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China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power

Abstract

China has (re)emerged as a great power in a world not of its own making. The distribution of power in major organisations and the dominant norms of international interactions are deemed to unfairly favour the existing Western powers, and at times obstruct China's ability to meet national development goals. Nevertheless, engaging the global economy has been a key source of economic growth (thus helping to maintain regime stability), and establishing China's credentials as a responsible global actor is seen as a means of ensuring continued access to what China needs. As an emerging great power that is also still in many respects a developing country, China's challenge is to change the global order in ways that do not cause global instability or generate crises that would damage China's own ability to generate economic growth and ensure political stability.

Keywords: China; responsible great power; global order; rising powers

Chinese understandings of China's place in the world can be summed up by the content of two separate news items from the same day. The first pointed to China's global economic reach and significance. It was simply no longer possible for the existing powers to ignore such an important economic force and China had to be a central component of any new mechanisms of global governance, Chinese interests

and ideas taken more seriously, and the existing power structures revised to take account of China's economic power.

The second focussed on China's position on global environmental issues. Although a big power, China, it argued, was still very much a developing country with more than 100 million people living in poverty and hundreds of millions more lacking the basic standards of living that are taken for granted in the West. It would simply not be fair for the Chinese to be denied the same benefits of development that people in the developed expected – particularly given that the developed world was responsible for the overwhelming majority of carbon dioxide emissions since Europe began to develop two centuries ago.

So we have, in the eyes of many Chinese, a China that deserves to be at the centre of global politics. And promoting the idea of returning to the “great power” status that China held for centuries before subjugation by militarily superior western powers in the nineteenth century has a strong resonance within China. There is also a widely held and strong popular sense of injustice that China is being unfairly “demonised” by its enemies (Song et al 1996; Liu and, Liu 1997; Song et al 2009). China is a great power in a world that is not of its own making, where existing power structures have been established by others to serve the interests of the developed West. A dissatisfied great power with myriad domestic developmental challenges that remain the primary focus of China's leaders – challenges that might even undermine continued rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) if not correctly handled.

But dissatisfaction and a desire for change has not (yet) resulted in a revolutionary

global agenda. On the contrary, China's leaders are keen to project an image of responsibility and trustworthiness; a responsible great power that is a force for global peace, stability and growth. This is not simply a desire to be liked. China's leaders understand that the world is watching them closely - and that many of those watching are concerned. In particular, by the late 1990s there was an increasing recognition by China's leaders that their rejectionist and critical language and rhetoric of Chinese foreign policy was raising concerns in other states about China's ultimate objectives (Johnston 2003). Should this concern result in policies designed to contain China and constrain its development, then the task of meeting domestic challenges would become ever harder (Shirk 2007). Thus, external perceptions of what China wants are partly driven by what China says and does - and what China does and says is partly a response to these external perceptions.

For the promoters and supporters of the global liberal order, the rise of China seems to have been identified as the single biggest challenge – more so even than global economic chaos. So before outlining in more detail the understanding of a “dissatisfied responsible great power”, and what exactly China wants to change, this article first establishes why it is that China seems to be such a source of concern. The answer is partly found in the simple speed and scale of change in China in the post-cold war era; change that has had unintentional consequences for the rest of the world. But it also goes beyond just the practical and real impact of China's rise into a more deep seated mistrust of China's long term objectives, and the values and belief systems than underpin these aspirations. In short, no matter what China's leaders might say, some in the west remain convinced that China aims to shift not just the

global balance of power but also the way in which international interactions occur and are governed as soon as it is in a position to do so.

Interpreting China's Rise: China as Threat

Perhaps there is something intrinsically destabilising (and worrying) about dramatic changes in the global order no matter what (or who) is causing this change. But there is more to concern over China's rise than just the trauma of change. On one level, we have already seen changes in the price and distribution of major commodities, and massive shifts in global financial flows. On another level, as with Japan's rise in the 1970s, there is a feeling that China is succeeding by not "playing by the rules" – or more correctly, by using the rules of the global capitalist system when they suit China but bending and sometimes ignoring those rules that are deemed to be damaging to the national interest.

China's ultimate objectives are also questioned. Even though China's transformation owes much to its integration into the existing global economic order, the concern remains that once it has the power to do so, China¹ will try to change both the structure of international institutions and also norms of governance (both domestic and global). Indeed, relations with "rogue states" like Burma, Sudan and Zimbabwe are seen as evidence that a China challenge to the global liberal order is already underway. In some (extreme) interpretations, conflict between a rising China and the USA is all but inevitable (Bernstein and Munro 1998).

¹ Of course, "China" doesn't act or have a single interest, and "China" is used here simply as shorthand for the actions, aspirations and perceptions of the political elites.

For those who fear China, it represents a combination of two previous challenges to the Western world order. In the eyes of a (racist) Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, China and Japan were considered to be the “yellow peril”, threatening to swamp the world with cheap labour and uncivilised ways. And this was before Japan’s military power and aggression became a serious Asian challenge to European hegemony. After the Korean War (1950-53), Japan became a new Asian (yellow) challenge; like China today, a rising Asian power trying to compete and perhaps beat the West by playing in the global economy, but not playing wholly by the rules. At the same time, while no longer driven by communist ideology, China remains ruled by a Communist Party; with communism historically seen as posing a (red) challenge to the West. So if China is a combination of the red peril of communism and the yellow peril of Asia it becomes a new, “orange peril” for the 21st century; at least for those who see mystery, opacity and hidden intentions in what emerges from the East.

For the suspicious, the roots of China’s long term strategy are found in Deng Xiaoping’s foreign policy prescriptions. Fearing condemnation and possible isolation after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. Deng exhorted his comrades to “hide brightness and foster obscurity”; most often taken to mean that China should hide its true abilities and ambitions. While China today may have abandoned obscurity for Great Power politics, the suspicion that real intentions remain hidden and that China cannot be trusted remains at the heart of many observations today (Geis and Holt 2009).

Even without this mistrust, the speed and scale of China’s rise alone would probably have been enough to raise concern in the rest of the world. As Communist Party rule

unravelling in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s, China's leaders were facing severe challenges of their own; the social/political fallout of Tiananmen, elite conflict over the wisdom of further economic reform and strained relations with many western countries did not suggest a rosy future.

Yet, in many respects it was the responses to this position of apparent weakness that generated China's subsequent dramatic rise. Deng Xiaoping's support for further economic liberalisation and integration with the global economy during an official tour of southern China in 1992 has come to be regarded as a symbolic "turning point" (Wong and Zheng 2001). In less than two decades, China has become the world's third biggest economy (the second biggest using Purchasing Power Parity calculations), the world's largest exporter, and the single biggest holder of foreign currency reserves. China has the three biggest banks in the world (measured by market capitalisation) (Wines and Wong 2009) and become a major investor in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Chinese investment in Europe, Australia and North America have also become significant – indeed, in the wake of the global economic crisis China has emerged not only as a potential major source of much needed investment, but also through the development of its own domestic demand, as a *potential* alternative to declining Western consumption. China has become a "stabilizer" of the global economy (People's Daily 2010).

In thinking through the implications of this dramatic change for the global order, a number of theorists have looked to the past for their inspiration and evidence and the "historical correlation between extraordinary rapid internal growth and external expansion" (Friedberg 1993-4: 16). Rising powers are by their nature a challenge to

the global order, and even more of a challenge when they are dissatisfied with the existing order, or feel oppressed and constrained by it – as was the case with Japan and Germany in the 1920s and 30s (see Johnston 2003).

It becomes the responsibility of the existing power (in this case the US) to manage this rise in ways that do not lead to conflict (Schweller 1999). Such “power transition” approaches suggest that once China has the economic and/or military strength to do so, it will first demand a greater role in the international order commensurate to its power, and subsequently challenge the existing hegemonic power (see Goldstein 2005). For Mearsheimer (2001), this suggests that the US should be doing whatever it takes to prevent China rising to challenge its supremacy before it’s too late. It is not just coincidence that much of the literature on China’s rise has been written by scholars in the USA intended to influence a domestic audience. In this respect, they are in some ways more to do with the decline of the existing hegemon than the rise of a new one (see Dumbrell, this volume).

Interpreting China’s Rise: Global Challenger or Rule Taker?

Despite these fears, the evidence of scholarship for over a decade suggests that in the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the World Trade Organisation, China has been much more a rule taker than a challenger to the existing international order (Kim 1999, Jacobsen and Oksenberg 1999, Wei, 2007). Indeed, Johnston (2008) shows how participation in the global disarmament regime has resulted in changes to not just Chinese discourse and action, but also to Chinese bureaucratic structures to make them “fit” with the existing global institutions.

In terms of China's economic paradigm, the evidence is more mixed. Major concerns remain over China's use of exchange rate controls, support for exporters, continued protection of key domestic sectors and the rather opaque nature of decision making (and the dissemination of information). Yet much of China's remarkable economic growth has been achieved by adjusting the domestic order to facilitate integration with the capitalist global economy. As Hu Xijin (2008: 27) argues, China is doing well precisely because it is "playing by the rules that Westerners themselves have formulated". And of course, trying to rig the rules of the game to create an uneven playing field is not exactly a practice that is unique to China.

China has also become an advocate of liberal economic norms of a sort through its active promotion of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area providing access to its domestic agricultural market that Chia (2008) argues China's 'competitors' find it difficult to countenance. And perhaps it is in China's own back yard that we see the biggest movements towards status quo activity and discourses. In the early 1990s, ASEAN as an organisation and many of the states of Southeast Asia were viewed with suspicion if not open hostility in Beijing. But both perceptions and policies changed as China's leaders moved to block the regional ambitions of others (Taiwan, Japan and the US), and began to see China's economic and (non-traditional) security interests as inextricably bound with what happens in the rest of the region (Breslin 2009).

Chinese Perceptions of China's Global Role

Proactive engagement of the region is also part of a broader strategy designed to assuage fears about the consequences of China's rise. It is also driven by more

pragmatic understandings that perceptions matter. For example, the promotion of the idea of a “China Threat” in the West could be used to justify policies designed to obstruct China’s further rise (Liu 2002).

The task of changing these perceptions is largely an elite-driven project, but one not confined to leaders and officials. Many Chinese scholars share leaders’ concerns over images and perceptions and are involved in attempts to explain to both domestic and international audiences how and why China’s rise will be a peaceful one. Some of these scholars work in official research organisations and can be seen as part of the wider state effort. For example, the concept of China’s “Peaceful Rise” was developed by Zheng Bijian (2005) – a political advisor and scholar who is widely understood to have developed the idea at the behest of China’s top leaders and to propagate it through non- and semi-official fora. Other university-based scholars have less formal connections to the formal party-state apparatus but can be considered to form part of a wider project of what Beijing University academic Pan Wei (2010: 9) calls “a movement of cultural renaissance.”

The overarching objective is to show by word and deed that a rising China is a force for global stability, peace and prosperity. The basic argument propounded by this combination of leaders, scholars and officials is that China is a “responsible great power”. In contrast to the predatory colonial European powers of the nineteenth century, China’s state identity and actions were driven by different philosophies and cultures that stressed the need for harmony, respect, dialogue and consultation. And in contrast to the dissatisfied rising powers of the 20th century, China’s rise would be a

peaceful one; it was China and Chinese values, not the existing order that would help to build a “Harmonious World” (Su 2009).

China’s Promotion of a Chinese Alternative?

In short, China wants to be accepted as a key global actor that is a force for peace and stability, but also a force for peaceful change. For example, Chinese participation in the G20 is seen as a welcome and marked improvement on an at best marginal position in the G8,² reflecting China’s increased power and status. But participation in Gs of any size is a means to the more important end of “democratising” global governance; for example, by reforming the distribution of power in the international financial institutions, with a greater say for developing countries towards ultimately parity with the developed world.³ China also supports UN reform, including greater representation for developing countries on the Security Council – but whether this equates to diluting its own veto power is another question altogether.

But there is more to this “democratic” global order than just votes and institutions. There is a clear attempt to construct an idea of China as “different” – not just different from previous rising powers but a different kind of actor that other contemporary powers, seeking the creation of a different (but peaceful) world order.

According to this view, it is not China that is the source of tension and conflict, but the existing world order. An order in which the developing world is politically

² While not a member of the G8, Chinese officials participated in many outreach activities including meetings of finance ministers prior to the global crisis. China’s leaders have attended G8 related dialogue activities since the 2003 summit in Evian, though Hu Jintao left the 2009 summit in Pisa before its commencement to deal with disturbances in Xinjiang.

³ For a typical example of Chinese views, see “China Demands Larger Quota Share of Developing Countries in IMF”, People’s Daily Online, 5th October 2009.

marginalised and economically subject to the will of the developed. If necessary, the powerful are prepared to use military force against those who are not considered to be part of the self defined “international community”. So the promotion of an idea of what China is – what it believes in, what it aspires to and how it acts – can be thought of as a process of “Occidentalism;” a China that is defined in opposition to the negative values and objectives of the West.

So rather than impose supposedly universal (but really Western) values on other countries, China thinks each sovereign state should develop its own systems of authority based on their own peculiar histories, cultures and experiences. Unlike the West, China engages others from a spirit of mutual gain – a win-win scenario –with no liberalising strings attached to business relations, treating developing states as equal partners.

There is also an increasing emphasis on the idea of China as a “model” that other developing states might learn from. In reality, identifying core components of this model is extremely difficult. A strong role for the state seems to be a recurring theme. Domestically, despite introducing a private sector, and allowing foreign actors to play a key role in promoting growth, the state still plays a key role as “anchors of economic stability” through macroeconomic intervention, ownership of the major banks, and residual state ownership of enterprises in key industries (Wang 2009). Internationally, globalisation is portrayed as having been “managed” so as to bring benefits but not vulnerabilities. But perhaps the single defining component of the Chinese “model” is experimentation and a non ideological (perhaps even de-

ideologised) commitment to doing whatever it takes to promote growth whilst maintaining political stability (Heilmann 2009).

Again, it is not so much what China is and what China stands for that is important as what it is not – it is not the Western agenda (or what is presented as the Western agenda). China stands against “shock therapy” rapid transitions to the market, against wholesale liberalisation (particularly of finance), against the necessary linkage between economic and political liberalisation/democratisation, and against the idea that there is or should be a single model. So China’s economic rise becomes an example of not doing things the western way, and instead doing what works best given the unique set of conditions that all countries face. And of course, this has all occurred under “regime continuity” (Sun 2008).

A subtle but important component of this promotion of alternative is the attempt to develop what we might call “definitional power”. Rather than simply denying the relevance of key concepts and ideas developed in the West, there is now an attempt to re-interpret or re-define them to suit Chinese interests. For example, Chinese scholars and officials are defining what democracy and human rights mean in the Chinese context in means that don’t contradict or undermine continued one party rule (Yu 2003. State Council 2005). The terms of political debates are not being left to others to set, but instead are being defined in China on China’s terms.

Whether the roots of China’s contemporary international interactions really lie in China’s traditional system and political thought is open to question. Indeed, there seems to be an attempt to create a history to look back to using an eclectic mix of a

variety of (sometimes conflicting) Chinese thinkers and philosophies (Ding 2008). We might also question the extent to which China has always been a force for peace and harmony. And there seems to be a tendency in some quarters to explain Chinese growing influence as a result of a growing attraction to Chinese values at the expense of a focus on harder commercial relationships – nothing increases the attraction of a state identity more than a large cheque! Nevertheless, as Olimat (2010: 185) argues, places like the Middle East are generally open to Chinese initiatives as:

China presents itself in the region in a much more positive posture than the US. The latter is seen as anti-Arab, anti-Islam, and anti-Palestinian, hegemonic, dominant, coercive and exploitive to the region.

From Soft Power to Hard Realities

Nevertheless, the suggestion here is that rather than focus on “soft” ideational considerations, three “harder” material considerations are more likely to be key determinants of China’s global role and impact in the future. First, resource requirements have been the main driver of Chinese outward investment, and finding the wherewithal to maintain domestic growth will continue to drive Chinese relations with large parts of the world. In addition to the current emphasis on raw materials and industrial supplies, China’s search for food resources and security are likely to become ever more important over time. Notably, this has led to close relations with a number of states that have strained relations with the west – for example, China has become Iran’s largest trade partner and Iran provides around a tenth of China’s crude oil imports.

Second, while there is some concern that China might one day have the military might to threaten the US (and of course, much more clear and direct concern in Taiwan), the more pressing issue is Chinese arms sales and technology transfer to others. Although China has promised to adhere to the Missile Technology Control Regime, it has not formally joined it, and stands accused of exporting technology to, among others, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Pakistan and Syria (Rasmussen 2007) and to contributing (through arms sales) to armed conflict and/or state repression in Burma, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Nepal, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda (Amnesty International 2006).

The argument here is not so much that China is changing the balance of power directly, but indirectly through its relations with other countries – including so called “rogue states” – it is making it harder for the liberal west to pursue its global objectives. This “blocking” power is reinforced by China’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which it acquired when Beijing assumed the China seat in 1971. China has used its veto to block the introduction of sanctions against Zimbabwe and to prevent official UN censure of human rights abuses in Myanmar. The difference today is that China can offer more than just diplomatic support to those that it wants to defend.

But while the first two considerations suggest increasing ties between China and other developing states, the third raises a counter word of caution. It is easy to fall into a simply black and white dichotomy of the developed liberal west fearing China and the underdeveloped world welcoming and supporting the new emerging global power; but that is far too simplistic. There are many in the developing world who are worried

about China's rise. Cheap Chinese imports and an influx of Chinese traders have caused considerable problems for domestic producers and retailers in parts of Latin America and Africa, forcing many out of business. There are also complaints that Chinese companies that win contracts in Africa undercut domestic firms and do not even use local employees for skilled work (Onyango 2009), while local workers in some Chinese-owned factories and mines have resorted to violent protests to demand better treatment and conditions. In short, we might expect that the more Chinese power is projected in actual commercial relations on the ground, the more that it will come under scrutiny and the more it will generate concerns within the supposedly supportive developing world.

Conclusions

For many who are interested in the impact of China for the world, there is often an apparent implicit assumption that China's growth will continue and that a continued rise is inevitable. This is not a view shared by those who study China from the inside out – nor by China's leaders who are concerned that continued inequality and corruption might result in large sections of the population becoming alienated from the party. And although government intervention meant that China got through the worst of the global economic crisis in 2009, this could be at the expense of increasing bank debts and other structural problems in the long run. The “model” of growth generated more by investment and exports is frequently thought by many to have run its course (Yao 2010)

We also have to take care and not overstate the importance of China (or the decline of the West). In military terms, although the official Chinese figures might understate the

true extent of financing, the US spends more on the military than the next 45 countries in combination. Chinese investment in Africa and Latin America have indeed risen quickly, but Europe, the US and Japan remain key partners as well. If China had the financial power that some suggest it already has, then the US would not have sold arms to Taiwan in January 2010, and President Obama would not have met the Dalai Lama the following month. China might be in a much stronger position to defend itself than at any other time for at least a couple of centuries, but this does not yet mean that China can force others to simply fall in line with Beijing's interests. Furthermore, it's also not clear how China plans to operationalise its desire to introduce a more democratic global order; for example, to change the structure of the Bretton Woods institutions. It also remains to be seen whether China's image in the developing world will be reassessed as Chinese actors expand their actual contacts with developing countries and whether the Chinese self-image of being a very different type of international actor can be sustained. An assertive and confident China is also likely to increasingly alarm others – no matter how much time and effort China's leaders expend on trying to convince skeptics about their country's benign intent and penchant for peace and harmony.

The idea that China can change the world at will and with ease is overstated and exaggerated. But while the decline of the West in Africa and elsewhere might be overstated, China's relationship with developing countries has provided clear alternatives to the western global order. It also seems clear that domestic economic considerations – most notably resource requirements – will shape not just China's international interactions, but the policy of other states towards China's key partners. What is more clear, is that how the Chinese government decides to articulate a

national interest is a crucial component in any change in the global order; quite simply, if a change is not palatable to Beijing, then it is not likely to occur. Perhaps China does not yet have the power to dictate changes in the global order, but it does have the power to block them and ensure that its interests are taken into account. In the long term, it seems likely that China will increasingly push to change rules and norms, but in ways that do not cause instability or generate global crises; crises that would damage China's own ability to generate economic growth and ensure political stability. Finding way of peacefully promoting change is not just a matter of assuming global responsibility, but a matter of pragmatic national self interest as well.

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