Preface

David B. H. Denoon

Over the last three decades, no country has received more attention from academics, journalists, and policy analysts than China. The “Rise of China,” debates over trade, investment, and technology flows, and China’s role in the COVID-19 pandemic have become a staple of international commentary.

In the period from 1990 to 2010, the commentary on China was overwhelmingly positive, noting its rapid growth and transformation into a modern society. The massive fiscal stimulus China undertook in 2008 played a key role in stimulating the world economy, and China gained respect as a manufacturer and assembler of an increasingly diverse range of exports.

Yet, after 2010, international sentiment began to shift. Attention began to focus on China’s trade surpluses with the United States, its theft of intellectual property, and its aggressive occupation of atolls in the South China Sea. By 2016 the entire scene had changed: the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea had ruled that China had no right to occupy territory in the South China Sea, and many of China’s trade practices were being viewed as predatory and in clear violation of World Trade Organization rules.

China went from being a savior of international economic growth to being a problem. This has led many analysts to start asking more fundamental questions: What are China’s long-term intentions? Will China’s economic success be used to fund an expansionist foreign policy? Does China have a grand strategy? If so, what are the key features of that strategy?

We don’t know if China has an explicit grand strategy statement like the US National Security Strategy Report. As shown in the Appendix to Chapter 1 of this volume, however, China does have an elaborate set
of sector strategies, including: detailed social goals; foreign policy objectives spelled out in the rationale for the Belt and Road Initiative; a manufacturing strategy laid out in “Made in China 2025”; an education modernization plan; a cyber security strategy; and a rural revitalization strategy.

Rather than speculate on what might be in China’s grand strategy statement, if it existed, we have decided to approach the subject by offering chapters on three functional areas (national security, economic and technological development, and diplomacy) and six regions (Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, Europe, and North America). Also, to give the reader a sense of the variety of perspectives that exist within the spectrum of Chinese policy scholarship, we have chosen authors with a broad range of views.

An additional issue to be aware of is the rapidly changing circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 epidemic. Each of the authors has tried to make their chapters current, as of April 2020, but we are well aware that major changes in the situation could occur between the time of writing and when the book is published. We have thus tried to stick to basic trends that we think will shape Chinese strategic thinking regardless of how a particular policy topic develops.

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Just as this manuscript was going to press, there were two important new developments in US-China relations: the White House published a new US Strategic Approach to the PRC and the Chinese National People’s Congress decided to change the wording of its security law, tightening control over Hong Kong and the protesters there.

The new White House policy statement indicates a sharp break with the positions of the previous three administrations. The new policy rejects “engagement” as a tool for the US to encourage the People’s Republic of China to behave cooperatively. It also endorses direct “competition” as the preferred way to proceed. For its part, China’s new policy toward Hong Kong is likely to antagonize Hong Kong residents and all outside powers who had hoped that Beijing would honor its prior commitments to implement the “one country, two systems” policy.

It is too soon to know whether either of these policy changes will create a strong counter-reaction, but the American statement is clearly
meant to show that the US is no longer willing to make a series of concessions to preserve amicable relations. Conversely, the Chinese guidelines for security policy in Hong Kong demonstrate that authorities in Beijing are more concerned about maintaining order than they are about preserving the open, market environment.

The hardening of positions on both the Chinese and American sides increases the chances that policy differences could escalate into either confrontation or conflict.