

“SOFT POWER” AT SEA: ZHENG HE AND CHINA’S MARITIME DIPLOMACY

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As China turns its gaze seaward in search of prosperity and energy security, it has embarked on a naval buildup unprecedented in the nation’s modern history. To ease worries about its intentions and to amass “soft power” in the littoral regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, Beijing has enlisted Zheng He (1371-1433), the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) “eunuch admiral” who commanded seven voyages of trade and discovery in these waters, setting sail for the first such cruise six centuries ago. While China’s Zheng He narrative is not good history for a variety of reasons, it has proved to be effective diplomacy. It behooves the United States to recognize this trend in Chinese diplomacy if it hopes to sustain its position as Asia’s leading maritime power.

Introduction

For a glimpse of China’s future on the high seas, consider Beijing’s search for a usable maritime past—a past it is using to advance present-day political aims.¹ The Chinese leadership’s creative use of history is seemingly lost on the Pentagon, which in its 2005 annual report on *The Military Power of the People’s Republic of China* confessed that “[d]irect insights into China’s national strategies are difficult to acquire,” owing to the secretive nature of the Chinese political system. Like other documents in the series, the 2005 report took stock of official policy and strategy statements from Beijing, as well as the force structure that is rapidly taking shape at Chinese shipyards and defense installations.² Pentagon analysts must continue to devote their analytical energies to such appraisals, but Chinese diplomacy and military affairs cannot be understood in material terms alone. Ideas matter, and so does history. Absent this wider understanding, Washington could misjudge China’s motives and the actions they inspire, and it could see America’s standing in the region deteriorate as a result.

A figure from Chinese maritime history furnishes one of the “direct insights” the Pentagon craves. Zheng He, the Ming Dynasty’s “eunuch admiral,” commanded seven voyages of trade and discovery in Southeast and South Asian waters (1405-1433). Today he is shaping China’s maritime orientation and grand strategy while at the same time presenting Beijing a useful diplomatic implement. Capitalizing on the six-hundredth anniversary of the

¹ Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past, and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

² Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: The Military Power of the People’s Republic of China, 2005* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, July 2005), p. 9. See also “The Pentagon Eyes China’s Military: Back to Threat-Based Planning?” *IISS Strategic Comments* 11, no. 5 (July 2005): pp. 1-2.

first cruise of Zheng's "treasure fleet"—so dubbed for the silks, porcelains, and other valuables it carried to trade with foreign peoples—China's contemporary leadership has woven an intricate narrative vis-à-vis fellow Asian nations, portraying the swift ascent of Chinese economic, military, and naval power as merely the latest phase in a benign regional dominance that had its origins in the Ming era. In this narrative, a resurgent China benefits all of maritime Asia today, just as it did in the age of Ming supremacy.

Why mount such a diplomatic charm offensive? As China turns its gaze to nearby seas in search of prosperity and secure energy supplies, it has embarked on a naval buildup unprecedented in the nation's modern history. Beijing evidently hopes to allay any suspicions aroused by its bid for sea power. In so doing, it hopes to discourage the coastal nations of East, Southeast, and South Asia from banding together—or with powerful outsiders such as the United States—to balance the growth of Chinese power.³ At home, Chinese leaders summon up Zheng He to help turn the attention of the populace seaward, rousing rank-and-file citizens for seafaring pursuits. Maritime history, in short, now suffuses Chinese politics abroad and at home.

The Voyages of Zheng He

Students and practitioners of international affairs group the tools of national power into four loose categories. The first three—diplomatic, economic, and military—are fairly straightforward, the fourth, variously known as cultural or "soft" power, less so. Soft power refers to the cultural attributes, ideas, and policies that make a nation attractive to other peoples and countries, creating an atmosphere of goodwill that helps its leaders muster support for their foreign-policy initiatives.⁴ For example, America's open, democratic society and the benefits that accrue from such openness constitute a major source of the nation's soft power.⁵ As the traditional "central" power in Asia, and with its economic and military power on the upswing, China enjoys sizable reserves of soft power in the region.⁶ Unsurprisingly,

³ International-relations scholars of "realist" inclinations typically maintain that the rise of a dominant power prompts weaker powers to balance out the prospective hegemon. Contends Kenneth Waltz, perhaps the most influential theorist of the balance of power, "hegemony leads to balance...through all of the centuries we can contemplate." By assuaging suspicions about its motives, China seems to be attempting to head off this dynamic. See for example Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (fall 1993): pp. 44-79, as well as Waltz's classic works such as *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979). For a sample of other realist analyses, see Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry," *International Security* 18, no. 3 (winter 1993/94): pp. 5-33; Richard K. Betts, "Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States after the Cold War," *International Security* 18, no. 3 (winter 1993/94): pp. 34-77; and Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival," *International Security* 22, no. 3 (winter 1997/98): pp. 36-73.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), and "Asia's Allure Lies in Soft Power," *Straits Times*, November 16, 2005, Taiwan Security Research Website, <<http://taiwansecurity.org/ST/2005/ST-161105.htm>>.

⁵ Joseph S. Nye, "The American National Interest and Global Public Goods," *International Affairs* 78, no. 2 (April 2002): p. 238.

⁶ Chen Jian distinguishes usefully between "centrality" and "dominance" in Chinese political thought. He observes, "The Chinese collective memory of the 'Central Kingdom's' glorious past—remembered not just as the center of civilization, but civilization in toto—and the nation's humiliating experience in the modern age constituted a constant source for national mobilization in the twentieth century." For Chen, then, China's ascent to great-power status need not involve

then, Zheng He has proved an ideal ambassador for Beijing.⁷ Statesmen from countries far from Chinese shores hailed his accomplishments in 2005, the centenary year of his inaugural cruise to the Indian Ocean.⁸ And he has helped Beijing exert a form of soft power at home, rallying citizens accustomed to thinking of China as a continental power for nautical endeavors.⁹ The primary theme in China's Zheng He storyline: that China is a more trustworthy steward of maritime security in Asia than any external power—read the United States—could be.

Zheng's expeditions in effect made China the first country to station a naval squadron in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ His fleet was a technological marvel by the standards of the day. Compasses had been in use since the Song Dynasty. Navigators knew how to determine latitude and maintain a course to a predetermined destination, using charts accurate enough that many of them remained in use in the eighteenth century. And his *baochuan*, or treasure ships—essentially giant seagoing junks, some boasting as many as nine masts—featured innovations that did not make their way into Western naval architecture until the nineteenth century.¹¹ If a treasure ship incurred hull damage from battle or heavy weather, for instance,

territorial conquest or military domination. Chen Jian, *The China Challenge for the Twenty-first Century* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1998), pp. 4-8.

⁷ Nye worries that the Bush administration has partially squandered American soft power by invading Iraq and through its seeming proclivity to unilateralism. While the United States has not lost out to China in Asia, it is now in a weaker position to compete with China in soft-power terms. Joseph S. Nye, "The Rise of China's Soft Power," *Wall Street Journal Asia*, December 29, 2005.

⁸ In August 2005, for instance, a major conference convened in Singapore to commemorate Zheng He and his achievements in maritime Asia. George Yeo, "Speech by George Yeo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Opening Ceremony of the 'Third International Conference of Institutes & Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies' on 18 Aug 2005 at 9.20 AM," *HuayiNet Website*, <<http://www.huayinet.org/happening/zhenghe/keynote.htm>>.

⁹ Writing in *Jiefangjun Bao*, the influential People's Liberation Army daily, one commentator fretted over the "worrisome indifference" toward the South China Sea shown by Chinese youth. Du Xianzhou, "A Reporter's Visit: Six Xisha Islands in One Month," *Jiefangjun Bao*, December 19, 2003, p. 2, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)-China, FBIS-CPP20031219000077. On China's plans to commemorate Zheng's voyages, see "China to Mark 600th Anniversary of Zheng He's Voyages to Asia, Africa," *Xinhua*, December 4, 2003, FBIS-CPP20031204000165; and Joseph Kahn, "China Has an Ancient Mariner to Tell You About," *New York Times*, July 20, 2005, *China Digital Times Website*, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/07/joseph_kahn_chi_8.php>. There are some signs that Beijing's use of Zheng He has succeeded too well. Some youthful Chinese nationalists have reproached the government for failing to embrace with sufficient fervor the British submariner Gavin Menzies's controversial claim that Zheng He visited the Americas decades before Columbus. Wang Gungwu, "China's Cautious Pride in an Ancient Mariner," *YaleGlobal Online*, August 4, 2005, <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=6095>>. See also Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (New York: William Morrow, 2003).

¹⁰ Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Sea Power* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), p. 28.

¹¹ The dimensions of the *baochuan* are a matter of some dispute. Ming histories report that the vessels were 440 feet long and 180 feet wide—a ratio that would make them so broad-beamed as to be "unresponsive even under moderate sea conditions," in the opinion of one modern analyst. Bruce Swanson contends that the treasure ships more likely resembled the large junks used in succeeding centuries, estimating their length at 180 feet. Swanson further contends that ships with these dimensions would have been large enough to accommodate ship's companies of the size

watertight bulkheads limited the spread of flooding, helping the ship resist sinking.¹² If battle loomed, the *baochuan* were equipped with incendiary weapons such as the catapult-thrown gunpowder “grenades” the treasure fleet used to overawe and defeat pirates near Malacca.¹³

Who was the man who commanded this wondrous armada? Born Ma He, the son of a Muslim Mongol family in Yunnan province, Zheng He was taken captive by a Ming army as a boy, castrated, and placed in the household of the future emperor Zhu Di. He won favor from Zhu Di through his cleverness. In 1403, after wresting the Dragon Throne from his younger brother Zhu Yunwen through bloody civil strife, Zhu Di issued orders to begin the construction of an imperial fleet of trading ships, warships, and support vessels to visit ports in the China seas and the Indian Ocean. Bearing all the treasures the empire had to offer, such a grand fleet had never been assembled before, and soon every province became absorbed in the mammoth effort.¹⁴

Part of the treasure fleet’s purpose, suggests Louise Levathes, author of a well-known history of the Ming Dynasty’s maritime exploits, was to “comb the seas and either find Yunwen or dispel the unsettling rumors of his exile abroad.”¹⁵ Emperor Zhu Di, then, had ample reason to dispatch a fleet overseas. He worried that Yunwen would return to unseat him from his hard-won throne; he hoped to use foreign trade to replenish imperial coffers depleted by civil war; and, not least, he wanted to restore and expand the tributary system, a hierarchical arrangement under which foreign rulers acknowledged the suzerainty of the Dragon Throne in return for certain political, economic, and military benefits.¹⁶ Exploring maritime Asia in quest of diplomatic and commercial ties with new peoples would advance both domestic and foreign-policy goals.¹⁷

By Zheng He’s day, Chinese seafarers plied two established sea lanes: an East Sea Route leading to ports in Java, Borneo, and the Philippines, and a West Sea Route leading to ports in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula and to the Strait of Malacca. The Dragon Throne’s

reported in the histories. Others, notably Louise Levathes, accept the figure from the histories. Either way, the treasure ships dwarfed the ships sailed by Zheng He’s near-contemporaries, Columbus and da Gama. (Columbus’s *Santa Maria* was all of 85 feet long.) Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, pp. 33-34. See also Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 19.

¹² Swanson, pp. 34-36. In contemporary parlance, “compartmentation”—using watertight bulkheads to subdivide the interior of a ship’s hull into many small compartments—limits the amount of flooding. Barring major damage to the hull that breaches multiple bulkheads, a compartmented ship stands a good chance of withstanding “progressive flooding” that might sink a ship not so equipped.

¹³ Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, pp. 47, 50-52.

¹⁴ Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, pp. 57-73.

¹⁵ Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, p. 73.

¹⁶ David C. Kang, “Hierarchy in Asian International Relations: 1300-1900,” *Asian Security* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): pp. 53-79.

influence permeated coastal Southeast Asia—a fact that is not lost on China’s rulers today. The treasure fleet used the latter route to reach the Indian Ocean. On a typical cruise, the fleet would undergo intensive training before wending its way through the Taiwan Strait into the South China Sea. Ports of call generally included Hainan Island; the Xisha (or Paracel) Islands; Champa, in modern-day Vietnam; various islands off the west coast of Borneo; and Sarabaja, in Java. In July, when the winds turned favorable, Zheng He’s ships would make their way through the Strait, thence to Calicut on India’s Malabar Coast. There the fleet typically broke up into smaller flotillas, sailing for exotic ports such as Aden, Hormuz, Jidda, and even modern-day Kenya.¹⁸

At times the threat or use of naval force figured into Zheng He’s maritime diplomacy. During its third voyage, for instance, the Ming armada struck hard at pirates. Commanded by the Cantonese pirate Chen Zuyi, who had seized control of the Sumatran city of Palembang, the pirate fleet had preyed on maritime traffic in the Strait and its approaches for years. During the ensuing battle, Zheng’s warships burned ten of Chen’s ships, captured seven others, and killed five thousand sailors. The pirate chieftain himself was hauled to Nanjing, there to be publicly executed.¹⁹ “Zheng He spent a lot of time making the Malacca Strait secure,” reports the historian Bruce Swanson, “for even at that time its importance as a trade entrepôt linking Asia and the Indian Ocean was recognized.” Indeed, Zheng’s marines erected an outpost at Malacca, helping solidify Chinese suzerainty over the Malay Peninsula while assuring free navigation through the vital sea passage.²⁰

Apart from its counter-piracy operations, the treasure fleet occasionally used force in support of kings who had shown themselves loyal to the Dragon Throne. In 1411, most prominently, Zheng He intervened in an internal war in Ceylon, quelling an insurrection led by the Buddhist chief Alakeswara and asserting Chinese sovereignty over the island.²¹ “The episode,” notes the journalist Frank Viviano, “marked the only significant overseas land battle ever fought by a Chinese imperial army.” Military intervention was rare and limited in scope. By and large, Zheng was able to accomplish his aims through less dramatic means, using shows of force to lend weight to his diplomatic efforts. By the end of Zhu Di’s reign, *baochuan* had conveyed kings or ambassadors from over thirty foreign states to China on official visits, giving rise to “a far-flung system of allies who acknowledged Ming supremacy in return for diplomatic recognition, military protection, and trading rights.”²²

The experiment with sea power—and with it the tributary system Zheng He had painstakingly erected—came to an abrupt halt after the treasure fleet’s seventh and final voyage. A struggle convulsed the imperial court following the deaths of Zhu Di and his successor, Zhu Zhanji, both proponents of sea power. Ultimately, bureaucrats who looked to Confucian teachings—teachings which deplored profitmaking, and with it maritime trade and commerce—won out over the eunuchs, who favored preserving Chinese mastery of the

¹⁷ Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, pp. 28-33. See also Roderich Ptak, “China and Calicut in the Early Ming Period: Envoys and Tribute Embassies,” in Roderich Ptak, *China and the Asian Seas: Trade, Travel, and Visions of the Others (1400-1750)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 81-111; and “Ming Maritime Trade to Southeast Asia, 1368-1567: Visions of a System,” in Roderich Ptak, *China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang: Oceans and Routes, Regions and Trades (c. 1000-1600)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 157-91.

seas.²³ Naval construction slowed, then stopped. The Ming navy numbered some 3,500 vessels in the early fifteenth century; by 1500 it was a capital offense to build vessels with more than two masts; in 1525 an imperial edict ordained the destruction of all oceangoing ships.²⁴ The Ming Dynasty turned inward, relinquishing its technological and commercial advantages, not to mention its supremacy in maritime Asia, to seafaring European nations embarking on their own Age of Discovery.

Zheng He in Today's China

How China's leadership uses the Ming legacy says much about what it hopes to accomplish at sea in coming years. Economic development drives this quest for sea power. Chinese industry's demand for reliable seaborne shipments of fuel and other commodities has beckoned Beijing's attentions and energies to the waters plied by Zheng's fleet six centuries ago. Assuring free passage through the sea lines of communication linking the Persian Gulf region and the Horn of Africa with Chinese seaports has become a matter of surpassing importance.²⁵ Indeed, Chinese leaders have come to believe the survival of communist rule depends on economic development and the comforts it brings to a potentially restive populace.

Beijing, accordingly, has faired Zheng He into a sophisticated diplomatic campaign toward coastal nations adjoining critical sea lanes. This campaign makes use of all implements of national power: routine diplomatic interchange, trade and investment, and in some cases military and naval power. Zheng He adds a cultural and historical element, helping Beijing apply its soft power to the high seas. Several strands run through China's maritime diplomacy. First, Chinese officials and commentators conjure up the treasure fleet to make a geopolitical point, reminding foreign governments and their own countrymen that China boasts a proud tradition as a seafaring power, notwithstanding its reputation as a wholly land-oriented power. Indeed, foreign countries throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral once paid tribute to Chinese maritime suzerainty through a hierarchical system that was, in great part, the handiwork of the Ming admiral.

Zheng He also allows China's political leaders to indulge in one-upsmanship at Western expense, advancing their aim of regional primacy. On a recent trip to Europe, for example, Premier Wen Jiabao reminded audiences that the Chinese explorer had "sailed

¹⁸ Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, pp. 36-40. See also Frank Viviano, "China's Great Armada," *National Geographic*, July 2005: pp. 34-53.

¹⁹ Viviano, "China's Great Armada," pp. 36-37; Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, pp. 98-99, 102.

²⁰ Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, p. 39.

²¹ Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, pp. 114-18; Viviano, "China's Great Armada," p. 41.

²² Viviano, "China's Great Armada," pp. 37, 41.

abroad earlier than Christopher Columbus.”²⁶ Chinese spokesmen habitually contrast the size and technical sophistication of Zheng’s vessels with the relatively backward fleets put to sea in fifteenth-century Europe.²⁷ In 2003, during President Hu Jintao’s historic state visit to Australia—a visit that won plaudits, prompting the media to compare the reception accorded Hu favorably to the tepid reception that had greeted President George W. Bush shortly before—the Chinese leader depicted Zheng He’s expeditions as one historical basis for the Sino-Australian relationship. In a speech to parliament, he declared:

The Chinese people have all along cherished amicable feelings about the Australian people. Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China’s Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores. For centuries, the Chinese sailed across vast seas and settled down in what they called Southern Land, or today’s Australia. They brought Chinese culture to this land and lived harmoniously with the local people, contributing their proud share to Australia’s economy, society and its thriving pluralistic culture.²⁸ Hu’s claim that the Chinese settled in Australia during the Ming era is fanciful at best.²⁹ But his message was clear: China’s presence and power in maritime Asia far antedate those of Europeans. By conferring legitimacy on interests and activities far beyond China’s shores, this kind of rhetoric helps satisfy the Chinese populace’s penchant for nationalism—a critical goal for the communist regime now that its ideological appeal is in steep decline.

Second, to support Beijing’s claims that it is pursuing a “peaceful rise” to great-power status, Chinese spokesmen play up the predominantly nonviolent nature of Zheng He’s voyages.³⁰ This helps assuage fears of China’s naval construction program and foreign arms

²³ Declared Confucius in one representative passage, “The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain.” James Legge, trans., *Confucius: Confucian Analects, the Great Learning & the Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover, 1971), p. 170.

²⁴ Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, pp. 167-78. Zheng Bijian, executive vice president of the Central Party School, portrayed Zheng He’s exploits as the first of four “strategic opportunities” open to China in its modern history, the current era of China’s “peaceful rise” as the fourth. Zheng urged Beijing to grasp this opportunity, for “China lagged behind in modern times precisely because it missed opportunities.” “Strategic Opportunities: This Is the Fourth Opportunity in Modern History,” Interview with Zheng Bijian, *Wen Wei Po*, March 13, 2003, FBIS-CPP20030313000067.

²⁵ Some 80 percent of China’s oil imports, accounting for 40 percent of total Chinese oil consumption, passes through the Strait, giving rise to what Chinese President Hu Jintao has called China’s “Malacca Dilemma.” Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People’s Republic of China*, 2005, p. 33. On China’s growing thirst for petroleum, see David Hale, “China’s Growing Appetites,” *The National Interest* 76 (summer 2004): pp. 137-47.

purchases, which in short order have produced a leap in combat power.³¹ “The essence of Zheng’s voyages does not lie in how strong the Chinese navy once was,” declared Xu Zuyuan, the Chinese government’s vice minister for communication, “but in that China adhere[d] to peaceful diplomacy when it was a big power....Zheng He’s seven voyages to the West [explain] why a *peaceful emergence is the inevitable outcome* of the development of Chinese history”³² (emphasis added). Chinese officials also intimate that, had the Ming Dynasty not outlawed maritime pursuits after Zheng He’s final voyage, Asian history might have taken a different—and more humane—course under China’s beneficent dominance.³³

Third, and closely related, Chinese officials use Zheng’s expeditions of commerce and discovery to draw a favorable contrast with Western imperialism. Chinese power, they suggest, is self-denying in nature. Declared Premier Wen while visiting the United States, Zheng “brought silk, tea and the Chinese culture” to foreign peoples, “but not one inch of land was occupied.”³⁴ Guo Chongli, China’s ambassador to Kenya, proclaimed, “Zheng He’s fleet [was] large....But his voyages were not for looting resources”—code for imperialism—“but for friendship. In trade with foreign countries, he gave much more than he took,” fostering “understanding, friendship and trade relation[s] between China’s Ming Dynasty and foreign countries in southeast Asia, west Asia and east Africa.”³⁵ The overt message to countries leery of Beijing’s ambitions: despite China’s mounting political, economic, and military power, it can be counted on to refrain from territorial conquest or military domination of its neighbors. The implied message: Chinese stewardship over Asian waters is preferable to that of the United States, long the self-appointed guarantor of maritime security in the region.

²⁶ “Premier Wen’s Several Talks During Europe Visit,” Xinhua, May 16, 2004, FBIS-CPP20040516000069. Wen sounded similar themes during a spring 2005 trip to South Asia. See Xiao Qiang, “Premier Wen’s South Asian Tour Produces Abundant Results,” Renmin Ribao, April 13, 2005, FBIS-CHN200504131477. On the extent of Chinese predominance in fifteenth-century Asia, see Roderich Ptak, “China and Portugal at Sea: The Early Ming Trading System and the Estado da Índia Compared,” in Ptak, *China and the Asian Seas*, pp. 21-37.

²⁷ Reporting on the efforts of Yao Mingde, the official in charge of the activities commemorating the treasure voyages, the official news service Xinhua observed that “Zheng He’s fleet surpassed all other marine navigators of his time in scale, sophistication, technology and organizational skills in his seven sea trips, which were a great event in the world’s navigation history.” “China Launches Activities to Commemorate Sea Navigation Pioneer Zheng He,” Xinhua, September 29, 2003, FBIS-CPP20030928000052.

²⁸ Hu Jintao, “‘Constantly Increasing Common Ground’: Hu’s Speech to Australian Parliament,” October 24, 2003, <<http://www.australianpolitics.com/news/2003/10/03-10-24b.shtml>> .

²⁹ Intriguingly, Hu’s questionable claims were based on Menzies’s 1421, an account deemed wildly speculative by most academic experts. Menzies claims, for example, that Zheng He reached American shores 70 years before Columbus. See Menzies, 1421.

³⁰ The “peaceful rise” hypothesis rests on several assumptions and projections. First, China needs a stable external environment to develop its economy. Second, Beijing faces severe internal problems that will distract it from hegemonic ambitions. Third, China’s rise to a “middle rung of advanced nations” will take 25-35 years, by which time the country will be fully integrated into the international system. Finally, China’s military growth is proportionate to the vastness of the country in terms of both geography and population. In recent months Beijing, apparently concerned about the misgivings the notion of China’s “rise” provokes, have officially recast China’s policy as one of “peaceful development.” See Zheng Bijian, “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great-Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): pp. 18-24. (Zheng, the architect of the peaceful-rise theory is a close advisor to President Hu.) See also People’s

In short, Beijing has used Zheng He to fashion a maritime diplomacy that bestows legitimacy on China's naval aspirations in East, Southeast, and South Asia, mollifying littoral nations skeptical of Chinese pretensions; undercuts America's claim to naval mastery in the region; and appeases Chinese nationalism, helping the communist regime maintain its rule. This represents an impressive use of soft power.

What Does China's Zheng He Diplomacy Tell Us?

Many Asian diplomats and scholars have lavished praise on Zheng He in recent years, reciprocating China's overtures.³⁶ While Zheng's feats make for good diplomacy, however, they do not make for good history. A host of objections to Beijing's narrative might be raised. For one thing, today's communist regime bears scant resemblance to the Ming Dynasty. Drawing a straight line from Emperor Zhu Di's foreign policy to that of the communist regime, or for that matter from the Ming armada to the People's Liberation Army Navy, is dubious at best. For another, Zheng's voyages spanned too brief a time to allow historians to draw firm conclusions about the Ming Dynasty's proclivity for Western-style imperialism. Indeed, the fight with Alakeswara on Ceylon suggests that, had the Dragon Throne not retreated from the seas, it might well have deployed force to uphold its suzerainty over coastal areas. If so, China's first foray into sea power would indeed have taken on the semblance of colonialism.

Despite its faulty historical reasoning, China has used its ancient mariner adroitly to exert soft power. Asian officials' readiness to overlook the flaws in China's narrative bespeaks a receptiveness to China's cultural appeal that eludes many in the Bush administration, which since 9/11 has predicated its Asia policy almost exclusively on hard-power matters such as counterterrorism and traditional balance-of-power politics.

What insights should American leaders draw from China's Zheng He diplomacy? First, that the attentions of China's leadership are now riveted on the seas. Gone are the days when Beijing, preoccupied with events ashore, was content to entrust its maritime interests to the U.S. Navy. Nor will China's navy be a pushover, as it was in the past. In all likelihood, as China comes to rely on the sea to support economic development, it will put to sea naval forces able to defend its interests far from Chinese shores. Second, Beijing will direct its strategic gaze not eastward into the Pacific, as many China-watchers predict, but southward, along the sea lines of communication that convey vital commodities—the stuff of a developed economy—into Chinese ports.³⁷ Third, Beijing understands how to incorporate all elements of national power, hard and soft, into its diplomacy. Like Zheng He, today's Chinese leaders mesh diplomacy, economic and trade incentives, low-key shows of naval and military force, and cultural influence into a comprehensive outreach program.

And finally, owing in part to deft Chinese diplomacy, most littoral nations in Asia do not view China with the same foreboding that animates many in Washington. For them China represents trade and investment. It is less a "China threat," to borrow a term common in Beijing, than a means to economic vitality—the paramount goal for political leaders

³⁶ See for example "Malaysian Deputy PM Najhib Vows to Enhance Ties with China," Bernama (Kuala Lumpur), January 11, 2004, FBIS-SEP20040112000008; "Singapore Tourism Sector 'Wooing' Chinese Tourists," Xinhua, April 30, 2004, FBIS-CPP20040430000205.

³⁷ For an analysis of China's likely maritime orientation, see Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, "Command of the Sea with Chinese Characteristics," *Orbis* 49, no. 4 (fall 2005): pp. 677-94.

throughout Asia. Realists have forecast that Asian nations will band together to offset Chinese power, but other analysts have predicted the emergence of a hierarchical order resembling the Sinocentric tributary system Zheng He helped craft.³⁸ If Beijing did manage to replicate history in such a manner, it would fundamentally challenge the Asian security architecture designed and sustained by Washington in the postwar era. America's overall position in Asia, along with U.S.-led bilateral alliances in the region, would surely suffer.

Washington, then, should accept and indeed welcome Beijing's claims to leadership in Asian waters, which could advance the two powers' mutual interest in maritime security and trade. But it also needs to be alert to Chinese efforts to displace the United States from its position as Asia's leading maritime power.³⁹ If Zheng He supplies Beijing with a way to apply soft power, he also supplies Washington with a measuring stick for China's intentions. As analysts at the Pentagon and elsewhere compile future analyses of Chinese foreign policy and strategy, they should watch for signs that China is deviating from the benevolent purposes conveyed by its Zheng He narrative. In the meantime, the United States needs to devise a broader-based grand strategy of its own for Asia, sustaining its soft power lest it find itself less and less able to influence Asian affairs or, in the worst case, shut out of the region altogether.

³⁸ See for example David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (spring 2003): pp. 57-85; and Kang, "Hierarchy in International Relations," pp. 53-79.

³⁹ The trend toward dislodging America from its leading role in Asian affairs is already evident today. In mid-December 2005, for instance, Asian nations held their inaugural East Asia Summit, a regional meeting that for the first time excluded the United States, in part at the insistence of China. Strikingly, Premier Wen Jiabao used the meeting, held in Kuala Lumpur, to unveil Beijing's policy of peaceful development. Wen Jiabao, "China's Peaceful Development: An Opportunity for East Asia," Address to the East Asia Summit Leaders Dialogue, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, December 12, 2005, <<http://ls.chineseembassy.org/eng/xwdt/t228421.htm>>.