

CHAPTER 5

CHINA 2020

PAPER TIGER

Any discussion of the future has to begin with a discussion of China. One-quarter of the world lives in China, and there has been a great deal of discussion of China as a future global power. Its economy has been surging dramatically in the past thirty years, and it is certainly a significant power. But thirty years of growth does not mean unending growth. It means that the probability of China continuing to grow at this rate is diminishing. And in the case of China, slower growth means substantial social and political problems. I don't share the view that China is going to be a major world power. I don't even believe it will hold together as a unified country. But I do agree that we can't discuss the future without first discussing China.

China's geography makes it unlikely that it will become an active fault line. If it were to become an area of conflict, it would be less China striking out than China becoming the victim of others taking advantage of its weakness. China's economy is not nearly as robust as it might seem, and its political stability, which depends heavily on continuing rapid growth, is even more precarious. China is important, however, because it appears to be the most likely global challenger in the near term—at least in the minds of others.

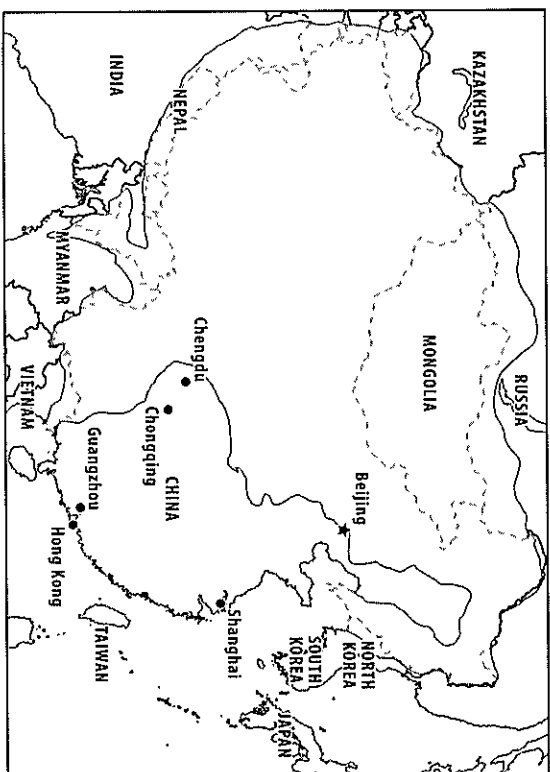
Again, using geopolitics as our framework, we will begin by considering the basics.

First, China is an island. It is obviously not surrounded by water, but it is surrounded by impassable terrain and wastelands that effectively isolate it from the rest of the world (see map below).

To China's north are Siberia and the Mongolian steppe—inhabitable, lightly settled, and difficult to traverse. To the southwest are the impassable Himalayas. The southern border with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam is simultaneously mountainous and jungle, and to the east are oceans. Only its western border with Kazakhstan can be traveled by large numbers of people, but there too, movement involves a level of effort not frequently justified in Chinese history.

The vast majority of China's population lives within one thousand miles of the coast, populating the eastern third of the country, with the other two-thirds being quite underpopulated (see map, page 90).

China was completely conquered only once—by the Mongols in the



China: Impassable Terrain