

China's foreign policy: Realpolitik or something new?♦

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Acutely alarmed by its diminishing international clout in the late 20th century, China embarked on economic reforms that not only saved the economy and its political elites, but also gave the state more confidence and power to meliorate its international position. Moreover, because of its geographic position and traditional regional influence, any changes in China's foreign policy would lead to reactions among East Asian countries. In this review of China's foreign policy, we focus on how it has changed over time while addressing four questions: Is the guiding principle of China's foreign policy, idealism, Realpolitik or something else? Is China's primary goal in the new millennium purely economic development or regional hegemony? Will increasing regional influence of a rising China increase the likelihood of war or consolidate peace? Does China practice its own unique brand of foreign policy? Finally, we discuss China's evolving foreign policy and its future trajectory.

The origins of Chinese foreign policy

Following a series of mid-nineteenth century external and internal conflicts, including foreign wars in the late Ching dynasty, the revolutionary war in 1910s, the civil war among warlords in 1920s, the Sino-Japan war in 1937-45, and the civil war between Communist and Nationalist in 1945-49, China unhappily found itself at the periphery of the global system. Nonetheless, after half a century of relative peace and economic reform policies enacted in 1978, China has begun to re-build its international relations.

Mao Ze-dong declared the Chinese people had finally "stood up" in the world and a "new China" had been built in 1949. Despite this declaration of a "new China" in 1949, there are historical legacies embedded in modern China's foreign relations. These include preserving the conception of Chinese "centrality" in the world. However, rather

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than maintaining illusions of centrality a more pressing task for modern Chinese foreign policy has been the maintenance of China itself.¹

During a century of defeat and humiliation, modern Chinese leaders have repeatedly promoted a reversion to ancient China's "centrality" in global politics. The conflict between the China's idealized image of cultural superiority in international relations and the practice of its relations with foreigners from the time of the Opium War has resulted in a split between the ideas of China as a leader and China as a victim in its foreign relations.² Neither Modern China nor the old Imperial China, had any natural allies, nor a tradition of maintaining alliances. Therefore, China has always promoted an independent foreign policy.

For China to pursue an independent foreign policy it must first harness and channel the power to do so, and nationalism may be a useful tool for this end. For instance, following the Belgrade embassy bombing in 1999, a *People's Daily* op-ed declared: "This is 1999, not 1899...The Chinese people are not to be bullied, and China's sovereignty and dignity are not to be violated. The hot blood of people of ideas and integrity who opposed imperialism for over 150 years flows in the veins of the Chinese people, and U.S.-led NATO had better remember this."³ In the Chinese view, the bombing was not an isolated event, but the latest in a long series of Western aggressions against China,⁴ and China's government and people are accustomed to responding with nationalistic passion, even though this is not necessarily rational to outsiders.

Chinese handling of foreign relations in this manner stems from the experience of the so-called "Century of Humiliation" or "Century of Shame" from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The events that occurred during this period remain central to Chinese nationalism today. Jenner states: "China is caught in a ... prison of history."⁵ The weight of the past is particularly heavy in China, and the concept of national narratives helps us better understand the role of the past in contemporary Chinese nationalist politics.

In the Chinese view, the devils invading from the West had a civilization that challenged the superiority of Confucian civilization and threatened its security. Though the international status of China has markedly improved, many Chinese nationalists are still primed to view some American or Japanese actions as aggressive. The paranoia caused by the victimization narrative is a crucial component of China's assertion of its foreign policy.

Besides the traditional view of Chinese centrality and the modern variable of nationalism, ideology is another factor which influences China's policy. Ideology, namely Marxist-Maoism, began to lose favor as a significant variable for explaining Chinese politics shortly after the death of Mao.⁶ When Deng Xiao-ping consolidated his power, he proclaimed an end to the ideological politics of the Maoist era. Nonethe-

less, in order to maintain the Communist's monopoly of power, the leaders of the CCP understand the continuing importance of ideology in justifying their rule.

According to authentic Maoist thought, the world is divided into two inherently hostile camps, and the socialist camp and its allies are engaged in a world-wide struggle against imperialism. In the post-Mao period, a distinct lowering of China's international ideological profile occurred. Perception and ideology play a role in the foreign policy of every state, and China is no exception. In China's case, nationalism and the optimism of China rising from the periphery to the core have replaced the primary ideology of Marxism.

Further, one must consider the deep influence of the tradition of elites in China's policy-making process. For many decades, the CCP supported the myths of Marx and Lenin by declaring that it speaks selflessly for the interests of the proletariat and the whole of China's people. CCP figures such as Mao, Chou En-lai, Deng, and Hu, represent a strong strand of continuity in the making of Chinese foreign policy. Almost all important decisions since the 1950s have been made by China's leading nucleus, and foreign policy in particular has remained the prerogative of a handful of CCP elders. Mao's role in key decisions determined the fundamental orientation of China's foreign policy, even propelling China into wars with foreign powers. The implementation of key country (i.e. US or USSR) policy is illustrative of the centralized and personalized nature of elite decisions.⁷

For a comprehensive understanding of Chinese foreign policy-making, it is necessary to understand China's general power structure. The PRC regime consists of three major systems, including the Communist Party, the government, and the military. One of the major characteristics of the Chinese political system is the high concentration of political power in the CCP. Nevertheless, though the system's apex is officially the Political Bureau, it's often controlled by a small core group of elites. Currently the focus of diplomacy serves China's main interest of economic development. The transformation of the national goal of economic development by embracing some aspects of market capitalism has in no wise changed the oligarchic nature of the CCP.

Furthermore, China's internal politics led by elites is not only a critical factor in foreign policy-making. As in many other states, China's leadership may sometimes choose a policy option based on domestic concerns, and not necessarily because they think it's rational for China's international interest.⁸ Before the 1980s this was especially true because the regime wasn't stable enough. China has since become more stable and foreign policy more rational.

Transition of China's global strategy

Foreign policy should proceed from basic assumptions and hopes about the outside world. That is, no matter how the Chinese political elites want to achieve the goal of China's centrality by a nationalistic approach, they must first define their worldviews. In Beijing's view, world politics continues to be a zero-sum game and manipulating the international balance of power remains China's primary means of managing potential conflicts with others.⁹ China's views of their place in the region and the world at large, such as the international balance of power are filtered through lenses colored by the nation's history, culture, and ideology. Chinese leaders have meanwhile demonstrated a desire to manipulate global events and repel outside pressures to enhance their particular interests.¹⁰

The tenability of earlier assurances that China's rise is harmonious, is questionable in the face of the realist approaches China has pursued with consistency at least since the 1980s, particularly in its own neighborhood. The foreign perception of China's Realpolitik has remained impervious to liberal cries of the last thirty years of China's peaceful intentions. There is little difference in articles written in the 1980s alleging to China's self interested behavior than those written in the present. Because perception is such a powerful force in world politics, a question for China's foreign policy makers is how to steer these foreign perceptions more favorably towards China's necessary rise. Obviously an official statement of harmonious intentions will have little effect, for the simple reason that actions speak louder than words.

When we review the evolution of China's foreign policy we hesitate to specifically address the "very causes" of those shifts if such specific causes even exist. A common trap we wish to avoid is to fabricate causality and create a narrative of China's foreign policy. In other words, as much as possible, we resist the temptation to reverse engineer the recent developments of China's international relations and ascribe causality to China's behavior. Such an oversimplification of the subject at hand would possibly do more harm than good by misleading the reader into believing that we and they are able to capture and explain complex human behavior that entails many seen and unseen variables. Crisis issues such as the CIA bombing of China's Belgrade embassy, which in China is regarded as a deliberate act, can be used as an "excuse" for a change in foreign policy rather than a specific cause of that change. Nonetheless, at least we can identify certain characteristics of China's foreign policy that we can with some confidence break into periods and identify those periods by said characteristics in the following pages.

In the late 1960s, Chinese foreign affairs were marked by acute isolation, and diplomacy during the Cultural Revolution affected China's policy towards the USSR and

US. The “Two-lines policy” or policy of “Opposing imperialism, revisionism, and the reactionaries of all countries,” was China’s simultaneous confrontation of both the USSR and US. Consistent with this policy, Chinese leadership redefined its international strategy and supported interactions with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in what has been termed the “Three Worlds theory.”¹¹ This approach left China’s national security vulnerable, especially in light of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia on 20 August 1968. Thereafter, the Chinese focused much more on the potential threat of the USSR.

The deterioration in the balance of power around China had compelled its leaders to address policy more directly and rationally. This led then to the Sino-America meeting in Warsaw in 1970. To the advantage of China, by the mid-1970s, the Soviet- US bipolarization” was dissipating and subtly transforming into a “multipolar” system of international security. In a multipolar global security environment, great powers will likely reduce the scope of their global security commitments.¹² This favorable situation allowed China the flexibility to modify its unreasonable foreign policy from the period of the Culture Revolution.

If China had a role during the Cold War, it was that of Beijing comprising part of a “strategic triangle” with the two superpowers. Thus, after the collapse of Soviet Union, the PRC’s status and importance to Washington was immediately downgraded.¹³ On the other hand, Sino-Russian economic relations (if not political relations) have continued to improve since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and as China has grown richer and Russia has grown more desperate for revenue, the mutual economic interests have proven valuable. One crucial influence of this development is that perhaps Russia remains a latent security threat to China, so in a sense Russians are selling weapons to China that could be used against Russia, or at least deter any Russian aggression. This explains in part why Russia still refuses to sell its most advanced weapons to China. Finally, the nature of the China - Russia - US triangle has changed because China’s relative power had increased and its policy options have increased as it chooses how to use its capabilities in dealing with its new foreign relations.

Through frequent Sino-US disputes, China has maintained an economic pipeline that pumps an increasing flow of American wealth to China and won a notably political victory in its trade relations with America when then-President Clinton announced in 1994 that he would no longer condition the PRC’s MFN trading status on its human rights record..¹⁴ By the 1990s, through the economics-driven growth of Chinese power, an emboldened Beijing began to assert itself internationally, and resist attempts by Washington to effect change in Chinese society. Beijing not only renewed its stress on foreign policy independence, but built an environment conducive to maintaining the power of its elites.

Although China has held dear an independent policy of foreign relations since the 1950s, Beijing certainly cannot entirely base its foreign policy on the independence principle except in the declaratory sense.¹⁵ China could act as a “swing state” and exploit to its advantage the China-Soviet-America triangle to secure its interests. The post-Cold War era has offered China’s leaders an entirely new set of foreign policy options to grapple with. The international system is no longer bipolar; instead, one declining superpower remains predominant, with a number of regional powers, and economic blocs such as the EU, ASEAN, or the rising influence of the BRICS nations, such as Brazil and India. This is an opportunity for China to accomplish what it couldn’t accomplish previously, namely satisfying its long-term ideal of living up to the name “middle-kingdom”.

China’s decision-making in the reforming era

As China’s foreign policy by the late 1980s was more pragmatic than during the Cultural Revolution of the late-1970s China’s foreign policy slowly emerged as a factor in international politics. Most importantly, power was generated from the economic and political reforms begun in 1978. The most fundamental change in the dynamics of China’s foreign policy decision-making has been the shift of emphasis since late 1970s from the national physical security to its economic development.

Policy of isolation: China pursued an autarkic plan since the establishment of the PRC, and the emphasis of China’s economic developmental strategy was self-sufficiency with a focus on heavy and military industries. The reason China chose this strategy was shaped by China’s perception of the international environment.¹⁶ As mentioned above, Beijing’s view of world politics as a zero-sum game sees state to state conflict as inevitable. In particular, the failed experience of a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union prompted China to pursue difficult and risky policies, like the Great Leap Forward in 1958-60, to achieve the goal of self-reliance. It was expected that this strategy would strengthen China’s security. It gradually became clear however that the autarkic policy was immensely costly. By the early 1980s, the leadership in Beijing reached a consensus that China was physically secure from outside invasion and that reform was possible and desirable.

Policy of Opening Up: The crucial milestone in China’s increased engagement with other nations was the declaration by Deng in the early 1980s that the world had entered a period of relative peace. The Chinese perception of a relaxation in the international

environment created the possibility for China to choose a pragmatic development policy for the first time. Notwithstanding, Deng was not necessarily a supporter of capitalism, he was a pragmatist and saw increased participation in international trade as one element of a series of drastic changes that would be necessary to increase China's engagement with the world. Deng believed that China's future depended not only on its re-joining the international economic system, but also on actively participating in the different economic regimes that make up the modern global system, such as the IMF and GATT.¹⁷

Late 1978 saw the beginning of a new era of "opening up to the outside world" which led to the designation of special economic zones (SEZs). Initially, China's SEZs were not designed to serve the domestic market,¹⁸ but to provide a channel to facilitate China's participation in international trade. In the 1980s, China deepened its engagement with global regimes and made some significant changes in its trade policies.¹⁹ Nevertheless, China's regulations governing foreign investment continue to lack transparency and uniformity and are not standardized across provinces. Lack of uniformity is in part a consequence of the reformers' strategy of gaining support for the Open Policy from officials in key provinces.²⁰ Nevertheless, the success of these reformist policies allowed China to increase its engagement in international trade, which it has leveraged building the development of its foreign policy.

Even though Marxist ideology and the CCP's political monopoly contradict the democratic implications of capitalist policy, China is highly unlikely to change its reformist strategy for the near term. More importantly, China improving of its trade relations with the broadest possible range of countries (including Taiwan) in pursuit of economic goals, influences China's foreign policy considerations. In other words, as China's economy has expanded and become integrated with the global economy, Beijing's view of its own international position has changed.²¹ By the mid-1990s, China appeared to see itself as an emerging major player with the strength to negotiate more aggressively, with the Taiwan Strait's "missile crisis" in 1996 providing an example that Beijing is now more prepared to use more active approaches to deal with issues it feels reflect upon China's sovereignty or international standing. However, it is also very possible that China's "aggressive" response to Taiwan was simply a reaction to Taiwan's inflammatory overtures toward asserting formal independence under the Democratic Progressive Party led by Chen Shui Bian, who was Taiwan's president at that time

In fact, there are two different schools of thought regarding the interaction between China's economic growth and its foreign policy:²² One school focuses on the "openness" of reform policy and predicts that growing economic interdependence is gradually creating significant diplomatic constraints on Chinese foreign behavior. The process of opening reduces a nation's sovereignty and weakens the central control of government

decision-making. A second perspective is that as China's power and influence rises, China will become an increasing capable and independent actor in the medium term, within the first half of this century. These competing perspectives are the focus of the next section.

China's brand of diplomacy

The traditional Chinese belief that actors should behave in accordance with their ascribed proper roles from a hierarchical Confucian basis means that the issue of identity in international affairs is quite important for China. Some Chinese policy-makers have inherited a long held deep anxiety and uncertainty about China's place in the international order. Because of its large population and latent power potential, China has always been to some degree an important country in the world. Therefore it is reasonable for theorists to focus on China's potential role as a regional hegemony, such as a Chinese "Monroe Doctrine" for East Asia, as it seeks to improve its international status.²³

In some respect, the guiding principles of Chinese foreign policy have been continuously transforming since the 1990s. What hasn't changed is that the CCP seeks legitimization in the eyes of the Chinese people through the mobilization of mass support according to Deng's developmental theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.²⁴ The ideology of pure communism has become more and more just a political symbol in China's policy-making. Nationalism or patriotism has to some degree been on the rise as a powerful force in China, but the Chinese leadership has been very cautious and ambivalent toward nationalism.²⁵ According to Xiao, Chinese nationalism is of a "reactive-defensive" nature which means that it has always risen in response to negative stimulus from foreign powers.²⁶

The Sino-American relationship is the most crucial of China's foreign relations. It is also the most frustrating one, because of America's ability to challenge China's aspiring international status and regional leadership. China's pragmatic leaders have tried to avoid the danger of falling victim to nationalism although they often use nationalistic propaganda to counterattack the US. Furthermore, China's leaders try to avoid confrontation and maintain long-term cooperation with the US so that China may protect its vital interests and plans for the future. Some may be under the impression that China is confrontational when interacting with the US. If China expects to fulfill the vital interests of the nationalists, then it would confront US hegemony, but instead China seeks to maintain good relations with its most important partner and challenger and Sino-American relations are not dictated by domestic nationalist interests which represent minority views.

Policy of Power: After executing reformist policies and subsequently obtaining new power to deal with its foreign relations, Beijing's perception of its role in the international community has adjusted. The idea of "power" occupies a central place in Chinese thinking on international politics, and to China, just as to the neo-realist, the structure of the international system is decided by the distribution of power across nation-states.²⁷ During the Cold War Era, the bipolar system enabled Beijing to gain some strategic benefits, and by the end of Cold War China's leaders were without a definition of their place in the world.²⁸ They predicted that in a multi-polar world, a non-Western centered global contradiction would arise. China prefers a multi-polar world in which US global power declines absolutely and regional powers (such as China) are able to resist external interference.²⁹

China's elites are suspicious of most multi-lateral regimes, and, in most cases, China joins organizations (e.g. WTO, and the World Intellectual Property Organization) and international regimes (e.g. International Atomic Energy Agency) to avoid losing face and influence.³⁰ A great power identity in a global context has been China's desire since the 1990s, and the policy of "Big Power Diplomacy" is confirmation of this desired identity. China's obsession with great power relations is rooted in its historical and ideological ideas.³¹ China's foreign policy addresses the following: How should China deal with its relations with the present great powers in the Post-Cold War Era? How can China establish its international status and reassert its regional leadership? How can China become a true great power?

In the 1990s when China's leaders exercised "Big Power Diplomacy," the centralized and personalized characteristics of the Communist regime were heavily influenced by Deng Xiaoping. The third and fourth generation of China's leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao are more flexible and more active than Deng when dealing with foreign affairs. In Chinese Big Power Diplomacy is "大國外交", "大國" which simply translated is big power or great power foreign policy. The term exists only in academic discussion and is not a matter of stated official policy.

Generally speaking, modernization, nationalism, and regionalism can be used to describe the direction of Chinese foreign policy in the Post-Cold War Era.³² Therefore, emerging leaders have concentrated on issues of economic growth and gradualism in reform and foreign affairs. The PRC is now regarded as a regional power, and is preparing itself for a global role in the near future. The foreign policy prescription that China should keep a low profile in international affairs, instituted by Deng after the Tiananmen incident of 1989, was modified by Jiang, and China has since exercised more freely in the global politics.

Perhaps China is not an illegitimate rogue state with hegemonic ambitions and revisionist plans as some observers in the West have asserted.³³ After all, it sits as one of the permanent members of the UN's Security Council, and to some extent has already established itself as an emerging great power. This raises the question, "how will China's 'Big Power Diplomacy' impact other states and the international system now? The optimistic answer may be: a modernizing and prosperous China will facilitate the operation of capitalist system, and a responsible attitude of international participation will also provide more stability to the world and even strengthen the multi-polar system. International regimes will constrain China and assure that China becomes a benign power or a benign hegemon.

There are however those who hold that no regime poses a greater threat to global security today than Communist China. The PRC's territorial ambitions are immense. China's modernization of the PLA into a world-class military force with the most modern strategic nuclear missiles and a navy capable of projecting power far from Chinese shores does not sit well with the global community. The inescapable fact is that a rising China adopting an enterprising foreign policy will shock the world's balance of power.

Conclusion: Where to from here?

China and the world are struggling with the tension between an idealized world order of balance between powers, and the worrisome prospect of disequilibrium caused by China's rise and potential hegemony. China like the global order is different from its past self. Some factors which grant China its international status include:

- One of the world's oldest civilizations;
- The most populous and the fourth largest state in the world;
- The third-largest trading nation following the US and Germany;
- The world's second largest oil consumer;
- The world's largest army

Shanghai has overtaken Rotterdam as the No. 1 port in terms of cargo throughput, and the China-ASEAN FTA has created the third largest single market in the world after NAFTA and the EU. Nicholas Kristof asserts, "China is the fastest growing economy in the world, with what may be the fastest growing military budget ... The rise of China, if it continues, may be the most important trend in the world for the next century."³⁴ In short, China may now be on its way to achieving its goal to stand as the center of all the nations in the world.

Regardless whether China becomes a “big power” or not, its foreign policy must pursue a long-standing and stable international environment of peace to ensure its continued economic development. To fulfill these conditions, China’s great strategy has also undergone further changes, resulting in a modification and extension of the existing security approach toward a highly “calculative” new strategy.³⁵ This means China’s leaders are adopting a pragmatic approach that emphasizes the primacy of internal economic stability, the nurturing of amicable relations with foreign nations, and the continued search for asymmetric gain within the international community.

Theoretically, Beijing’s strategy implies that it relies upon a relatively peaceful global system, and would not intend to bring about global or regional instability. The US still regards China as a potential threat and challenger to the contemporary world system. Despite areas of perceived cooperation such as the response to terrorism brought about by 9/11, the two states are unable or unwilling to reverse the forces impelling them toward continuing suspicion and competition.³⁶ The limited cooperation between the two states is deeply rooted in their very different domestic political regimes and their positions in the international community. The US views China as the most probable competitor to its hegemony, and China counts the US as the main obstacle limiting its global influence. China’s semi-totalitarian political structure and domestic civil unrest create uncertainties that prevent us from stating that China will ultimately become a real “big power”. Our response to China’s development and role in the future is a conservative “wait and see”.

Our less cautious prediction of what China’s foreign policy will look like ten years from now will depend in large part on changes in China’s internal and external environment and how the Chinese manage those changes. For example, if China’s neighbors assert their claims over disputed territories more vigorously, how China responds matters greatly. Recently, China’s heavy handed behavior towards its neighbors has prompted many Asian states to welcome a continued leadership US role in Asia. Every leader requires followers, and if China wants to emerge as a leader in Asia in the next decade, it will need to make short term sacrifices to earn respect and trust and not behave like a diplomatic bully. Otherwise the region will resist China, in which case the people of China will only have themselves to blame.

Notes

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