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China's Secret Foreign Policy

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Everyone is afraid of China. One reason is an instinctive reflex to avoid anything enormous moving at great speed. But even more important is that China's true intent can't be gauged. Is China a threat to the world order, or at least to its region? Is it a rival to the U.S. or an enemy? Should it be balanced or contained? Or should China be envied and admired for its achievements in accruing wealth and power?

China is difficult to decipher because China itself has not yet made up its mind about its true direction and aspirations. China, however, most likely will have to make those decisions during the next decade under its new leader, Xi Jinping. External conditions — threats to China's energy sources, territorial disputes, the North Korean nuclear gnat — combined with internal tensions — restive populations in Tibet and Xinjiang, anti-corruption protests and social media, the budgetary issues caused by an aging population — will cause the country, or at least the regime, to show its true colors.

In some respects, China is a natural candidate for a vengeful nationalism because of its deep-seated feeling of humiliation, which New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman calls "the

single most underrated factor in international relations." Just as European textbooks routinely refer to the Hundred Years' War, Chinese texts and maps routinely refer to the "Hundred Years of Humiliation," the foreign domination during the opium wars of the mid-19th century to the Japanese occupation in the mid-20th century.

One answer to the Chinese enigma lies in how the Chinese overcome that humiliation. Will China settle accounts with the West by building a society that is more productive and stronger than the deadlocked democracies of Europe and the U.S.? Or will China need to humiliate the West by turning it into a servile debtor while pilfering its economic secrets from its computers?

In that sense, the Russians are lucky. Except for some fighter jets and weapons systems that the Chinese haven't yet reverse-engineered, Russia has few R&D secrets worth stealing. Moscow's worries concern the population imbalances in the Far East: sparse on the Russian side of the border, burgeoning on the Chinese.

The recent revelations about the Chinese government-backed hacking of U.S. businesses and institutions are about more than saving money on research and development. They are part of a three-pronged foreign policy strategy in which China will combine cyberespionage with economic pressure to bring the West under its sway while projecting traditional military might in its own region. The third prong is nuclear. Currently, China is in the same league as England and France but is pushing ahead with intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-based missiles. You can't be a superpower without them.

China is also investing heavily in its navy, which is the only way to protect the flow of energy and raw materials into China, and the export of finished goods. Besides protecting its economic lifeline, naval power allows China to deny or delay U.S. access to the South China Sea and East China Sea in the event of a crisis over Taiwan. Beefed-up naval power will also help in negotiations over the various disputed islands.

For all the money Beijing is pouring into modernizing its armed forces, it still spends more on domestic security than on defense. According to official figures, since 2010 the budget for the police, the state security forces, the courts and prisons has exceeded the money spent on the military. Even China is afraid of China.

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