

# China Hawk Settles in Neocons' Nest

By Jim Lobe | May 12, 2003

Neoconservative hawks have scored a new victory in the administration of President George W. Bush with the hiring by Vice President Richard Cheney of a prominent hawk on China policy. China specialist and Princeton University professor Aaron Friedberg has been named deputy national security adviser and director of policy planning on Cheney's high-powered foreign policy staff headed by I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, one of the most influential foreign policy strategists in the administration. Libby also served as the general counsel to the Cox Commission, a House Select Committee that issued a report in 1999 accusing China of large-scale espionage to advance its nuclear weapons program and was soundly criticized by many China scholars for its factual errors, unsupported allegations, and shoddy analysis.

Both Friedberg and Libby, as well as Cheney, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, and 21 other prominent right-wingers, signed the 1997 founding charter of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which called for the adoption of a "Reaganite" policy of military strength and moral clarity." Friedberg also signed another PNAC letter to Bush on September 20, 2001, which called for the "war on terrorism" to be directed against Iraq and other anti-Israel forces in the Middle East, in addition to al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. And the professor wrote a chapter on the threat posed by China in *Present Dangers*, a 2000 book edited by PNAC cofounders William Kristol and Robert Kagan that also included chapters by other leading neoconservative hawks, including former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle and former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief James Woolsey.

The significance of his appointment lies both with Cheney's and Libby's influence in foreign policymaking and the fact that Friedberg will be the only recognized China expert in such a senior position. "There really haven't been top people under Bush who knew much about China," says John Gershman, an Asia specialist at New York University's Wagner School and the codirector of the Foreign Policy in Focus think tank. "He's the first one." But according to

Gershman, Friedberg "fits clearly into the group that has been dominant in the administration" since the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and the Pentagon. "He's a China-threat person without being hysterical about it," Gershman continues. "But his appointment is a clear sign that the cooperation that has emerged between the U.S. and China on the war on terrorism and North Korea is entirely tactical, and that Cheney is still inclined to see China as a strategic competitor."

## A New Twist to U.S-China Ties?

The appointment, which will take effect June 1, comes at an interesting moment in the evolution of Sino-U.S. ties under Bush, who came into office with a significantly harsher view of Beijing than his predecessor, President Bill Clinton. An early test came in the spring of 2001, after a collision between a U.S. spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet that destroyed the latter and forced the U.S. plane to land on Hainan Island, where its crew was detained for several weeks. The incident turned out to be an early indication of the profound split within the administration between right-wing hawks centered in the offices of Cheney and Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose successful negotiation of the crew's return



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eventually defused a crisis that was avidly stoked by neoconservatives, especially Kristol and Kagan, whose *Weekly Standard* magazine generally reflects the views of the administration's hawks.

Bush himself appeared to mellow on China after the crisis and a subsequent meeting with then-president Jiang Zemin, a process that was furthered after Sep. 11 when Washington actively sought Beijing's cooperation in the "war on terrorism." But despite the détente, Rumsfeld, presumably with Cheney's backing, held up resumption of military-to-military ties between the United States and China that were cut off for more than one year during the crisis.

In addition, the Pentagon has been trying to persuade a reluctant Taiwan, which China considers a renegade province, to buy a slew of weaponry, including destroyers, submarines, and aircraft, which the administration approved for sale to the island almost two years ago. According to the May 9 edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, Washington is now offering Taiwan its most advanced anti-missile system, the Patriot-3, a sale that, if consummated, is almost certain to result in a Chinese protest.

The Pentagon has also been eagerly courting the Indian military over the past year in what one recently leaked document revealed by *Jane's Foreign Report* depicted China as "the most significant threat to both (the U.S. and India)," and called for Delhi to become a "vital component of U.S. strategy" vis-a-vis China, particularly now that Washington is reassessing its military alliances with Japan and South Korea.

## A Significant Appointment

In this context, Friedberg's appointment gains significance. In his writings over several years, Friedberg has depicted China as a "strategic competitor" to the United States that will almost inevitably challenge Washington's own political and military pre-eminence in the region. In a 2000 article entitled *The Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, in the leading neoconservative monthly *Commentary*, Friedberg wrote, "over

the course of the next several decades there is a good chance that the United States will find itself engaged in an open and intense geopolitical rivalry with the People's Republic of China (PRC)." While such a situation is not completely inevitable, he says, it is "quite likely." "The combination of growing Chinese power, China's effort to expand its influence, and the unwillingness of the United States to entirely give way before it are the necessary preconditions of a 'struggle for mastery,'" he goes on, adding that actual military confrontation could be either slow to develop or could happen as a result of "single catalytic event, such as a showdown over Taiwan."

One of the major problems that U.S. policymakers will face is balancing the interests of "powerful business lobbies"—which Friedberg calls "pro-PRC lobbying groups"—in the United States, which are determined to expand access to China's market and labor force, against strategic concerns caused by Beijing's desire to expand its influence in the region. He also expresses concern that China's growing economic power in Asia will enable it to exert influence on the region's governments as part of its "strategic competition."

Moreover, writes Friedberg, China "will be a very different kind of strategic competitor from the Soviet Union," given its size, dynamism, and relative openness, all of which could work against Washington's ability to contain it in the coming years. "The thrust of what he writes is the inevitability of confrontation with the U.S. or of an attempt to displace the U.S. in Asia," says one former senior State Department Asia specialist. "The problem with this is his automatic presumption of a clash rather than a more careful assumption that confrontation may not be inevitable."

Indeed, Friedberg's assumptions were even questioned by Zalmay Khalilzad, a senior Bush strategist who has handled relations with Afghanistan and Iraq but has supported a policy of both engagement and containment—or "conengagement"—toward China. In a published reply to Friedberg's *Commentary* article,

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Khalilzad criticized his assumption “that the current Chinese regime and/or its likely successor will pursue regional hegemony. This is by no means inevitable,” Khalilzad said, arguing that it was also possible that the relationship would evolve into “mutual accommodation and partnership,” particularly if Beijing made democratic reforms.

But Friedberg thinks this unlikely. “Regimes in transition from strict authoritarianism to greater political openness,” he replied, “have historically been prone to bouts of aggressive nationalism.” While Washington should continue to foster trade and investment—though not in key strategic areas—the priority, he wrote, should be placed on “serious, sustained, and unchecked efforts to strengthen our alliances, improve our military capabilities, and maintain a balance of power in Asia that is favorable to our interests. Engagement, yes; but from a position of strength.”

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