

# Correspondence

Robert Jervis

## Thinking Systemically About China

*To the Editors:*

Aaron Friedberg's comprehensive and insightful discussion of the theoretical bases for alternative expectations of future U.S.-China relations ends by explaining how various elements highlighted by liberal, realist, and constructivist perspectives might be combined.<sup>1</sup> I would like to offer an extension that builds on Friedberg's penultimate paragraph.

With the exception of this paragraph, Friedberg's synthesis addresses how liberal, realist, and constructivist elements could be combined in various ways that are essentially additive (pp. 39–45); that is, the forces he describes can be added to or subtracted from each other in different ways, depending on the observer's theoretical perspective and empirical expectations. But a systems perspective would lead scholars to consider somewhat more complex possibilities.<sup>2</sup> This way of seeing the world sensitizes us to feedbacks, interactions, and contingencies. Indeed, not only does the magnitude of the impact of one variable often depend on the state of other variables, but even the sign of its impact can be affected as well.

To start with, feedbacks over time are possible. The theoretical perspectives Friedberg discusses touch on these, but a systems view highlights them. Most obviously, as liberals argue, the effects of democracy, domestic economic growth, and international trade can produce a benign and self-reinforcing cycle. It is no accident that wealth and democracy tend to be correlated: increased wealth makes power sharing less risky for rulers and usually leads to the diffusion of power, while the rule of law and citizen participation encourage economic growth. In the modern era, these processes are enhanced by economic intercourse between as well as within countries. Furthermore, they are reciprocally implicated in peace and good relations with other countries. So it is not merely that each of these factors makes an independent impact; rather, each reinforces the others. Pessimists can find feedback loops between China's rising power as stressed by realists and the negative images stressed by constructivists. As China gains greater ability to threaten the United States and its allies, these countries are likely to draw disturbing inferences about its intentions and character, thereby leading the Chinese leadership to expect further deterioration of relations and reasons

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1. Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Fall 2005), pp. 7–45. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically in the text.
  2. Not surprisingly, I borrow from my book *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

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*International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 206–208

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for an enhanced military buildup. Optimists, understanding that feedbacks are not automatic but can be affected by actors' expectations about them, may argue that this very danger explains why the outcome is unlikely. U.S. and Chinese leaders can see what will happen if they do not take special efforts to defuse tensions and build better relations, and so the knowledge of the likely feedbacks can be used to derail them.<sup>3</sup>

As this indicates, a focus on feedbacks reminds us that the actual and desired state of political relations can be independent, as well as dependent, variables. Thus current and expected good relations between countries can lead to increased trade and investment, and the extent of current U.S.-Chinese economic relations (with its attendant positive impact on Chinese economic development and decreased prices for U.S. consumers) would have been inconceivable had political relations between the two countries remained bad.

Feedbacks help explain how systems change over time; interaction effects remind us that the impact of any two variables at any one point in time may not be additive. Indeed, the sign as well as the magnitude of the impact of one variable can depend on the state of another. To take the most obvious example, the growth of China's economy could have a strongly positive effect on Sino-American relations if China is seen as following a benign policy toward Taiwan, but it would have a negative effect if it were seen as menacing the United States' ally. Less dramatical, but still significant, the benign effect of any given increment of increased Sino-American economic activity is likely to be magnified by increases in democratization within China. The latter factor does not merely add to the former; it multiplies it.

Finally, as Friedberg notes toward the end of his article, contingencies and path dependence are possible. Any number of accidents could push Sino-American relations in a particular direction; and if this generates positive feedback, the change (for better or for worse) could be hard to reverse. Natural disasters have brought countries together and perhaps helped end civil wars, as in the case of Indonesia. If Taylor Fravel is correct, instability within China could lead it to seek better relations with Taiwan and the United States, which in turn could set these countries on a more benign path.<sup>4</sup> Malign disturbances are perhaps easier to imagine. Domestic politics in Taiwan could heighten Chinese fear of independence, leading to a military demonstration that could reinvigorate the negative image of China in American eyes, or the temporary rise of a strongly anti-Chinese faction in the U.S. government could lead to a deterioration in Sino-American relations, which could further strengthen the hand of hawks in each country. Or a downturn in the U.S. economy could lead to the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment, which could set political relations in a different direction and, if it produced restrictions on Chinese imports, lead Chinese leaders to view the United States as an unreliable partner or even to infer that the economic conditions were merely an excuse for malign U.S. leaders to harm China.

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3. *Ibid.*, chap. 7.

4. M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Fall 2005), pp. 46-83.

Obviously, these examples are stark, if not overdrawn. They are intended neither to be definitive nor to contradict Friedberg's analysis, but to show that thinking more systematically about the sort of nonlinear dynamics that make politics so fascinating and hard to manage can be fruitful.

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ERRATUM

On page 149 of Vera Achvarina and Simon F. Reich's summer 2006 article, "No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers," the second equation should read as follows:

$$CS = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Poverty} + \beta_2 \text{Orphans} + \beta_3 \text{Access} + \varepsilon,$$

We regret the error.