

Sea Power and China's Strategic Choices

Zhang Wenmu

No Turning Back

China's national goals have shifted from the need to guarantee its survival during the country's revolutionary days to the current state of securing stable economic development. This shift marks a full transition for China, changing from a closed country to a developing one that is irrevocably integrated with the rest of the world. Today, while this subject is a common discourse in scholarly and political circles, the international community is still coming to grips with the meaning and impact of China's evolving role on the world stage. It is not an easy issue and extends beyond economics.

With external trade accounting for almost 50 percent of China's economy, China is now highly interdependent with a globalized market.¹ This shift also includes hard social, political and geopolitical choices that deeply impact matters of national security. The more developed China becomes the greater its dependence grows not only on foreign trade but also on the resources to fuel the economy. With these complex and expanding interests, risks to China's well-being has not lessened but has actually increased, making China's national security at once both stronger and more vulnerable.

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The year 2004 marked the inauguration of the Chinese government's national development goal of "building a balanced, well-off society". With sustained high economic growth rates, China holds great potential to fulfill this grand aim for its population of 1.3 billion people. Achieving this goal would also raise China's status as a player on the international stage. But these national objectives have also locked China into a development path from which there is no turning back. China must continue to move forward, for if it does not, the economy's productive force could turn into a destructive one that leads to chaos and even violent civil unrest. Maintaining China's economic juggernaut not only requires continuing participation in the global market but it also depends on access to energy and other resources.²

How can sufficient resources be guaranteed to satisfy China's rapid and stable economic growth? Addressing this question holds immense challenges both for China and the international community.

Equal Rights

A stable energy supply is the key driving force for China's secure long-term economic growth. But China is not achieving that due to a number of important structural contradictions in its energy consumption pattern. A sustainable development model should be one where productivity rises as resource consumption falls. Currently, however, China's productivity is rising while resources are being consumed even faster. China cannot maintain an economy whose energy intensity continues to increase. Such a state of affairs invariably leads to significant ecological degradation. If the cost of restoring the damage to the environment offsets the gains in GDP growth, what has China gained? This is not a healthy way to economically develop. It may be tolerable in the short-term but cannot be viable in the long-term.

The second and closely related contradiction is that while China's hunger for resources increases, its access to resources outside its own borders has not grown in tandem. The West praises the Chinese for being a hardworking people, contributing hugely to the global economic growth. In 2003, China accounted for just 3.89 percent of the global GDP but it contributed to 15 percent of the GDP growth of the world.³ Yet, an industrious society also requires more food. It is almost as if China is expected to work harder on less sustenance. China makes contributions to the world but does not receive an equal share of its resources. This is not congruent with the international

democratic principle of reciprocity between rights and responsibilities. China will not always have sufficient natural resources to sustain its present participation in the world economy.⁴ Equally sharing in the global resources is the international democratic right to which China is entitled.

On balance, China is presently consuming its own resources in its role as the “factory of the world”. Resource shortages are rapidly becoming a bottleneck to China’s development. The only way out of this predicament is for China to go to the world and rightfully claim its share of international resources.

This is particularly true of China’s need for energy resources. Yet, the irrational distribution of energy is forcibly maintained under the present international order, which is marked by war and conflict. Prior

to World War II, the world’s center of energy demand and consumption was in Europe and the United States. However, following the oil crises of the 1970s and 1980s, the base of industrial power began to shift toward Asian countries, especially Northeast Asia. Now this region claims the highest demand for oil, though it has critically insufficient oil reserves available for consumption.

However, China currently does not possess the ability to safeguard its equal right to energy in the world. Some say that as long as one has money, resources can always be bought. But, this neglects the reality that wealth and access to resources go hand-in-hand with politics and military affairs.

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Security Lags Behind Dependency

The confluence of geopolitics and resource politics has become a basic feature of the international system. The degree of resource shortage worldwide is proportional to the level of tension between big powers. Where there is a scarcity of resources, geopolitics is at play. The latter has a direct bearing on China’s survival and development since the country’s oil consumption is almost 50 percent reliant on imports. China’s dependence on international energy imports is rapidly changing from a relationship of relative dependence to one of absolute dependence. China cannot have control over development goals without corresponding control over the resources to fuel the economy.

The simple fact is that China does not possess that control. More than half

of U.S. oil imports are shipped via the sea lanes.⁵ The crucial difference is that China is almost helpless to protect its overseas oil import routes. This is an Achilles heel to contemporary China, as it has forced China to entrust its fate (stable markets and access to resources) to others. Therefore, it is imperative that China, as a nation, pay attention to its maritime security and the means to defend its interests through sea power (a critical capability in which China currently lags behind).

Some observers note that China's overseas trade is presently developing smoothly and there is no need for sea power. However, the question is whether this can be considered development with any guarantee. If one day, another nation(s) finds an excuse to embargo China, what can China do? Any substantial blockage of its foreign trade-dependent economy and/or its energy supply could gravely imperil China.

The history of capitalism and its spread globally have shown that it is often accompanied by cruel competition between nation states. Those countries that lose out are not necessarily economically or technologically underdeveloped or those with a low level of culture. Rather, they are most often those nations who forgo the need to apply their national strength to national defense and therefore do not possess sufficient strategic capability.

Wealth itself does not naturally endow a nation with ample security. Before the Industrial Revolution, the British were far poorer than the Chinese.⁶ In terms of GNP alone, China accounted for 32.4 percent of the world's total in 1820, some 1.2 times greater than all of Europe. Yet, in 1840, only 20 years later, China was roundly defeated by Britain. Again, in 1890, although China had 5.3 times the GNP of Japan, China did not prevail in the Sino-Japanese war just five years later.⁷

Independent of wealth, a guarantee of access to global trade and resources necessarily requires sufficient power to defend one's interest in the trade and resource transportation sea routes. Economic globalization entails globalization of the military means for self-defense, because the national defense must go where a nation's economic interests lie.

Protecting Border Security and Security Boundary

In international politics, the idea of security naturally expands alongside national interests, not merely its geography. The security of one's sovereign

territory and a notion of greater national security (interests not necessarily within a country's physical territory) are related, but fundamentally different. They can easily be confused and should be thought of as a country's "border security" versus its "security boundary".

In the past, China's national security was largely confined to border security because it did not have many global interests. Rather, China's core concern was one of survival. With this overriding goal, protecting the homeland and winning a war depended on luring the enemy into the hinterland. This was a viable strategy when China had little inside its border to lose. Today, even if national security were similarly confined to China's territory, such a strategy would be impossible as the whole eastern region of China is the engine of the national economy. Luring the enemy into China would invariably mean the destruction of China's prosperous eastern seaboard and the core of its economic power. Thus, safeguarding China's territorial borders requires a broader concept of security.

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Today, China's core national security not only narrowly centers on survival but includes a broader development goal which extends beyond the nation's territory. Indeed, China's national interests – writ large – are especially relevant to the nation's economic development, and may not only involve all the regions of the world but could even include outer space. This gives rise to the concept of a nation's "security boundary", which is a nation's security concerns over all of its national interests, including those beyond its own borders. Many of China's political and economic interests have been widely integrated into the world and therefore its security boundary is much more broadly defined than its border security.

Often, the extension of a country's security boundary is equated to the expansion of its territorial border, thereby creating a threat. In fact, this is incorrect. All countries that enter the global market economy have interests outside the scope of its territorial border. Once a nation state takes part in globalization, it has the right to protect those national interests that have been integrated into the world. The territorial borders of the United States, even in an expansive sense, are only limited to North America. Yet, because of its powerful political, economic and military strength, America's national

security boundary covers virtually the whole globe. China has a territorial border roughly the same in size as that of the United States. However, the security boundary China is capable of protecting does not reach beyond its own territory and is far more limited than the United States due to a deficient military capability overseas.

A security boundary is the boundary of one's interests. Wherever China's interests lead, there too must follow China's capabilities to protect those interests. And as the nation's economic interests expand into the global market, China must consider the problem of safeguarding its global and regional interests. The most crucial conduit connecting China with the region and with the rest of the world is the sea lanes, and therefore, China must have a powerful navy. The oil imports that China consumes from Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia will mainly pass through these sea lanes. China's trade is also 90 percent dependent on sea lane transport. If all goes well and other nations behave fairly, China will certainly act in accordance with WTO rules.

The rise and fall of a country ultimately depends on a country's ability to use national forces to achieve political goals.

But what if others don't act so fairly? It is not difficult for the West to find a pretext to impose sanctions on China. The Yinhe incident in 1993 is a classic case of how the United States has attempted to make an issue out of nothing.⁸ Precisely because China's navy did not have the capability to resist, China had little choice but to let them

board the ship to make the so-called inspections. In an era when development is the core national interest, China would secure nothing if it did not have a strong navy.

The determining factor shaping the rise and fall of a country ultimately is not just the size of its total economic volume but also the strategic ability of the country; that is, the ability to use national forces to achieve political goals. Many cases in history have shown that the main reason for a country to be strong is more than a rise in prosperity or technological advancement but the effective application of such technology and wealth in national politics, especially military power.

The benefits of attaining such capabilities are often not apparent in the short term. The immediate costs of unifying the country during the American Civil War were very dear in blood and treasure. In the long term, however,

Lincoln laid a foundation for the United States that has made it the great nation it is today. When Mao Zedong decided to build an atomic bomb, the sacrifice made at a number of levels in order to successfully complete such a project was enormous for China at the time. In the long term, however, China obtained over 30 years of peace and security to develop as a nation. It is imperative to view the significance of economic growth and technological progress from a political angle. If national economic force cannot be effectively turned into national political force, it will lose its positive significance.

In the current era, where maritime transportation is a key factor to success of the flow of goods and commodities for the globalized economy, a powerful navy able to effectively control the sea passages will receive increasingly greater attention by all nations, particularly China. Thus, a necessary question to answer is how should China seek to protect its own growing security interests regarding these vital sea lanes?

Unifying Sea Rights and Sea Power

Sea power has determined the fate of nations. China is no exception. In the past, China's slow but sure descent into a divided, colonized state at the hands of foreign powers was – to a considerable extent – due to its failure as a naval power. The two Opium Wars in 1840 and 1854 respectively, as well as the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, are examples showing China's crucial defeats at sea, which ultimately led to its failure as a state. The delay of resolving the Taiwan issue is also largely because of China's insufficient sea power.

Opinions in China are greatly divided on whether or not, and if so, how China should strive for sea power. Given both the nature of global interdependence and the disastrous naval defeats of certain countries in history, some have put forward that it is unnecessary for China to emphasize sea power in the process of economic development. Others have stressed the importance of vastly strengthening China's navy in order to vie with other naval powers for hegemony. However, both views are inaccurate. China's sea power is uniquely defined. A traditional Western notion of sea power is the ability to control the sea, while China's concept of sea power is a marriage of the notion of equal sea rights and sea power. In the latter, the application of power on the seas cannot exceed the former but rather should serve the aim and scope of a nation's sea rights.

If “sea right” is the natural extension of the concept of “national sovereignty”, then “sea power” is limited to the means to preserving a nation’s interests at sea. Two points are worth noting here. First, in a fundamentally anarchic international political system, sea rights are often exercised through sea power and therefore people unconsciously confuse the two. Naturally, these ideas are linked, but they are really two completely different concepts. Sea power is only the means to achieve sea right, not sea right itself.⁹ Second, a nation’s sea power is also an important medium to transform sea rights into sea hegemony. Hegemony is the act of one country manipulating and controlling others’ behavior by dint of its strength.¹⁰ Such influence or domination is separate from a fair and lawful sea right, which any country naturally possesses.

A sea right is a national right that only sovereign states are entitled to and can exercise according to international law. Sea power is in fact a neutral concept though it has come to mean a capability at sea through which one can compel others by force. In the international community, only the United Nations or countries and bodies authorized by the United Nations are qualified to use such force.¹¹

Control over the sea may hold the balance regarding the survival of a nation. While this statement may sound arbitrary, it undoubtedly conveys the fate of some great powers in the past, for example, when the United States became independent in the late 18th century the young nation regarded strength on the sea as its lifeblood. India is perhaps the most vivid example of the importance of sea power. The Indian Ocean is at the center of the world geopolitical system and India is the primary power in its orbit. Over a period

China’s concept of sea power is a marriage of the notion of equal sea rights and sea power.

of several centuries, the Indian Ocean was first controlled by Iberian countries and then by the British Empire, which forced India to become a British colony due to its failed sea power. This humiliating course of history impelled India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to articulate that India,

constituted as she is, cannot play a secondary role in the world. She will either count for a great deal or not count at all. A middle position is not an option for India.¹² Some ascribe a hegemonic tendency to these thoughts but they are in fact, no more than a deep concern of India’s unique position in a

geostrategic location. If India cannot establish an effective national security shield in this geopolitically central zone, namely the Indian Ocean, then it will never have a secure future.¹³

Is China in the same boat? Is there a particular geostrategic water mass that China must control or face the prospect of being controlled? What are the limits of that strategic goal? What are the contents and scope of China's sea rights?

The Limits of Sea Power

In the near to medium term, unifying Taiwan with the motherland and recovering China's sovereign islands is both the great historical mission that the Chinese government must shoulder and a necessary foundation for China to safeguard its national sea rights. Therefore, within the context of these imperatives, the significance of China expanding its naval power can never be overestimated. Whether these goals are realized peacefully or otherwise, the Chinese navy's future military role in unifying the country will be of great importance. In this sense, and only within the scope of national sovereignty, the expansion of China's sea power is unlimited.

The Taiwan issue not only involves the issue of China's sovereignty; over the long run, it is also very relevant to the problem of gaining sea power which will determine the fate of China's development. If China loses Taiwan, it will subsequently also lose the Nansha Islands (Spratleys) and perhaps the Diaoyu Islands. Losing these regions implies that China will lack the basic space for ensuring national political and economic security that will be essential to China's rise as a great power. That is because the center of gravity of China's national economy has shifted to the southeastern region, whose economy is spearheading China's great development drive. Given this, China's security boundary cannot be limited to its southeastern coast. If Taiwan and other islands are not within China's control, China will not be able to guarantee the border security of commercial centers such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

Beyond the above objective however, China's sea power and the expansion of its navy are limited. This is because many issues relevant to international maritime rights need to be resolved through multilateral consultations within the framework of international laws of the sea. The goal of the Chinese navy

in this environment is merely to ensure the lawful execution of multi-party discussion outcomes. From this perspective, China's sea power is fundamentally peaceful and Chinese naval build-up is confined to the role of providing self-defense and deterrence. The goal of a strong Chinese navy will always be to afford China the ability to independently stand up for its rights in the world on an equal footing with others.

Know Thy Self

This paper has discussed the nature of China's irreversible joining of the global system, China's right and necessity to protect its evolving interests in that system and the limitations of those goals. This has caused a varying degree of anxiety amongst certain nations regionally and globally. Thus it is important to address how China envisions its position in the world, and how China will wield its growing power and influence.

Profoundly relevant to this issue are the lessons from history that China has garnered and internalized. History shows that the rise and fall of great powers principally depends on how they exercised national power and influence outside their sovereign borders. The demise of all such powers in history has resulted from their succumbing to the temptation of excessive expansion. When one considers China's need for world resources, its growing national strength and the need for a strong navy to protect its interests, does this not mean that China's military capabilities will also expand out of control in the future?

Absolutely not! If China's modernization drive entails worldwide expansion, even unwarranted regional expansion, it will be the nation's road to disaster. In fact, the 50-year development goal that Deng Xiaoping set out for China's future was to become a "medium-developed" country. In this way, he has positioned China as a regional power for the foreseeable future. China's influence in the world is essentially realized through a regional framework. In this way, China is fundamentally different from the United States, whose outlook in terms of power and influence is organically global in nature.

One way such differences are manifested is by the culture and character of each country's respective defense establishment. For instance, U.S. military exercises always take on some major country in the world and face an imagined opponent on a battlefield in a foreign land such as the Red Sea,

the Panama Canal, the South China Sea or Okinawa. Chinese soldiers, on the other hand, traditionally view their role as protecting the homeland and envision the battleground as Shanhaiguan, Wuhan or the Yangtze River. In fact, the American experience may have taught China that its military should indeed have a greater outward orientation. Furthermore, China's future security policies need to change from the policy of defending the home territory to the policy of maintaining what China has already accomplished regionally; from an inward-looking policy of keeping to its own affairs to a policy of outward active defense. However, China should of course concentrate on Asia, maintaining friendly relations with its neighbors, and thus laying a meaningful foundation for its long-term future.

Beyond this, any further ambitions are curbed by the profound lessons China has taken from the events such as the fall of Germany in the last century and the current U.S. predicament in Iraq.

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The Crucial Lessons of History

The study of German history and the great success of Otto von Bismarck alongside the failure of Wilhelm II are especially instructional. Bismarck saw an opportunity to unite the German provinces using dynastic wars and a complex system of regional and international cross alliances. His brilliance however, lies less in the accomplishment of unifying the German Empire, than in his understanding that Germany had to limit its own ambitions to regional power and influence, despite its ascendancy at the time. Bismarck was not only able to deter France and others from destroying the newly unified Germany, but he was able to maintain a relative stability in Europe by imposing a self-restraint on Germany's ambitions beyond its borders and the region.¹⁴

Bismarck's foreign policy of strategic self-control led to a rapid rise in Germany's national strength, a state of affairs that dramatically changed after he stepped down as chancellor in 1890 in favor of Wilhelm II. The new emperor reversed Bismarck's foreign policy and unwisely yielded to Germany's

impulse for worldwide expansion driven by the rise of its national strength and pride. Certainly the fortunes of Germany go beyond the actions of two single leaders, nevertheless the latter period introduced the large scale expansion of German nationalism and its military might regionally and further abroad.¹⁵ These adventures increased direct confrontation with other powers in the world, including France, Russia, the United States and Britain. Treaties to confine Germany's growing ambitions were formed between almost all of the major powers. The rest is history as Germany was defeated and nearly destroyed as a nation through the two World Wars.

Any country must grasp a delicate balance of pursuing its interests and avoid overdrawing its national strength in great power competition.

These historical experiences on the European continent are apropos of China's future. The essence of Bismarck's foreign policy is to not fear challenges to one's national sovereignty and be bold in resorting to force if necessary. Beyond that, however, involvement in international issues is complex and fraught with grave risks.

Any country must grasp a delicate balance of pursuing its interests and avoid overdrawing its national strength in great-power competition. In short, China will seek regional influence not global domination because this is in China's own interest and a matter of survival.

The more recent history of the United States is also a poignant lesson for China. After joining the ranks of world powers in the middle of the 20th Century, the United States has begun to witness the decline of its national fortune, which is closely related to its policy of pursuing world hegemony.


America's superior economic strength came into ascendancy following World War II and has slowly evolved into a global expansion of its military might, especially sea power. This process began with control of the Pacific Ocean when the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up a westward "frontier" migration plan in 1946. According to the plan, the 7th Fleet of the U.S. Navy entered Japan and occupied the Ryukyu and Ogasawara Islands. With Asia's largest navy based in Okinawa, the United States continued by occupying the Mariana, Caroline and Marshall Islands in 1947. However, this expansion met with serious setbacks in the Korean Peninsula and Indochina.¹⁶ In the 1950s, the United States suffered heavy losses in Korea when fighting with China. In the mid-1960s, after France withdrew from Vietnam, the United States hast-

ily entered Indochina to shoulder the burden of “salvaging the democratic world”. The result was the quagmire known as the Vietnam War.

It was during this period that America's world expansion began to consume its national strength. In 1960, the United States accounted for 25.9 percent of the world's total output value but dropped to 23 percent in 1970 and 21.5 percent in 1980. Meanwhile, countries like Japan witnessed a quick rise in their share of the world's total output. Its share rose from 4.5 percent to 9.0 percent of the world's total between 1960 and 1980, while China's increased to 4.5 percent from 3.1 percent over the same period. Nixon saw the drop in U.S. national strength as a result of overseas expansion and decisively altered U.S. foreign policy by ending the Vietnam War and normalizing relations with China. U.S. national strength began to rise once again until the end of the Cold War. Although its arch enemy, the Soviet Union fell apart, the United States resumed its expansionist foreign policy. Through the first Gulf War in 1991, the Kosovo War in 1999, the Afghanistan War in 2001 and its present occupation of Iraq, the United States has installed its military forces into the Gulf Region, the Balkan Peninsula and Central Asia, fully displacing the geopolitical ambit of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, permanently altering the global strategic balance.¹⁷

Under the present administration of George W. Bush, the United States has clearly become the international hegemon. America has not learned the painful lessons of the past. This is abundantly clear as America becomes increasingly bogged down in its Iraq campaign. It is also true in its treatment of China. The dynamic between China and the United States today is closely reminiscent of the 19th century, when Britain attempted to keep a young America under control. Those painful memories of struggling to find its place under British domination have been forgotten. As China grows out of its isolation and attains greater influence internationally, there is a very real risk that the United States will repeat the mistakes of past great powers, and try to contain China. How relations between China and the United States in this context will play out is of critical importance in the near and medium future.

Perhaps a greater lesson for China is how it will make its own choices as it rises in power and influence. The history of past empires shows us that no great power has been able to resist the temptation of worldwide expansion to the point of overstretch. Yet, a country can only remain strong if it restrains

its ambitions to a regional scale. China's great challenge is to resist the course that the United States has chosen, since worldwide expansion will inexorably lead to a nation's demise. No matter how strong China becomes in the future, it should always adhere to the basic foreign policy precepts set out by the late Chairman Mao, "dig deep holes, store abundant grain and never become a hegemon." 

Notes

¹ "The Chinese economy is highly dependent on foreign trade should be swiftly addressed," *Oriental Morning Post*, Dec. 8, 2005. See: <http://finance.people.com.cn/GB/1045/3925435.html>.

² National Development and Reform Commission, "China to become the second largest energy consumer in the world," Nov. 4, 2004. See: http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2004-11/04/content_2175691.htm.

³ "China contributes 15 percent of the GDP growth of the world," *China Business Times*, Sept. 20, 2004. See: <http://news.sohu.com/20040920/n222124515.shtml>.

⁴ Zhu Chuan, *Mineral Resources and Sustainable Development*, China Science and Technology Publish House, 1999, p. 41.

⁵ Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Briefs: United States," Nov. 2005. See: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Usa/Full.html>.

⁶ Angus Madison, *Chinese Economic Long Run Performance*, translated (*Zhongguo Jingji De Changyuan Weilai*) by Chu Xuping and Wu Xiangsong, Xinhua Publishing House, 1999, p. 57.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Zheng Fei, "The U.S. detains China's Yinhe shipping vessel to remain on high seas for 33 days," *Beijing Legal Times*, Sept. 25, 2004. See: <http://news.tom.com/1002/2004925-1358206.html>.

⁹ Power, written as 'pouer' in English in the medieval times, originated from the ancient French 'poeir,' and meant the ability to do something. Later, it was extended to: a nation, esp. one having influence or domination over other nations. See: *Webster's Dictionary* (2nd college ed.), p. 1116.

¹⁰ Hegemony: leadership or domination, esp. that of one state or nation over others. See: *Webster's Dictionary* (2nd college ed.), p. 649.

¹¹ The General Navy Dictionary contains no entry on "sea right" but has explanations about "sea power theory" and "sea strength theory". This author thinks that the latter explanation is a more accurate translation of sea power. See Zhang Xuhan (ed.), *The General Navy Dictionary*, Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, 1993 ed., p. 7.

¹² Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Teen Murti House, 1999, p.56.

¹³ India's unease is described by K. M. Panikkar, India's first ambassador to China and the founder of India's modern sea power theory. See: K. M. Panikkar, *India and the India Ocean – an Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, translated by De Long et al, World Knowledge Press, 1965 ed., pp. 88-81.

¹⁴ Dittmer Ralf, *A History of Germany, Chinese ed.*, Inter Nationes Press, Bonn, 1985.

¹⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, translated by Wang Baocun et al, Seeking Truth From Fact Press, 1988 ed., p. 247.

¹⁶ Ibid pp. 532-533.

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, translated by the China Institute of International Studies, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1998 ed., p. 4.