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China: what sort of great power will it be?

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> 'The debate over China is not about what China wants today, but what it might want tomorrow.'
>
> Jeffrey Legro (2007)[1]

The Asian security environment is characterised by the growth of Asian power. Twenty years ago, when the regional 'great powers' of Asia were the USSR and Japan, both powers were circumscribed regional actors: Moscow's main interests were in Europe, and Japan was a timid, low-profile actor, reluctant to lead. But when the Asian great powers include China and India, the regional security mosaic looks markedly different.

As China's strategic weight increases in the Asia–Pacific and international arenas, debate is sharpening over what type of power it will be: whether it will be a force for stability; how it will use its hard and soft power; whether some overarching grand strategy drives its international engagement; and whether it will be a 'security contributor' or a 'security disrupter' in international politics. Those questions arise faster in relation to China than to India for two good reasons: China is ahead of India on the power curve, and so the effects of its rise will be felt sooner, and China is an opaque great power whereas India is not.

True, forecasting the likely strategic trajectory of any country is difficult and uncertain. But the exercise becomes more demanding with a state that has burst relatively abruptly onto the regional and global stage. Over the past thirty years, China's growth has been spectacularly swift, its ascent magnified by the collapse of the USSR and the relative decline of Japan. Moreover, the breadth of disagreement amongst 'China watchers', over what sort of great power China will be, is truly startling.

In the typology of states, is China a 'fragile superpower', strong abroad but weak at its core?[2] Is it a comprehensive challenger, increasingly adept at exercising 'three faces' of power—hard power, economic power and soft power?[3] Is it a 'status-quo' power, benefiting from the existing order and absorbing the rules and norms of that order?[4] Is it a 'limited-revisionist' power, willing to challenge the existing order along certain axes, but content to live within it along others?[5] Or is it a 'non-status-quo' power, resentful of US pre-eminence, and wanting to alter the regional balance of power in its own favour?[6] Will its rise be beneficial for Asian stability, or not?

How do we discern what sort of great power China will become? It isn't enough to look merely at the rate of growth of China's power assets: its economy and its military, in particular. Those tell us only that China has increasing amounts of power available to it; they don't tell us how China intends to exercise that power. Below, we examine four indicators that should give a better idea of China's future role as a strategic actor: its grand strategic vision, its predilections in terms of use of force, its international leadership style, and its behaviour at home.

China's grand strategy

Chinese strategists have had ample opportunity to study what works and what doesn't in international relations. 'Unlike the Soviet Union, which was a military giant and an economic dwarf, and Japan, which has been an economic power with stunted military development and little normative attraction beyond its borders, China explicitly aims to be a great power of comprehensive strength.'[7]

China, naturally, describes its own strategic ambitions in cautious terms. In 2006, the Chinese Defence White Paper identified a desire 'to build a socialist harmonious society at home and a harmonious world' as a means of ensuring 'both its overall national security and enduring peace in the world.' The White Paper also noted that 'world peace and security face more opportunities than challenges.' It spoke of the world 'at a critical stage, moving toward multi-polarity…[and] addressing the serious imbalances in the international strategic alignment.' China worried then about the US 'accelerating its realignment of military deployments to enhance its military capability in the Asia–Pacific region', a strengthening of the US–Japan alliance, and a Japan becoming 'more external-oriented.'

In response to those developments, the Defence paper stated that China pursued 'a national defense policy which is purely defensive in nature.' But it also hinted at developing national defence capabilities beyond the context of purely territorial defence, and more suited to policies of strategic denial and deterrence:

> 'The Army aims at moving from regional defense to trans-regional mobility, and improving its capabilities in air-ground integrated operations, long-distance maneuvers, rapid assaults and special operations. The Navy aims at gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations and enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counterattacks. The Air Force aims at speeding up its transition from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations, and increasing its capabilities in the areas of air strike, air and missile defense, early warning and reconnaissance, and strategic projection.'[8]

If we move away from Chinese declaratory policy, to a sharper-edged assessment of China's strategic interests, the picture becomes a little more complex. International relations theories suggest that rising powers tend to be expansive in their interests. But China's core strategic interests still seem to be relatively few in number. First, China is interested in territorial integrity and sovereignty. Second, it shows a keen interest in a restoration of its pride and place: a reversal of the 150 years of humiliation. And third, it is overtly committed to a continuation of its impressive development trajectory, and thus of the peaceful environment that permits it.

Some of those interests are driving China into a broader engagement with the world, and increasing Beijing's sensitivity about how China is seen, and treated, by others. China's pride, for example, could not tolerate the disruption to the Olympic torch relay abroad; and China's interest in resources is a strong motivating factor in its engagement of Africa, the Middle East and, to an extent, Australia. By themselves, China's core strategic interests do not seem to be driving it into a collision with US vital interests, nor into a substantial redefinition of global or regional order. But they do portray a China intent on gaining its own 'space' in the power and influence matrix.

Further, China's strategic personality is typically introverted and defensive—this, after all, is the culture that built a Wall to define the boundary between civilization and barbarism. It would be unsurprising to conclude that China is probably still 'feeling its way' as an international actor; that the leadership in Beijing is itself uncertain about the sort of great power China should be.

Use of force

China's behavioural patterns in relation to the use of force provide a further line of evidence as to how the country sees its international role. What can we deduce from analyses of China's use of force since the Chinese Communist Party came to power? Some say this is a country that neither fears invasion nor plans for the territorial conquest of others: that it intends to become a superpower of economic rather than military strength. If so, what are we to make of China's military modernisation agenda? Are the Chinese military forces of the future meant primarily to exercise force gravitationally—influencing outcomes indirectly—rather than directly?

China seems a reluctant wielder of force rather than a ready aggressor. An assessment of its behaviour in territorial disputes between 1949 and 2007 shows that it has participated in twenty-three territorial conflicts with other states, but used force in only six.[9] Some disputes—as with India and Vietnam—have been notably violent. But it has seized little land it did not control before the outbreak of hostilities. And it has compromised more than it has fought, offering concessions in seventeen of its disputes. Interestingly, its behaviour has not become more aggressive as its military and economic power has grown.[10]

A more narrowly focused review looked at eight case studies of Chinese military actions from 1950–96, involving either the US or the USSR, or indirect challenges to them via proxy allies. That study showed 'certain consistent characteristics, such as early warning for deterrence, seizure of the initiative, risk acceptance and risk management.'[11] It also concluded that China doesn't calculate its cost-benefit ratios in strictly Western terms. Political factors and national pride—what Asians would term 'face'—might well make China take risks that in a strictly military sense would seem highly unattractive: an attempted secession by Taiwan would be a case in point. Moreover, that study found miscalculation of the costs of a particular venture was 'a recurring phenomenon under both Mao and Deng.'[12]

Some authors point to a 'cult of defence' in Chinese military thought.[13] That cult is, in part, a product of China's geopolitical condition as an 'enclosed' great power.[14] But it does have some important ramifications, including a continuing Chinese predilection for deception as a key element of military strategy. China typically uses deception to magnify its limited resources,[15] and to make the most of the weaker hand that it frequently holds in military contests. Unfortunately, that predilection has a severe cost in openness and transparency. Weaning China off it might well prove one of the more important strategic goals of the 21st century.

Leadership style

Georgetown University scholar Robert Sutter has noted that Asia tends to suffer from a 'leadership deficit': Asian great powers, he argues, have been slow to accept risks, costs and commitments on behalf of the regional security order.[16] He thinks this is particularly true of China. China expert David Shambaugh, too, has written of the relatively slow emergence of China as a systemic 'leader': in particular, he points to its willingness to take only 'baby steps' towards a leadership role.[17] This hesitancy sometimes leads Western analysts to think of China as a 'free rider' on the international system, and was the basis for Robert Zoellick's call in 2005 for China to assume a greater role as a 'responsible stakeholder.'

China's 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', originally laid down in 1954, still set the basic framework for its international behaviour: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual nonaggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. These principles form the core of an independent foreign policy, but offer few opportunities for leadership roles: China has no troops stationed abroad, nor formal allies, nor does it 'extend' a nuclear deterrence guarantee to others. Its entanglements abroad are few, and deliberately so.

Those entanglements have still sometimes been a cause of friction with the West. China's relationships with Pakistan, Iran, Sudan, and Burma, for example, have often suggested a Beijing working at cross-purposes to Western efforts. But China is not merely a 'security disrupter'; in important ways it is also a 'security contributor'. It has helped manage the problem of the North Korean nuclear program, its economic growth has had a strong influence in nurturing a stable Asia, and its resource needs have made it much more interested in secure maritime traffic.

In recent years China has also pursued a set of strategic partnerships and cooperative relationships with a range of states and organisations. The shape of those partnerships tells us something about how China sees its growing international role. So what sort of security relationship has China attempted to grow with other countries, especially with other regional countries?

In truth, the relationships vary. Some of the material on the discussions of a possible China–EU 'strategic partnership', for example, suggests a relationship based on declaratory statements rather than tightly-crafted shared interests. The 'strategic partnership' with Russia, by contrast, involves a degree of practical military cooperation and a common strategic interest in offsetting 'US hegemonism'; the one with India involves a pledge to resolve border tensions and boost trade and economic linkages. In short, the 'partnerships' seem to be idiosyncratic, rather than 'boiler-plate', constructs. 'Partners' bargain for what they want.

Overall, China's current international engagements point to a power still feeling its way in the world, and hesitant to accept risks and costs on behalf of the system rather than on behalf of its own national interests.

China's domestic behaviour

The Chinese Communist Party governs a society in turmoil. That society is experiencing, within the span of a few decades, the wrenching social dislocations that many Western societies experienced, over a much longer time frame, during the Industrial Revolution. The rate of urbanisation of the Chinese population is increasing sharply. And the one-child policy has transformed a country which venerated its elderly into a country that worships its children.

Some, including Bates Gill, the director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, argue that we can best judge what sort of international actor China will be by watching what it does at home.[18] Since what happens inside China's borders is of increasing international importance—melamine contamination of milk supplies being only the latest example—how China manages its domestic crises and treats its national minorities will play a large part in determining whether or not it is seen as a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system. On some issues, Tibet for example, Chinese policy can be simultaneously clumsy, violent, opaque and nationalistic. Crises that inflame that virulent strain of Chinese nationalism can quickly transform the soft, cooperative side of Chinese foreign policy into something sharp and uncooperative.

Beijing's management of those crises, including internal unrest, corruption, and environmental problems, will tell us whether China's sociopolitical systems are evolving in ways that suggest greater political transparency, equity and accountability. A China in which such forms of governance were emerging would be a much easier China for the region, and the world, to engage. By contrast, a China where domestic issues were bubbling and worrying would tend to confirm Allen Whiting's suggestion that China slides readily into a 'trouble within, trouble without' syndrome.[19] The 'trouble within' China might frequently require the domestic use of national security instruments in ways that would make them appear less attractive as partners for external players, as the world saw in the PLA's crushing of dissent in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Part of Australia's hesitancy on nurturing a strategic partnership with China lies in trying to imagine what a close relationship between the ADF and the PLA might actually look like.

Will China's behaviour change as its power grows?

In relation to at least three of the four indicators that we nominate above, it might be sensible to sound a note of caution about the durability of China's past behavioural patterns. In a dynamic Asian security environment, where China is a more central player, Beijing might be drawn towards a re-evaluation of its grand strategy, use of force, and leadership style. Just how stable are Beijing's current strategic preferences?

Evolution in China's own understanding of its role will probably be decisive in determining its international engagement.[20] 'Changes' in behaviour will not necessarily be bad ones. In the early 1990s, the PRC had adopted a more belligerent posture which was encouraged both by certain contextual factors in the external environment, and the status accorded to the PLA after it rescued the Chinese Communist Party from a potentially destabilising Tiananmen situation. After the mid 1990s, however, the world, and especially Southeast Asia and developing economies, saw a more finessed and sophisticated foreign policy. Chinese military power was increasingly used in more subtle and low-profile ways.

Getting the China we want

What does the world want, and more importantly, *expect* from China? This question might be asked in terms of what we expect China to contribute to the international system, and of what history has taught us to expect when new powers rise.

Rising powers which have previously challenged the international order have included Nazi Germany and Japan under Hirohito. Not since then has there been an authoritarian state with global influence supported by such economic prowess and success, although the Soviet Union certainly posed a long-term political and military challenge to the West. Indeed, traditionally, rising states with autocratic political systems have presented a challenge to order. Germany, Japan and Russia all came late to industrialisation and military modernisation. So our 20th century experiences predispose us to worry about rising authoritarian powers—their attributes, and the friction that they generate.

On the other hand, some argue that a rising China will be drawn into greater engagement with the international environment, and therefore will have a greater interest in exercising responsible behaviour that does not upset the status quo. A variant of this is the belief that the more engaged China becomes as a result of its power, the more it will see its identity as linked to that international liberal order, and its interests as congruent with that identity.

Of course, the behaviour of others might well change too, as Chinese power grows. So one pertinent question might be: what can the international system do to encourage the growth of that China which it would most like to see? Do we encourage the growth of China's dialogues with the US? Should we encourage China towards a certain sort of 'strategic partnership'—one that would involve China bearing more risks, costs, and commitments on behalf of the regional systemic order rather than merely its own national interests?

An Australia–China strategic partnership?

In particular, what can Australia do? Should Australia start exploring more exhaustively with Beijing the sort of strategic partnership that we would like to forge at the bilateral level?

Forging a strategic partnership with a great power is always a bold step. For Australia to undertake such a step with China would suggest that Canberran policy-makers were both confident about existing areas of bilateral cooperation and alert to the future management difficulties that such a partnership might entail. Those difficulties are not merely the ones inherent in the bilateral relationship, but also those involved with maintaining our broader portfolio of security interests across the region. We would want our security partnerships with other regional states, for example, to be mutually compatible. And we would want our ANZUS alliance with the Americans to remain unfettered by any new agreement with Beijing.

Under the Howard government, ministers and officials began to consider the security relationships that Australia might build with each of the four great powers (US, Japan, China, and India) of the emerging Asian security environment. The continued strengthening of the ANZUS alliance with Washington, and the negotiation with Tokyo of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in March 2007, were two products of that effort. But the government lost the 2007 election before giving better definition to the intended shape of the latter two relationships. If Australia wishes to pursue its own closer security partnership with China, it needs to explore more intensively with China the basis and the limits of that relationship. Doing so will probably involve a degree of realism on both sides about what can be achieved.

We need to keep China's own policy motives in mind: although the motives don't excuse all Chinese actions, they do explain some of them. For example, partly because of its own inclinations, goals, and values, the US—and Australia—could consider China's economic relations with unsavory nondemocratic regimes in the Middle East and Africa an indication of normative non-compliance and a certain degree of revisionism. There is a danger we might read too much into Beijing's engagement there, interpreting China's economic micromotives as order-refusing macrobehaviour.

But we also need to keep in mind our own objectives. For Australia, it would be important that any strategic partnership with China

- enhance regional stability
- encourage transparency in Chinese strategic policy
- lower the risk of miscalculation in crises
- draw China into the supply of regional 'public goods'
- encourage the growth of Chinese 'responsibility' for systemic outcomes.

Such a partnership might begin with areas where China is already strong, such as economics, encouraging China to play a greater role in some form of regional economic stabilisation during the current financial crisis. But it would have to grow, relatively quickly, into other areas. It would offer China an opportunity to define its own vision of its role as a responsible regional and global actor.

There are several reasons for Australia to pursue a clearer strategic relationship with China. They include maintaining regional stability, and attempting in particular to improve regional crisis stability, as well as encouraging the growth of a particular style of Chinese leadership. One of our objectives should be to understand better the sort of strategic commitments that Beijing is prepared to make in Asia. Those objectives aim at a strategic outcome considerably more advanced than the one required to sustain a more positive military-to-military relationship. In an age of Asian dynamism we want to begin to put in place a set of 'grand bargains', similar to those that helped to bring stability to the Cold War era, by improving understandings between possible adversaries and patterns of cooperation between partners.

Endnotes

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