# INSIGHTS

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### Building 'a harmonious world'? Chinese perceptions of regional order and implications for Australia

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### Introduction

Over the last decade, China's regional diplomacy has undergone a dramatic transformation with far-reaching consequences for Asian regional order. While the United States remains the most important foreign relationship for China to deal with, relationships with neighbouring countries in Asia have assumed unprecedented importance in Beijing's strategic calculations. Through its increasingly active diplomatic activities, expanding regional trade and economic

ties, as well as growing participation in regional institutions, Beijing has not only substantially improved its relationship with most countries in the region, but has also become a most enthusiastic advocate of regional cooperation and integration. More significantly, Beijing has recently begun to promote a vision of international and regional order described as 'a harmonious world', raising important questions about China's future aspiration as a rising power. What are the motivations of China's new rhetoric of a harmonious world? What are the key features of a harmonious



Leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) gather for the joint declaration in Hanoi, 19 November 2006. AP via AAP/Kenichi Murakami © 2006 The Associated Press

international and regional order? How will China's changing regional diplomacy affect regional affairs and the future Asian order?

This paper seeks to address these questions. It will firstly analyse how the concept of 'a harmonious world' has been articulated and understood by Chinese scholars of international relations and by China's policy-makers. It will then examine the implications of China's new thinking about, and its recent active engagement with, the region for both regional order and Australia's engagement with Asia.

Since mid-2005, China has undertaken a concerted effort to articulate and promote the concept of 'harmony' in its foreign policy approach.

### 'Harmonious world' as a Chinese vision of world and regional order

Since mid-2005, China has undertaken a concerted effort to articulate and promote the concept of 'harmony' in its foreign policy approach. The concept, which is derived from the teachings of ancient Confucian classics, was originally advocated by the government in 2004 as a domestic policy response to growing social discontent in the context of China's rapid economic growth and restructuring. Since then, in domestic media, government leaders speeches and policy documents, 'building a harmonious society' has been claimed as not only a key precondition for China's realisation of its strategic goal of building a 'moderately well-off' (Xiaokang) society by 2020 but also as a defining feature of such a society.

Significantly, the concept of 'harmony' has more recently been promoted externally by Chinese leaders in their foreign policy statements and articulation of a Chinese vision of international and regional order. Speaking at the United Nations World Summit on 15 September 2005, China's President Hu Jintao floated the idea of 'building a harmonious world' where countries with different values, cultures and political systems co-exist in peace. Such a world, which, according to Hu, would be based on multilateralism, mutually beneficial economic cooperation and respect for political and cultural difference, would ensure lasting peace and prosperity. Hu subsequently advocated the idea in the Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Busan in November 2005, during his visits to Seoul and Hanoi in late 2005 and to Washington and Saudi Arabia in early 2006. Visiting France in late 2005, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao also made the idea of 'building a harmonious world' the central theme of his speech at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris.<sup>2</sup> In December 2005, the Chinese Government released a white paper entitled 'China's Peaceful Development Road' in which 'building a harmonious world' was declared as 'the lofty goal of China' (Emphasis added).3

China's President Hu Jintao floated the idea of 'building a harmonious world' where countries with different values, cultures and political systems co-exist in peace.

The new vigour displayed in the rhetoric of 'harmonious world' represents in part the latest effort by Beijing to assuage outside concerns of the uncertain impacts of China's rising influence in international and regional affairs. Over the last decade, Beijing has made concerted efforts to project a more cooperative and less threatening China that seeks to engage more deeply with the international and regional community through its 'new security concept' in the

1990s and more recently the notion of 'peaceful rise'. The current motto of a 'harmonious world', however, also reflects a thinly veiled dissatisfaction with the current unipolar world order dominated by a perceived increasingly hegemonic United States which tends to impose its values upon the world often by acting unilaterally and through military means.

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While outside observers might dismiss a 'harmonious world' as just another propagandistic effort by Beijing with little substance behind it, Chinese scholars of international relations and policy advisers take the idea seriously. Unlike 'peaceful rise' which caused considerable controversy and internal debate, the idea of a 'harmonious world' is embraced by almost all of China's academic and policy community. Indeed, to many Chinese scholars the concept offers a much needed and timely (if not overdue) Chinese vision of world order as the country's material power and influence expands. To this end, the concept was perceived not only as a declaration of China's peaceful intentions regarding its behaviour in international affairs but also as a preferred model of international order based on deeply rooted Chinese cultural norms and values. It is therefore not surprising that the term has quickly become a main theme of various foreign policy forums and academic meetings in China. As one example, since 2005 more than 420 academic journal articles have already been published in China on the theme of 'harmonious world'.4 With China's sustained economic growth, there has been a growing conviction among Chinese scholars that China should exercise

greater normative influences commensurate with its increasing power status. Moreover, to many Chinese scholars, the ancient Chinese ideal of 'harmony' represents not just an idealist vision of world order but also a practical solution to the problems facing the current world. To them, the concept of a 'harmonious world' offers a more effective approach to deal with security challenges in an increasingly globalised world than the narrow-minded 'democratic peace' theory and the paranoia-driven 'clash of civilization' thesis, and should be the guiding principle of international relations in the 21st century.<sup>5</sup>

... the meaning of 'harmony' is very much dependent on the interpretations of its contemporary advocates.

What, then, are the key elements of a 'harmonious world'? Ironically, despite considerable attention paid to the idea in China, the concept remains ill-defined. This is understandable given that the ancient Chinese concept of 'harmony' was characterised by ambiguity and flexible interpretation. Although 'harmony' was widely regarded as the defining feature of Chinese culture and traditional Chinese philosophical thinking, it lacks conceptual clarity and systematic theorisation. The original texts containing the concept have been scattered in various Chinese philosophical classics which often belong to different schools of thought such as Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, and have often been employed to convey various messages in different contexts. Depending on their purpose, different authors quoted different Chinese classical texts to explain the various aspects of the concept. Hence the meaning of 'harmony' is very much dependent on the interpretations of its contemporary advocates. 'A gentle man seeks harmony, but not uniformity. A vulgar man seeks uniformity, but not harmony'

In the current discourse of 'harmonious world', two Confucian terms have been quoted widely to express the essence of the concept. The first is 'he wei qui' (harmony is most valuable). The second is 'he er bu tong' (harmony-with-difference).6 The first term has been used to articulate 'harmony' as both the normative value as well as the ultimate goal of China's foreign policy outlook. It does not explain what 'harmony' means, however. It is therefore the second term that is more important, being central to the contemporary interpretation of a 'harmonious world'. For example, Chinese scholars often quote Confucius' famous passage of 'A gentle man seeks harmony, but not uniformity. A vulgar man seeks uniformity, but not harmony' (jun zi he er bu tong, xiao ren tong er bu he). In this interpretation, central to a contemporary 'harmonious world' order is the harmonious co-existence of different cultures. political systems and values, whereas 'sameness' (tong) is perceived as leading to 'disharmony'.

At an official level, such an interpretation of a desired harmonious world order was most explicitly expressed by China's then President Jiang Zemin in a foreign policy speech during his visit to the United States in 2002. Referring to the Confucius term 'he er bu tong', Jiang stated:

That is to say, harmony but not sameness; reserving difference without coming into conflict. Harmony promotes co-existence and co-prosperity, while difference fosters mutual complementarity and mutual support. Harmony-with-difference is an important principle in the development

of all social relationships and in guiding peoples conduct and behaviour. Indeed, it is the essential factor of the harmonious development of all civilizations.<sup>7</sup>

In his UN speech in September 2005,
President Hu reinforced this view, arguing
that 'Diversity of civilizations is a basic feature
of humanity and an important driving force
behind human progress ... Uniformity, if
imposed on them [the different civilizations],
can only take away their vitality and cause
them to become rigid and decline'. Therefore,
in a harmonious world, 'every country's
right to independently choose its own social
system and path of development' as well as
their different cultures should be respected.<sup>8</sup>

... national sovereignty and independence have been a central element of Chinese foreign policy since 1949.

However, national sovereignty and independence have been a central element of Chinese foreign policy since 1949. To this end, the idea of a harmonious world is not entirely new. The notions of 'peaceful co-existence' advocated by Beijing in the 1950s—60s and the more recent 'new security concept' of the 1990s all emphasised the unquestioned value of sovereignty. To this end, despite its Confucian cloth, the notion of harmonious world still reflects an essentially Westphalian notion of international relations.

What is new in the notion of a harmonious world is the unprecedented emphasis on multilateral cooperation. In his UN speech, Hu listed four ways to build a harmonious world. The first and foremost is to 'uphold multilateralism to realise common security'. The other three approaches include promoting mutually beneficial economic

cooperation, respecting cultural, social and political diversity, and maintaining the United Nations authority and efficacy. To this end, while national sovereignty and identity is to be jealously guarded, a harmonious world also recognises growing interdependence and cooperation among nation-states.

It is not surprising that promoting multilateral regional cooperation and economic integration has been central to China's vision of a harmonious Asia.

Given the importance placed by China on good relations with its Asian neighbours in its overall foreign policy, it is not surprising that the concept of 'harmony' has been employed by Chinese leaders to reinforce their views on regional integration and cooperation in Asia. Speaking at the second summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) held in Almaty, Kazakhstan on 17 June 2006, President Hu called for the 'building of a harmonious Asia'. Pointing to the rich cultural heritage of Asian countries he called on different nations to 'respect the diversity of human civilizations and encourage their mutual exchanges and mutual enrichment'. 10 He further stated that 'Asia is crucial for China's development', and that 'China pursues a foreign policy of fostering a harmonious, secure and prosperous neighbourly environment'. The previous month, Hu also advocated a vision of a 'harmonious region' in his speech at the sixth Summit of The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held in Shanghai.

It is not surprising that promoting multilateral regional cooperation and economic integration has been central to China's vision of a harmonious Asia. In his speech at the CICA, Hu suggested that to realise a harmonious regional order, Asian countries should work together to build a new type of security architecture to manage regional political, economic and security affairs. Multilateralism and economic cooperation were again stressed. He suggested that Asian countries should work together to strengthen various regional organisations and security mechanisms such as the SCO, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and CICA, and accelerate economic cooperation and integration. Chinese academics and strategic analysts have subsequently argued that to promote 'a harmonious Asia', China should not only participate, but also promote and shape the future development of various security-related structures in the region.

... Chinese diplomacy has become increasingly sophisticated, pragmatic and successful.

### Implications for regional order

To a certain extent, the idea of a 'harmonious world' has grown out of Beijing's increasing confidence from the positive experiences of its recent engagement with neighbouring countries. The past decade saw an unprecedented interest in and active participation by China in regional economic integration, security cooperation, and community-building. In this process Chinese diplomacy has become increasingly sophisticated, pragmatic and successful. In particular, China's new regional activism has been qualitatively different in two important ways from its traditional good-neighbour diplomacy (mulin waijiao) practiced before the early 1990s. First, in the past China focused more on its political relations with neighbouring countries. In recent years, the

emphasis has been expanded to the security and economic areas by declaring a wish to build not only 'an amicable neighbourhood' (*mulin*) but also 'a tranquil neighbourhood' (*anlin*) and 'a prosperous neighbourhood' (*fulin*). In Second, whereas in the past China developed its relationships with neighbouring countries on a bilateral basis, over the last several years it has turned more towards use of multilateral mechanisms to promote its relationships with neighbours.

China's new thinking about regional relations and its active regional engagement has influenced Asian regional order in four significant aspects.

China's new thinking about regional relations and its active regional engagement has influenced Asian regional order in four significant aspects. Firstly, China's economic rise, and its emphasis on mutually beneficial regional economic cooperation, has prompted a China-led process of economic integration in East Asia. This process was partly triggered by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, when China and the regional countries began to realise the importance of regional economic cooperation. Since then, China has emerged as one of most active players and supporters of regional cooperation through the ASEAN + 3 process. In November 2001, China proposed the establishment of a China-ASEAN Free Trade Area by 2010. In 2002, China and ASEAN also signed a 'Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation'.<sup>12</sup> Following in China's footsteps, Japan announced its intention to develop a Comprehensive Economic Partnership with ASEAN by 2012, and India followed suit by proposing to establish an India-ASEAN Free Trade Area by 2011.

... Beijing's changing view of multilateralism has added new impetus to the process of confidencebuilding and security cooperation through its increasingly active role in regional security institutions.

Secondly, Beijing's changing view of multilateralism has added new impetus to the process of confidence-building and security cooperation through its increasingly active role in regional security institutions. China joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. Despite its initial suspicions of, and low profile in, the forum, Beijing quickly displayed its desire to use the multilateral platform to promote its desired regional order. In March 1997 China introduced its 'new security concept' in the annual ARF meeting. The key principles of the new security concept are: equality, mutual benefit, consultation and cooperation. In 2002, China also initiated an annual dialogue of regional defence ministers within the ARF. At their summit in 2002, China and ASEAN signed the landmark 'Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea' by which all sides agreed to resolve their disputes through peaceful means. While in the 1990s the South China Sea dispute was widely perceived as a major potential flashpoint in the region, the declaration has helped attenuate this risk. The China-ASEAN relationship reached new heights in October 2003 when China signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), becoming the first non-ASEAN country to do so. In the meantime, China and ASEAN declared their intention to establish 'A Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity'.13

Thirdly, in sharp contrast to its passive diplomacy in the early 1990s, China began to

take a lead in building regional multilateral institutions. In June 2001, it played a leading role in establishing The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with four Central Asian countries and Russia; the first multilateral security framework that China has sponsored. Since 2003, it had hosted six rounds of the six-party talks on the North Korea nuclear crisis. China also became one of the driving forces of the East Asia Summit (EAS), the initial meeting of which was held in December 2005. In his speech at the EAS Leaders Dialogue on 12 December 2005, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao stated that 'China is committed to East Asia cooperation in the interest of fostering a harmonious, secure and prosperous neighbourly environment'.14

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Fourthly, China's new regional diplomacy has had a far reaching, yet largely unnoticed, influence on the normative structure of the emerging regionalism in East Asia. There is considerable convergence between the Chinese concept of 'a harmonious world' and the established 'ASEAN way' of regional cooperation which has been based on consensus-building, non-interference in each others internal affairs and a preference for informal processes over formal legalistic measures. While most Asian countries held such norms firmly, in recent years, there has been criticism both within and outside the region that such norms are outdated and ineffective, and a move to a

more interventionist approach to regional affairs has been advocated. In this context, China's espousal of the idea of 'harmonious world' as well as its largely 'no-strings attached' approach to regional affairs has lent a critical support for the 'ASEAN way'. Indeed, it is China's intention to expand the ASEAN model into an East Asian Model of regional cooperation.

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In a sense, the norms championed by China and most of ASEAN countries have already cemented their place as key elements of the ideational foundation of regional cooperation in East Asia. In this regard, China's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2003 was particularly important. The TAC came into being in 1976, and its fundamental principles are respect for sovereignty and non-interference in countries' internal affairs. For many Western observers, the TAC was considered outdated with its Westphalian vision of nation-state relations. Yet China's accession to the TAC gave critical support to these principles. Following China's accession, Japan and India also signed the TAC. The TAC was later made an essential criterion for membership of the EAS. Consequently, in 2005 Australia had to sign the TAC to facilitate its attendance at the inaugural EAS meeting. Given China's support of ASEAN as the driver for further development of an East Asian community, the norms contained in the TAC and a 'harmonious world' is an attempt to lay the ideational foundation of the future East Asian regional order.15

### Implications for Australia

China's rising regional influence and active participation in regional cooperation and community-building have important implications for Australia's interests in the Asia-Pacific region. On the one hand, China's increasingly cooperative and sophisticated policy approach to regional relations and its focus on maintaining regional stability and economic development serve Australia's interests in supporting a stable and prosperous Asia. Moreover, Australia has long been an advocate of multilateralism in international and regional affairs. Especially since the end of the Cold War, Australia's view has been that multilateral institutions offer the best approach to manage a rising China. Consequently, a key element of Australia's China policy has been to tie Beijing into an array of regional multilateral institutions in order to 'socialise' its behaviour with

established international norms. To this end, China's increasingly active participation in regional institutions is clearly in Australia's interest.

... China's increasing participation in regional institutions poses a challenge to Australia's deeper engagement with the region.

On the other hand, China's increasing participation in regional institutions poses a challenge to Australia's deeper engagement with the region. China's vision of 'a harmonious world' and its rising regional prominence may well mean that a future China-dominated regional order may be based on different norms and values from those currently espoused by Western



People's Republic of China President Hu Jintao is surrounded by members of the Australian Parliament after he addressed a joint sitting, 24 October 2003. AAP/Alan Porritt © 2003 AAP

countries, including Australia. Despite its emphasis on cooperation and multilateralism, central to China's view of regional order is the pre-eminence of national sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of nation-states. Given this, China considers that human rights, democracy and good governance are not central to the agenda of regional cooperation institutions. This will present challenges to Australia's future engagement in a potentially China-centric regional order. In particular, human security is becoming an increasingly significant issue in international affairs, and domestic political problems in repressive authoritarian states may have spill-over effects on regional stability and inter-state relations. The issue of human rights is currently a latent source of friction between Australia and a number of regional countries, including China. Australia therefore faces considerable challenges in balancing its engagement with a region in which China's influence is rising whilst at the same time ensuring its political values are not compromised.

Despite their increasingly cooperative relationship, Beijing and Washington still hold fundamentally different views over the future shape of regional order in Asia.

Moreover, China's push for a regional order based on harmonious relations contains an implied criticism of the current regional order, based upon a set of US bilateral alliances. Despite their increasingly cooperative relationship, Beijing and Washington still hold fundamentally different views over the future shape of regional order in Asia. Washington considers the San Francisco alliance system as the bed rock of the regional security

structure, although in recent years it has been moving to complement that system by a strengthening of relations with both China and India and a reinvigoration of its ties with Indonesia. Beijing, on the other hand, still sees the US alliance system in Asia as a relic of the Cold War, a product of outdated thinking. Beijing's recent rhetoric of a harmonious world and its call for building a new type of security structure is an indirect rebuff to the existing US dominated regional order.

With China's rising influence and its increasing desire to shape the regional order, a key policy challenge for Canberra is how to balance its relationship with both Washington and Beijing to protect and advance Australia's diverse interests.

Herein lies the biggest dilemma for Australia in its relations with China. On the one hand, the Howard Government increasingly takes a long-term view about closer relations by seeing China as 'a nation which is very important, not only to Australia's future but also very important to the future of our region and indeed the future of the world'.16 On the other hand, the enduring value placed on the Australia–US security relationship complicates Canberra's relationship with Beijing. Australia's recent security cooperation declaration with Japan, with the encouragement of the US, has created concern among China's political and military elites. With China's rising influence and its increasing desire to shape the regional order, a key policy challenge for Canberra is how to balance its relationship with both Washington and Beijing to protect and advance Australia's diverse interests.

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### **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

APEC Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

ARF ASEAN Regional Forum

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian

**Nations** 

CICA Conference on Interaction and

Confidence-Building Measures

in Asia

EAS East Asia Summit

SCO The Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation

TAC Treaty of Amity and Cooperation

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