problems, thus generating considerable domestic public anger at the regime. On the other, national pride abounds as does a growing military force. China scholar Susan Shirk came closest to correctly categorizing the emerging giant in titling her 2007 book *Fragile Superpower* (though I would quibble with the term superpower).

My own conclusion is that China's external behavior can best be explained by the nature of its domestic politics. The forces with the strongest purchase on Chinese politics push and pull the country in many different directions. Public and elite opinion now consists of a mix of anger at the regime for its corruption, inequality, and brutality; national pride; and aggrieved nationalism. Assuming China does continue its economic growth, which provides for its military modernization, this mix -- of strength and weakness, pride and fear -- makes for an unpredictable and potentially dangerous China, especially in the lead-up to a possibly contested 2012 succession.