The uprisings sweeping the whole Middle East since the beginning of this year – better known as the “Arab Spring” in the United States – have been watched closely by people in China. As the uprisings became the main geopolitical event of the year, they also stimulated heated debate inside the government and among students of international relations and Middle East observers in particular. This essay offers my personal observations and thoughts in understanding the entire event as it unfolds.

The uprisings surprised most Chinese, as well as Western scholars. Very few succeeded in predicting the outcomes in Tunisia. Even when the uprisings eventually spread to Egypt, most Chinese scholars still believed President Mubarak would hold on to power. Only after Mubarak resigned, people began to take the uprisings as a start of a grand transition and reflected on the main reasons behind this massive popular revolt. Most scholars would agree that it is an outbreak of a comprehensive crisis in the Arab world as the result of a combination of political, economic, and social factors. In general, it was driven by internal dynamics, and was regarded as a genuine local, bottom-up movement. Chinese, for the most part, tend to believe that people in the Arab world are so desperate to find a way out of a world in which they are increasingly marginalized during the course of globalization that they can no longer live with the status quo.

As viewed from China, we tend to understand the uprisings as part of a broader process, comparing the uprisings with the other two major watershed events in the post-World War II history of the Middle East. The first is the rise of Arab nationalism associated with the charismatic Egyptian leader Nasser, which defined the construction of modern Arab states in its heyday in 1950. The second is the revival of the Islamic movement after the Arab world suffered humiliating defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The current uprisings may signify a return of secularism, which will help strike a balance between secular and religious forces, and establish a more pluralist environment for the reform to come. There are scholars who prefer to put the Arab Spring in the context of democratization processes in the post-Cold War era. The “Jasmine Revolution” is the third in the sequence following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the color revolutions in Central Asia. It may come as a coincidence that these three big events happened every ten years after the end of the Cold War, but they seemed to share some common features. Therefore, it may be tempting to use historical precedents of the former two to evaluate the future trajectory of the current uprisings.
The uprisings have affected China’s foreign policy profoundly. In general, the uprisings will serve as a wake-up call for the Chinese government to continue its commitment to addressing social tensions based on the philosophy of “people first” in pursuit of building a harmonious society. An important lesson learned from the uprisings is that equal attention should be paid to social grievance and economic development. It can be expected that domestic development and stability will remain the top priority of the government for the next 10-15 years. As a result, domestic considerations will exert a greater constraint on China’s foreign policy orientations.

China-U.S. relations have become the focal point of the debate over implications of the uprisings to China’s foreign policy. In the immediate aftermath, most Chinese scholars were concerned about possible U.S. involvement in China’s domestic politics. There are a few people who argue that the United States may be tempted to take advantage of the Arab Spring to promote democratization in China given that human rights issues have increasingly become a source of frictions between the two countries in recent years. However, more people tend to play down its significance in the overall relations, as they consider the bilateral relationship has evolved to become mature enough not to be derailed by this episode.

Chinese scholars are also interested in knowing the extent to which U.S. strategy towards the Middle East will be affected by the uprisings. Most Chinese scholars agree that the United States has been distracted from attention to the Middle East since President Obama took office, and tend to put the steady decline of U.S. commitment to this region into the larger context of U.S. “returning to Asia”, a process that is not wholly celebrated in China given the potential negative impact on Chinese interests in the region. Some people seem to breathe a sigh of relief when they compare the uprisings with what happened after 9/11, when the United States had to reorient itself back to the Middle East (and perhaps away from what seemed then to be a drift toward confrontation with China), a phenomenon that contributed to the improvement of China-U.S. relations at that time. Therefore, they take this moment as another period of opportunity for improvement in the bilateral relations.

Most Chinese scholars would agree that the uprisings surprised the United States. The majority regarded U.S. policy as responsive, rather than proactive, and thought that the failure of the United States to shape the whole event indicated a continuing decline of U.S. influence, reflecting the inability of the United States to maintain its dominance in the Middle East. In the long run, the power vacuum left over by the U.S. withdrawal from the region will likely invite other big powers to play games in Middle East politics. Yet, opinions in China remain divided. There are scholars who argue the uprisings have enhanced, rather than weakened, the U.S. position in the region, given that democratization is a goal long pursued by the United States. Moreover, the United States will be quick to adapt itself to the changes as it is more experienced in dealing with the crises in the Middle East than any other big powers.

The Middle East has been undergoing profound changes. With Chinese interests growing rapidly in the Middle East, the Arab uprisings have imposed great challenges to China, both theoretically and politically, some of which have been reflected in the current debate. As it goes on, the public intellectual debate may contribute to a better public understanding and sound policy recommendations.

Ye Qing is currently a visiting fellow with the Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS. He is also associate research fellow and deputy director of the Institute for Global Governance Studies at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies.

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PUBLICATIONS

• “China’s Exchange Rate Politics: Decoding the Cleavage between the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the People’s Bank of China,” CSIS, June 2011. By Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, and Wen Jin Yuan, Researcher, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

On June 19, 2010, the People’s Bank of China (PBOC), the country’s central bank, announced with much fanfare that China would allow the resumption of the RMB’s steady appreciation against the dollar through “a managed floating exchange rate regime” tied to a basket of currencies. Upon the announcement, speculation has focused on the future of the RMB, particularly on how much and how fast the currency would appreciate. This report aims to decipher the contrasting views within Chinese central leadership circles on the issue of currency reform, in particular the PBOC’s motivations as the main backer of currency reform and the Ministry of Commerce’s efforts to impede reform; and to ascertain the pace and process of China’s currency reform in the future.

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• “Garbling U.S. Policy toward Taiwan Poses Risks,” cogitASIA Blog, May 24, 2011. By Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies and Senior Associate, Pacific Forum, CSIS

The message the Obama administration should convey is that the only path to a reduction of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan is through Taipei. China must dramatically reduce its military threat to Taiwan, and thereby persuade the Taiwanese people that they do not need to bolster their capability to deter and defend against an attack from China. Until then, the United States should uphold the Taiwan Recovery Act and correctly recite the U.S. “one China” policy at every opportunity.

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• “Pomp and Substance: Hu’s State Visit to the U.S.,” Comparative Connections, CSIS, May 2011. By Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies and Senior Associate, Pacific Forum, CSIS, and Brittany Billingsley, Research Associate and Program Coordinator, Freeman Chair in China Studies

Hu Jintao’s state visit to the United States on January 18-21 put a floor under the China-U.S. bilateral relationship after a year that was riddled with tension and discord. The summit provided an opportunity for the U.S. and Chinese presidents to discuss a broad range of issues, and to attempt to chart a course forward that enables cooperation where U.S. and Chinese interests converge, as well as the means to manage differences where common ground is lacking.

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CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

• June 6 “Henry Kissinger ’On China’ Special Book Event”


• June 2 A Perspective on U.S.-China Relations

Following a recent trip to China, Congressmen Charles Boustany (R-LA) and Rick Larsen (D-WA), cochairs of the bipartisan U.S.-China Working Group, presented their perspectives on the U.S.-China relationship. CSIS President and CEO John J. Hamre introduced the congressmen as thoughtful leaders representing Congress at its best. Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, moderated the discussion.

• May 12 President Ma Ying-jeou on “U.S.-Taiwan Relations in a New Era”

Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou outlined three strategies for increasing Taiwan’s national security—institutionalizing cross-strait rapprochement with mainland China; enhancing Taiwan’s contributions to international development; and aligning Taiwan’s defense and diplomacy. CSIS President and CEO John J. Hamre and Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, hosted the conference.

PUBLICATIONS


The third U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), held on May 9-11, included the Strategic Security Dialogue, a new joint civilian-military dialogue and a significant achievement with the long-term potential to strengthen bilateral strategic trust. S&ED also addressed economic issues such as U.S. concerns over China’s commitment to rebalancing its economy, although Beijing’s political transition to 2012 meant no major inroads would be made on economic policy issues of import to U.S. interests.

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2011

June
• “China’s Exchange Rate Politics: Decoding the Cleavage between the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the People’s Bank of China,” CSIS, June 2011. By Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, and Wen Jin Yuan, Researcher, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

May
• “Garbling U.S. Policy toward Taiwan Poses Risks,” cogitASIA Blog, May 24, 2011. By Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies and Senior Associate, Pacific Forum, CSIS
• “Pomp and Substance: Hu’s State Visit to the U.S.,” Comparative Connections, CSIS, May 2011. By Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies and Senior Associate, Pacific Forum, CSIS, and Brittany Billingsley, Research Associate and Program Coordinator, Freeman Chair in China Studies

March
• “China’s Approach to CBMs with Taiwan: Lessons from China’s CBMs with Neighboring Countries,” in New Opportunities and Challenges for Taiwan’s Security (RAND), March, 2011. By Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies and Senior Associate, Pacific Forum, CSIS. pp. 17-23
• “U.S.-China Military Relations: The Weakest Link”, China-U.S. Focus, March 9, 2011. By Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies and Senior Associate, Pacific Forum, CSIS

February

January
• “Memorandum to President Hu Jintao”, CSIS, January 18, 2010. By Charles Freeman, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS.
of candid discussions on critical security matters. Long-term process, but these goals will be unattainable in the absence of mutual strategic suspicions and building trust will undoubtedly be a cooperative, and comprehensive U.S.-China relationship. Easing President Obama’s and President Hu’s shared vision for a positive, and reliable military-to-military relationship is an essential part of January 2011 visit to the United States affirmed that “a healthy, stable, and preeminent – even in the face of a temporary decline – averting open confrontation with the United States will likely continue to define Chinese foreign policy. However, if Beijing were to conclude that the gap between Chinese and U.S. power was rapidly narrowing and represented a more enduring geopolitical shift, Chinese leaders might begin to challenge the United States more aggressively in order to take advantage of the opening and make gains on securing their core interests.

Beijing’s assessment of the global balance of power, especially American power and the position of China vis-à-vis the United States, is a critical factor in Chinese foreign policy decisionmaking. As long as Chinese leaders perceive a long-lasting American preeminence – even in the face of a temporary decline – averting open confrontation with the United States will likely continue to define Chinese foreign policy. However, if Beijing were to conclude that the gap between Chinese and U.S. power was rapidly narrowing and represented a more enduring geopolitical shift, Chinese leaders might begin to challenge the United States more aggressively in order to take advantage of the opening and make gains on securing their core interests.

After a three-month delay, the Chinese Ministry of Defense released its National Defense White Paper for the year 2010. This is China’s seventh such report and its biennial publication has raised expectations in the region and beyond for greater transparency about Chinese military developments. Each edition of the white paper is intended to build on past reports rather than provide a comprehensive picture of the People’s Liberation Army. This year’s report adds little to already existing knowledge about the PLA, however, and therefore will do little to assuage the concerns that many countries have about growing Chinese military power and opaque Chinese intentions.


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The Joint Statement released during Chinese President Hu Jintao’s January 2011 visit to the United States affirmed that “a healthy, stable, and reliable military-to-military relationship is an essential part of President Obama’s and President Hu’s shared vision for a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive U.S.-China relationship.” Easing mutual strategic suspicions and building trust will undoubtedly be a long-term process, but these goals will be unattainable in the absence of candid discussions on critical security matters.

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Internet Use in China

1. China’s mobile internet market reached $989 million in the first quarter of 2011, a year on year increase of 43.4%.
2. Between January and April 2011, the number of broadband users in China grew by 9.58 million to 135.92 million while the number of dial-up users fell by 130,000 to 3.77 million. China is currently home to the world’s largest internet market with 477 million users.
3. Sina Weibo, China’s version of Twitter, reached 120 million users in January 2011, with 40 million estimated to be active. The microblogging site has been operating for less than two years and sees 30 million tweets per day.
4. About 148 million customers purchased goods or services online last year in China, increasing the country’s online shopping transactions volume by 89.4% to $77 billion.
5. Around 284 million Chinese, or 25% of the population, watch videos online, compared to 9.6 million Indians, or less than 1% of the population. The numbers are expected to grow to 502 million and 71 million for China and India, respectively, in the next four years.

Sources: China Economic Net, Cisco Virtual Network Index, EON Business Wire, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Xinhua

Freeman Chair in China Studies

Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder
Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Fellow
Savina Rupani, Program Coordinator
Xiaoqing Lu Boynton, Fellow
Brittany Billingsley, Research Associate and Program Coordinator
Jeffrey Bean, Research Assistant
Mengyu Huang, Jackson Nichols, Philip Pei, Laura Yu and Wen Jin Yuan, Research Interns