

Perspective on China's Foreign Policy Making

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Introduction

One of the most complex tasks in analyzing foreign and security policies of a state are the factors that shape policy outcomes. Such analysis is difficult in respect of any state, but when it comes to China, where many foreign policy making aspects remain opaque and closed to outsiders, it is even more problematic. However China, today, is more accessible than ever before. This brings new options and challenges to understand Chinese policies. With China's growing importance in world affairs, it is imperative to take up these options and challenges to come to an understanding of the intricate matrix of ideas, institutions, influences and individuals shaping Chinese foreign policy.

In foreign policy analysis, focus is on the study of the conduct and practices of relations between different actors, primarily states, in the international political system. At the center of this analysis lie the processes and dynamics relating to foreign policy making. By virtue of this approach, foreign policy is closely connected with international and domestic politics.¹

Until the end of 20th century, the focus of relations with other states was exclusively on the state as an entity and the individuals involved in foreign policy making but globalization created space for a diverse range of non-state actors such as global environmental activists, multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations in inter-state relations which influence the foreign policy decision making.

Chinese system of conducting and practicing foreign policy can be best understood by looking at the hierarchy of the Communist party structure. Its government structure places Chinese president at the top, who enjoys considerable power in decision making but "Central authorities," meaning the Politburo and Party Congress have the final power to decide general programs and major policies. These high-level decisions are often made at the Politburo standing committee level, which meets once each week.

Chinese Foreign Policy Objectives

Chinese foreign policy objectives can be broadly categorized into four areas.² Its first objective is preservation of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity; creating a stable regional security environment for economic development, seeking opportunities for more trade, and regain its lost status of Middle Kingdom. Secondly, to reassure regional states that China's rising power is peaceful and not to coerce or intimidate its neighbours. Thirdly, to diminish the means available to regional powers to constrain China's rise and garner regional and extra-regional support to reduce the possibilities of its containment, and finally to secure and diversify China's access to energy sources, and security of its sea routes.

Elements of China's Foreign Policy

There are three basic elements of thinking behind Chinese foreign policy which are: *shi*, *identity*, and *strategy*.³

- *Shi*, in Chinese, refers to the general configuration of power in the world (GCP), its diversity and factors affecting the change, and behavior of prominent actor(s) in a particular era. GCP has two aspects, the broader recognizable trends in contemporary international politics and *guoji geju* which refers to the prevailing international power structure.⁴
- Chinese consider identity as factors within the frame-work of relations between states. They believe that it is its identity that defines China's national interests and diplomatic strategies to achieve those objectives.
- *Strategy* is the last core element of Chinese foreign policy thinking which, according to them is the art of employing available means for achieving selected goals. China has a complex web of issues at state, regional, and structural levels. Hence diplomatic strategy has preeminence over all other means to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

General Configuration of Power (GCP)

Comprehending GCP requires the ability to understand the trajectory of change and the existing power structure of international system. "*The distinctive feature of our times*"⁵ is the phrase repeatedly used by Chinese scholars and policy makers to explain the general pattern of behavior of international system in a particular period, and the term *guoji geju* – the second components of GCP – is to articulate distribution of power in the international structure. These two components together shape the Chinese foreign policy orientation.

The Chinese policy making elite and leadership's understanding of international strategic environment generally shaped the course and conduct of its foreign policy. Chairman Mao's basic premise of total war was based on the orientation of the prevailing international system which was exceedingly pro-capitalism.⁶ He believed that the US-led western countries' anti-China policies of containment were reflective of a confrontationist system which was inherent in the capitalist philosophy. Similarly, President Deng's policies of reforms and opening to the world in 1970s were reflective of the Chinese understanding that the world had changed. Deng's perception of the general pattern of behavior of international system laid the foundation of reforms which made fast paced economic growth possible.

Deng Xiaoping's worldview of a comparatively nonviolent and stable world order, however, did not completely eliminate the mistrust and suspicion of the international system, because of China's historical experiences.⁷ Its suspicion was exacerbated when Chinese embassy in Belgrade was bombed in 1999. But Chinese scholars and policy makers have generally agreed that interacting constructively with international system was to China's benefit.⁸

In 2009, President Hu Jintao in an official document reflecting Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) views on its world view focused on five points.⁹ These were profound transformation, a harmonious world, common development, shared responsibility and active engagement with other powers. In the president's opinion the world had transformed and China's future and destiny was intertwined with the outside world.

The general pattern of behavior of states at international level during this period, and China's position at the United Nations and G-20 gave it a stake in the existing global power structure with its expectations of further strengthening the system. President Xi Jinping's vision of "the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"¹⁰ is a patriotic call to draw motivation from its glorious past to become a great power in the 21st century. Chinese policy makers believe that, as its economy is growing at a fast pace, military modernization should be the next major step for attaining power parity with great powers and becoming a part of G-2.¹¹ Xi's "Asia for Asians"¹² and Silk Road initiatives are decisions which explicitly define Chinese expanding interests and integration with the international system. GCP has several components. The more important of them are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

- **International Distribution of Power (Guoji Geju)¹³**

From the perspective of distribution of power, in the international system, Chinese policy makers place China in the major powers club. They therefore, focus only on

great powers politics. China is still looking for space within the US-led western dominated international system for a role for itself. Chinese decision makers are of the view that only the US, which they consider both a regional and an extra-regional power, could pose a challenge to China's rise and development. This is the primary reason for China to actively engage in forums like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS - an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and creating new monetary institutions like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), formerly the BRICS Development Bank.¹⁴

The objective is to thwart containment strategies that are taking place in the shape of US rebalancing strategy, followed by a move to cobble together a multilateral trade agreement, comprising US, Canada and Japan and several other Pacific states in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).¹⁵ Besides the US, Chinese foreign policy making elite also take into consideration policies of other major powers like European Union, Russia, and to some extent Japan, and emerging power like India. Conscious of the importance of these multiple power centers, China is opening itself and engaging with all of them at different levels to increase its influence and reduce its dependence on few states. China is now the EU's second biggest trading partner after the US.¹⁶ Trade between China and India has increased rapidly in the last decade, reaching around \$70 billion in 2013. China is now India's largest trading partner.¹⁷ Through expanding its relations based on multiple economic and trade initiatives China is working to attain central position by securing for itself a major portion of total power in the world.

• **One Super-Power and Several Big Powers (*Yichao Duoqiang*)**¹⁸

Chinese scholars believe that a multipolar international system is more stable and existence of more than one big power at a time in the world creates checks and balance in the international system. However, on the 'pole debate' the opinions are divided in China. President Deng was of the view, that by any standard, China constituted a pole.¹⁹ Some Chinese scholars however argue that there are three poles in the world i.e. the US, the EU and East Asia. There are others who believe that there are five poles in the contemporary world system i.e. the US as the sole superpower, while China, the EU, Japan and Russia are the other four strong powers.²⁰

Since the advent of 2008 Global Financial Crisis some scholars in Beijing believe that the US' relative power has diminished and they are skeptical of its long time commitments to its international role. However, even after comparative decline US' capabilities and power remain matchless in their assessment. It is widely believed, in China, that the US has shown more adaptability to 2008 crisis than any other state

and still maintains, and will continue being the sole super power of the world for another decade or so.²¹ Hence existing *Yichao Duoqiang* structure will persist.

Although, China's foreign policy orientation and its world view has accepted hegemonic rule of the US as the only super power present in the world but its policy makers do not favour this system. Chinese political thought has made clear division between *ba dao* and *wang dao*, which is ruling by force, and ruling by virtue respectively.²² Chinese' experience of humiliation, at the hands of colonial powers in the past, has influenced its perception of hegemony as rule by force. They therefore look with suspicion at hegemonic stability theory of Charles P. Kindleberger.²³ However, Chinese policy makers are in favour of the rule by virtue which is similar to the notion of benign hegemony.²⁴

In the post World War II bipolar world Chinese were accommodative of the US policy in the region, specifically on the US' move to constrain resurgence of Japan. However, with the passage of time growing US-Japan relations were considered a threat by Beijing, which China now considers the core of Chinese containment policy. It is the dominant view in China that the US-led security infrastructure of the Asia Pacific region reflects institutionalization of American hegemony which Chinese decision makers take as containment of China and a hurdle in integration of Asian region.²⁵ US' co-option of Japan in its Asia Pacific strategy leaves no space for China and Japan to resolve their disputes at bilateral or regional levels.

Chinese policy makers not only aim to overcome US' hegemonic designs in the Indo-Pacific region but, because of their complex interdependence relationship, also cooperate with the US in multiple ways. They believe that power transition in the worlds can only take place peacefully when it is facilitated by supporting the declining *status-quo* powers. This would avoid chaos and keep the world stabile. Chinese under this belief are cooperating with the US to help it, while at the same time are aiming to replace it as the world's foremost power in the long run.

- **China's Relations with Multiple Power Zones**

Chinese foreign policy makers are cautious with regard to the importance of the EU from the perspective of Sino-US relations. They perceive that EU is under US influence in its foreign and security policy decisions.²⁶ However majority of them do recognize EU's significant role in the international system²⁷ and a key to US' politics of *status quo* in the region. In Chinese foreign policy, EU holds significance which is not only based on its economic and military strength but also to minimize the US supremacy over the globe. Chinese believe that, for constructing a favorable international order, they must cooperate and engage with EU.

Similar to Chinese approach, Europe also tends to focus on 'transforming the world by rules', rather than 'conquering the world by force'.²⁸ Similarity in their approaches makes China's co-operation with EU comparatively smooth and uncomplicated.

In 2014, EU and China launched over 70% of the initiatives identified in the China-EU 2020 'Strategic Agenda for Cooperation'.²⁹ Trade between China and the EU exceeded \$615 billion in 2014 with an increase of 9.9% over 2013. Chinese investment in the EU reached \$9.41 billion in the first 11 months of 2014, a nearly three-fold increase after 2013.³⁰ Cultural and people-to-people exchanges have become ever more vibrant, with 6 million people travelling between China and EU countries in 2013.³¹

On Russia, Chinese scholars emphasize that Russia is regaining its lost power and influence.³² Both states share policy objectives on terrorism, economics and trade. China is also restraining itself from taking any clear stance over Ukraine because it has interests in energy and mineral rich regions of Ukraine and Central Asia.

India which was once only benefiting from its relations with the erstwhile USSR, is now being supported by the US also as a counter-weight to China.³³ It has improved its position in US' Pivot to Asia policy frame-work and continues to be relevant in Russian strategic calculus. China's border disputes with India along with their economic relations place the two states in a position of *status quo* where both cooperation and competition go together but competition outweighs mutual complementarities in their relations.

China's Evolving Identity

Many scholars, both inside and outside China have emphasized on perception of China's identity. What is China's identity, whether it's a recipient or a donor, a status quo, a revisionist or a revolutionary state?³⁴ The question of China's identity has meant giving particular consideration to its international responsibilities. The type of identity China assumes in the international system is primary to its diplomatic strategy for pursuing its foreign policy objectives.

Many scholars on China opine that China's identity, with an increase in its economic and political clout, is transforming. In their opinion at present China cannot be regarded as a major global power. It is still maturing into a world power and lacks some of the elements of national power possessed by other big powers.³⁵

Given various problems in China's modernization, its transformation into world power will be a long and tortuous process. China is still a developing country, albeit a big developing country. In international system it is probably best classified as a developing country with a set of distinct national and socio-economic characteristics.

Chinese economy has flourished more swiftly since joining World Trade Organisation, (WTO) leaving a positive imprints on Chinese policy makers and academicians regarding the utility of globalization and contemporary international system. Before Chinese opening up and institution of reforms in 1970s, it had a revolutionary approach which was directed at overthrowing the existing world order. By integrating itself into the international system dominated by capitalistic states and free market economies, it gradually got co-opted into the international system and became a satisfied (*status quo*) state. This transformation of identity is visible in China's gradual integration into the international system. That is why President Xi while speaking before global leaders on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Bandung conference this year, a gathering of Asian and African nations, including Japan, called for enhancement in trade and investment liberalization, and wide-ranging cooperation among developed and developing countries across Asia and Africa. He spoke of enhancing south-south ties specifically.³⁶

Regionally, China has given importance to a policy of economic and diplomatic co-option over coercion. The extent of China's integration in international system however varies in different fields, especially when it comes to soft power issues like human rights. It also lacks a strong voice in international politics for agenda setting and influence on international civil society due to the low level of people to people interaction with outside world.³⁷

China worked for more than last three decades to become a *status quo* state. The identity shift, the acceptance of international system and its institutions, China's force modernization and norm acceptance all occurred in a peaceful process. Therefore there are no plausible reasons to believe that China will violently defy international system and power structure; however it appears that China will struggle gradually to improve its position in the existing world order.

China's Foreign Policy Strategy

China's foreign policy objectives have long been driven by aspirations of attaining a big power status. Neither China has so far achieved military capabilities comparable to the US and Russia nor does it have advanced technological knowledge like that of

Germany, France and Japan. A professor of China's Defence University, Liu Mingfu argues that China must have a military dimension of its rise.³⁸ Like the concept of the American century he puts forward the notion of Chinese era. However many analysts and scholars have criticized this approach. Following *Sun Tzu's* idea of winning war without fighting³⁹ they have argued that China's rise does not need a strong military as it would be an old model of power politics in the world.⁴⁰ They opine that in modern day warfare cost outweighs benefits of a war. The future of the world, therefore, lies in diplomacy, cooperation and peaceful co-existence, so China should take the lead in neo-internationalism, benefiting and letting others benefit from it.⁴¹

Another strategy to achieve Chinese foreign policy objective is keeping low profile at international level. Deng Xiaoping, in early 1990s, formulated the strategic concept of *taoguang yanghui* (lying low) as a guideline for China's diplomacy after China came under international criticism on Tiananmen Square incident of June 4, 1989. Today, an animated debate is taking place in Beijing whether China should continue to keep a low profile. Some scholars are of the view that maintaining a low profile may not be possible as the spillover effect of China's rise on its expanding national interests is making hard for China to keep a low profile internationally. On the contrary they emphasise that Chinese policy of keeping a low profile has contributed to the perception that China is 'irresponsible' and 'non-transparent'. This is weakening China's stance of peaceful coexistence and has also generated 'China Threat theory'.⁴² They propose that China should play an active role in international politics and pursue the policy of constructive interference.

China, at the moment, is resorting to a mix approach of keeping a low profile internationally and projecting its hard power regionally. On the one hand China, is engaging by establishing new trade relations and reviving the potential of old economic corridors, on the other hand it is moving into the South China Sea, and building new artificial islands of strategic importance in a disputed area which has displayed, in unambiguous terms, its strong position in the Pacific region. However it is still maintaining a low profile international by keeping secrecy in a number of matters including its defence capabilities and outreach.

Conclusion

Realism, rather than the idealism of its early years as an independent state, dominates the thinking of Chinese foreign policy makers now. Working within the frame-work of elements of *shi* they have developed a pragmatic approach in achieving China's foreign policy goals. In this they are guided by a strategy that emphasizes on diplomacy and economic co-operation with states and avoidance of confrontation with other powers. Economic diplomacy seems to a preferred tool of

China as evident from its expanding trade and economic relations with the US, EU, BRICS and also with smaller powers.

Recognising the rise of China as the second largest economic power in the world endowed with the potential to match its ascendant economic status with a strong military, its policy makers have chosen to make their way peacefully to the top in the world system instead of showing military prowess. They understand that a major military confrontation with any state at this stage of their development would impede their progress and blemish their identity as a peace loving state, that is ready to co-operate with other states for peace and stability regionally as well as internationally.

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Endnotes

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