

China as a responsible stakeholder

This presentation consists three parts: I would start with an analysis on the dual identity of the present China as being both a developing country and a great power. That will be followed by a discussion on “Western expectation and Chinese capacity”. And finally I would try to analyze the domestic and international responsibilities of the Chinese government.

I. China’s dual identity

In this section, the dual identity of the present China is seen as officially constructed. On the one hand, the Chinese leadership and its intellectual followers conceive the country as a developing country in the globalization era; and on the other, they also perceive that the country is a potential world power on the international arena.

China as a developing country in the globalization era, one side of the dual identity highlights the weaknesses China endows, the resulting necessity and urgency of economic development and the common interests China shares with many other developing countries.

Chinese leaders have in many occasions emphasized the weaknesses China has as a developing country. Former president Jiang Zemin, in an interview by reporters from *Washington Post*, admitted that “China has a large population and weak economic basis, and its economic development level is still not high and thus it is still a developing country.”¹ The weaknesses of the country are further highlighted in the process of globalization. Chinese leaders argued that globalization is a “double-edged sword” to all the developing countries including China, and for most developing countries, globalization means more challenges and pressures than opportunities.²

Identifying the country as a developing country endowed with weaknesses, Chinese leadership has repeatedly indicated that economic development and modernization are the highest priority for China. Deng Xiaoping, the initiator of China’s economic reforms after the Cultural Revolution, proposed his argument of

¹ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/9535.html>

² Tang Jiaxuan (former Chinese foreign minister), “Speech at the ASEAN-Dialog Countries Meeting”, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/2493.html>.

“development as the hard fact” (*fazhan shi yingdaoli*) and claimed that virtually all the problems China faced in contemporary time would be solved with economic development.³

While stressing the centrality of economic development at home out of its identity as a developing country, the Chinese leadership has also been emphasizing the common interests it shares with many developing countries in opposing Western criticisms on human rights, environmental and various other problems of these countries, exemplified, for instance, by objection to Western (especially the US) proposals of criticizing the human rights records of China in the annual UN Conference on Human Rights. With the backing of many developing countries on China, these proposals have never been passed in the conferences.

The other side of the dual identity is China as a potential responsible world power. Chinese leaders’ frequent assertion on China as the largest developing country most frequently goes together with the admittance to the US as the largest developed country to emphasize China as an influential player on the international arena. Among other attributes that emphasize China’s increasing international influences are the country as a standing member of the UN Security Council, the most populous country of the globe, and a nuclear power. While the Chinese leadership has never openly claimed to become a world power, China’s strong appeal for creating a multipolar world order in which China itself would constitute one pole, the country’s determination to oppose decisively hegemonism, and especially its mission to become a “medium developed” country⁴ by the mid 21st century, all suggest a vision among the Chinese elites to make the country a world power in the future.

In recent years, concerning the role of China on the international arena, there have been basically two positions within the country. Some Chinese commentators see that China wants to be a “world power,” to pursue the long-term goal of multipolarization of international politics.⁵ The other position is that China intends to

³ See Li Baojun, “Dangdai zhongguo waijiao gailun” (Outline of Contemporary Chinese Diplomacy), Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe (People’s University of China Press), 2001, p. 146-147

⁴ Considering its sheer size and large population, it would mean that China would be among the largest economies in the world.

⁵ See Song Hong, “Fuzheren de fazhanzhong daguo” (Responsible Large Developing Country), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 12, 2002; Xia Liping, “China: A Responsible Great Power”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 26, 2001, pp. 17-25.

be a “responsible country.”⁶

It should be indicated that according to the first position China has not yet been a “world power” but is on its way towards such an end. China’s intention of becoming a world power, it is so claimed, refers to the willingness of the country to play a larger role for the international society (both on regional and global levels), and to realize the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. China is now in the process of making the country rich and strong with the goal of realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the 21st century. Then, how to understand this rejuvenation? Since China was historically a world power, the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation would naturally mean to make the country again a “world power” according to this position.⁷

Concerning the view that China would be a “responsible country,” the wish is that China needs to be “connected to the international track” (*yu guoji jiegui*). Under the “connection to the international track” thesis, China should develop as other countries do according to prevailing international norms so as to improve the international image and position of the country gradually.

The above two positions both make sense on the surface. But when we examine them against the international and domestic environment, both of the arguments are insufficient. The first position is very much a combination of realist view of international relations and cultural particularism, while the second a mixture of liberalism and universalism. The extreme form of the first position would certainly not be desirable for the international society, since it would possibly imply a return to the central kingdom status in the ancient sense while using the modern Western realpolitik to strengthen its power. The reaction from the West and China’s neighbors towards China, in turn, would work against China’s own interests, since in such a scenario both the West and China’s neighbors would most likely adopt a policy of containment against China, the last thing China would like to see. The second position, while meeting exactly the demands from the West, would be problematic domestically. There would be too much resistance on its way.

Therefore, in the official construction of China’s self-identity, a potential

⁶ Shi Hongyin, “Lun zhongguo yingyou de waijiao zhexue, shijixin dazhanlue he dangjian jiben fangzhen wenti” (On the Necessary Diplomatic Philosophy, Century Grand Strategy and Present Basic Principles), paper present in the international conference of “Foreign Strategies of the US-Europe-Russia and China”, April 9, 2002, Beijing

⁷ Pang Zhongying, “Shijie daguo yu zhengchang guojia” (World Power and Normal Country), *Shijie jinji yu zhengzi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 11 (Nov. 2002), p. 13

“responsible world power” is the most desirable. On the way towards such an end, the Chinese policy and behavior would most likely contain the following features: firstly, the necessity of economic development would still be emphasized, very much in line with the logic of Deng Xiaoping’s assertion on “development as the hard fact.” Any actions provoking hostile international responses would be prevented unless there is an issue of highest concern of Chinese sovereignty. Secondly, China would still adhere to the sovereign rights central to its national interests, such as territorial integrity. Lastly, the country would gradually become more and more in conformity to international norms and institutions to show its normality and responsibility.

The Chinese dual identity in fact reveals the deeply embedded mentality in Chinese mind-set, that is, the weak-strong power mentality. Both Deng Xiaoping’s arguments in the initial period of the reform era and the proposals of the present Chinese leadership on China’s domestic and international strategies reflect this mentality.

Deng argued in the mid-1980s that “China is a great power but also a small power at the same time”, and the country needed to follow a diplomatic strategy in line with the weak-strong power mentality, i.e. “concealing one’s strength” (*taoguangyanghui*) and “taking some effective actions” (*youshuozhuowei*) in dealing with other major powers.⁸ This strategy in fact can best be described as the one applied specifically in the process of China’s march towards a potential responsible world power.

In the end of 2003, the present Chinese leadership proposed the national strategies of “rising in a peaceful way” (*hepingjueqi*) and “developing in a scientific way” (*kexuefazhan*). While the former indicates the determination of the Chinese leadership to secure the self-identity of a potential responsible world power and the consequent necessity of rising peacefully and responsibly, the latter reveals a clear understanding of Chinese leaders in the country’s weaknesses and the need of development in a correct, sustainable or “scientific” way.

II. Western expectation and Chinese capacity

⁸ Center for Study of Establishing Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, “Deng Xiaoping guoji zhanlue sixiang yanjiu” (A Study on Deng Xiaoping’s International Strategic Thoughts), Guofang daxue chubanshe (National Defense University Press), Beijing, 1997, p. 224

This dual identity itself gives rise to an immediate gap in China's foreign relations, i.e. the gap between developing country reality and world power aspiration. This gap implies that China should not only be responsive to the developing countries, as the champion of the developing world (or put more modestly as the Chinese leaders repeatedly say, the largest developing country in the world), but to the developed world as well, as among the leading countries of the globe.

Parallel to this is the second gap in China's foreign relations, that is, the gap between increasing international cooperation needs and sovereign concern. Chinese engagement with Africa, among others, is a case here. To dig even deeper, we witness the third gap, the one between national interests and foreign policy principles, in which the most debated one being non-interference in domestic affairs (a direct link to the sovereign concern).

Among China's national interests, we observe the fourth gap, that between issue-oriented national interests (such as China's energy needs) and relational national interests (like Sino-European relations). In many cases, the two are in conflict with each other. Chinese engagement with Africa is again a case here.

Related to the dual identity analyzed in the beginning and all the other gaps identified earlier, the final gap that has the closest reference to Sino-European relations is the one between increasing external expectations and the Chinese capacity to fulfil them. Back in China, we call the increasing demand or expectation from outside world (especially from developed world but also from developing world) as the "thesis of responsibility" (*zherenlun*). Compared to the "thesis of China threat" earlier, China feels almost equal amount of pressure, though from a different and positive direction. The peaceful rise doctrine was a delayed response to the thesis of China threat, what could come out as a response to the thesis of responsibility? In the years to come, gradually we will see a more responsive Chinese posture in different issue areas, which may not be to the full satisfaction of Western powers, but nonetheless would take Western concerns seriously.

In September 2005, in a speech in New York, Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State of the United States, urged China to become a "responsible stakeholder that will work with the United States and others to sustain, adapt, and advance the peaceful international system that has enabled its success."⁹ The messages were clear:

⁹ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/57822.htm>

firstly, the US recognized the rising Chinese power and influences, and the US wanted to cooperate with China on a variety of issues of common concern; secondly, the existing international system could be changed in the way that it continued to sustain peace and success; thirdly, though the US and China had different approaches to international issues, they could nonetheless compliment each other to a large extent.

One year later, in October 2006, similar message came from Brussels when the European Commission issued the policy paper of “EU-China: closer partners, growing responsibilities”. That policy paper implied that Europe had already taken much more responsibilities than China globally and in bilateral relations (especially economic relations), and with the rise of China, China could not act as a free rider and needed to act in a more responsible manner that was commensurate to its rising status. It listed a variety of areas where China and Europe should have shared responsibilities, such as trade balance, climate change, and energy.

Most Chinese commentators believed that Europe had followed the US suit of urging China to be a responsible stakeholder. Some of the people do realize that there are some differences between the American and European expectation on China. While the US position is that it is China (and not the US) that needs to be more responsible, the Europeans tend to emphasize that both China and Europe have “shared” responsibilities to make to world a better place, and to make the Sino-European relations a more equal one.

Chinese commentators have also been contemplating on two questions: one is who sets the criteria for being responsible, and the other is if China has enough capacity to fulfill Western expectation. To the first question, Chinese analysts tend to believe that it is not just the US and Europe that can decide for the criteria for being responsible, China should also have the right to decide on them. To the second question, Chinese commentators often think that many of the requirements that the West on China are beyond Chinese capacity to fulfill, for instance, in areas like trade balance and climate change, etc.

III. Foreign policy tactics and international responsibilities

A combination of weak and strong power mentality has evolved ever since the early

modern era. At first, Chinese elites in the early modern era reacted to the security threats posed by the West with the “mentality of Sino-centric world order and heartland-periphery division” and through the use of hierarchical tributary-based interactions, trade restrictions and concessions, and usually ill-timed efforts at armed resistance. All of these resulted in serious military setbacks and unequal treaties between China and Western powers. Over time, the Chinese started to realize the importance of using a combination of weak and strong state security strategy. To the Chinese territories in the periphery area such as Xinjiang, the late Qing rulers attempted various means to re-establish its effective control; towards the Western powers, the Chinese elites began to apply a host of weak state diplomatic strategies such as “playing barbarians off against barbarians” (*yi yi zhi yi*). In contemporary time, the strategy of “playing barbarians off against barbarians” was also used from time to time, particularly in the late Cold War era within the so-called Sino-US-USSR strategic triangle.

In the mid 1980s, Deng Xiaoping argued that China should follow a diplomatic strategy in line with the weak-strong power mentality, i.e. “concealing one’s strength” (*taoguangyanghui*) in dealing with other major powers. On the surface, the strategy of “concealing one’s strength” seems to be absolutely the one used by weak power that reflects weak power mentality. Deng, however, argued that pursuing this strategy did not mean that the country would not take any effective actions (*wushuo zuowei*). This strategy in fact can best be described as the one applied specifically in the process of China’s march towards a “responsible world power.” However, even in this process, on the issues essential to China’s national interests China would have to act as strong power, while on some other issues that would not be the highest concern or the “greatest apprehension” (*xinfuzhihuan*) it would behave like a weak power. In recent years, the weak power mentality has been reflected more obviously in China’s foreign economic relations in which China stresses greatly on economic security, particularly on the protection of infant national industries.

For creating an international environment conducive to China’s modernization efforts, the country would have to behave as a “good citizen” in the international society; or in Chinese commentators’ words, it should be a “responsible great power.” In order to maintain domestic stability, various problems should be tackled. These problems include: serious problems of corruption (though improving as a result of recent campaign against it); environmental degradation in the course of economic

growth; regional disparity and rich-poor division, etc. Both the international and domestic restrictions suggest that the country would pursue most likely a security strategy that is lowest provocative possible and *defensive in nature*, unless there involve ultra national interests like that of Taiwan.

Even after the Beijing Olympic Games, while the world has increasingly recognizing the Chinese growing strength, domestically China's leaders still emphasized the need for continuing being *taoguan yanhui*.

Taoguan yanhui is one half of an ancient Chinese idiom, and the other half is *yousuo zuowei* (sometimes being active). Though stressing the need for continuously being *taoguan yanghui*, it is obvious that China has been growingly showing its activeness over time.

Related to *Taoguan yanhui* tactics, China's leaders have been emphasizing that for a big country like China, to maintain domestic stability and increase the well being of Chinese people would be a great contribution to the international society as a whole, and therefore the greatest responsibility that the government has is in the domestic and not international. With this logic, for 3 decades since the reforms began in the late 1970s, keeping high growth rates that would bring up people's living standard (and thus the legitimacy of the government) has been on the highest agenda. While this is still the case, since 2003 when the fourth generation of the Chinese leadership came to power, a new emphasis has also been on the creation of a "harmonious society", after realizing that growing gap between the rich and poor is a factor harmful to social stability and government legitimacy as well.

Internationally, while China has been much less outspoken of promoting world multipolarity since NATO bombing on Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and especially after 9/11, for being *taoguan yanghui* and not offending the US, with the high economic growth and increasing national interests needs like energy consumption, Chinese foreign activities have expanding to a large extent, especially to Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, etc. New issues come with new taste, especially "no-political string attached" foreign aid policy and non-interference foreign policy principle. In the latter aspect, starting from early 2007 when Hu Jintao visited Africa, China began an approach of "constructive persuasion" (or persuasive intervention) as far as Darfur issue is concerned. The extent of this kind of "intervention" is still limited, but I believe a tendency would lead to more relaxation in this regard.