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Has China Plans for World Domination?

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Since the end of the Cold War, both the structure of the international system and the ranking of major powers have gone through a series of dramatic changes. Among these changes, there is probably no topic of greater importance to the analysis of contemporary international politics than the rise of China and the Chinese vision of China’s future role in the international world system. As China started to strengthen its national power and remake its place in global affairs, the questions of how its rise will transform the current international system and whether it will become the next superpower have become two of the most controversial issues in the field of international relations. Many analysts are skeptical about the orientations of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) growing national power.

Actually the tremendous economic success that the PRC has sustained in the last decades has alarmed many analysts and has prompted politicians – both in Western and in some Asian countries – to wonder what kind of power would an increasingly stronger and bolder China become. “Will a more prosperous and powerful China be an irrational, bellicose nation that will challenge the existing international order” or “will it be a peaceful, responsible and constructive member of the international community, respectful of international society’s rules?” 5 In more recent years one of the most debated issues in Western discussions about the future is “whether China will replace the United States as the leading world power.”

The Western Debate

Such a prediction seems to be taken for granted among economic forecasters, policy makers and a part of the IR community scholars. Actually many analysts have interpreted the 2008 global financial crisis as the beginning of the American decline and the beginning of a new era dominated by China. According to a 2007 Goldman Sachs report China will replace the United States as the largest economy in the world by 2027, 6 even if in terms of GDP per capita China has still a long way to go to match the

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USA. In 2050 China will belong to the “upper middle income group”, not to the “rich” club. In November 2008, a National Intelligence Council (NIC) report – Global Trend 2025: A Transformed World – stated that in 2025 the United States, while probably remaining the single most powerful country, would probably be less dominant and the whole international system would be revolutionized by the rise of emerging new players, reunited together in the BRIC’s forum. Interestingly, the NIC’s report assessed that rather than emulating Western models of political and economic development, more countries might be attracted to China’s alternative development model, and in general to the so-called “state capitalism” which China, India and Russia were following, and that other rising powers, such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, had followed in the past to develop their economies.

The Enthusiasts’ Position: A New “Model” for the World

Among those authors that in the last few years have accepted and boosted the assumption that China will unquestionably replace the USA as the dominant global power in the next few decades are the British journalist and scholar Martin Jacques, the Indian economist and former assistant director in the Research Department of the International Monetary Fund, Arvind Subramanian (named in 2011 one of foreign policy’s top 100 global thinkers by the Foreign Policy Magazine), and the American scholar Stefan Halper, Director of American Studies in the Department of Politics at the University of Cambridge. They are authors, respectively, of these best sellers: When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order (originally released in the UK with the subtitle The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World); Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China’s Economic Dominance and The Beijing Consensus: How China’s Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century.

The leitmotiv of these works may be found in their firm belief that China’s dominance is not only imminent, but also much larger in magnitude than is currently imagined. In other words, China’s impact on the world will not simply be economic; rather it will also have profound political, cultural and ideological effects. In particular, Halper demonstrates that the Beijing experience – the so-called “China model” which represents a successful co-existence of a free market and an authoritarian state in order


7 Goldman Sachs, The N-11: More than an Acronym, p. 11.
9 Ibid., pp. iv, vii. In a 2009 article published in the American review Foreign Affairs (“State Capitalism Comes of Age: The End of the Free Market?”), 88, 3, May/June 2009, pp. 40-55), Ian Bremmer, the Eurasia Group’s president, gave an interesting analysis on the crucial shifts occurred in world economy’s map following the overtaking of free market by state capitalism, a system in which the state is the leading economic actor.
to maintain economic growth and political stability – has provided the world’s most
irrefutable, high-speed demonstration of how to liberalize economically without
surrendering to liberal politics. In other words, instead of playing by America’s rules as
did the Soviet Union, China has redefined the rules of the game in its own terms,
showing the world how to achieve economic growth while maintaining an illiberal
government, and presenting the world’s despots with a viable alternative to the so-called
Washington Consensus.10

The Skeptics’ Position: Contradictions and Challenges of China’s Rise

The “skeptics’ front” include, among the others, eminent scholars such as Joseph Nye,
François Godement, Susan Shirk and the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.
To all of them China’s dominance in the 21st century should not be taken for granted,
since there are many obstacles that could derail China’s growth as well as many political
uncertainties that should be taken into account in such important future prevision. Both
Nye and Kissinger agree that while it is currently fashionable to compare the United
States’ power to that of the United Kingdom a century ago and to predict a similar
hegemonic decline, the United States is not in absolute decline, and in relative terms,
there is a reasonable probability that it will remain more powerful than any other state in
the coming decades.

According to Joseph Nye, China has still a long way to go to equal the power resources
of the United States; and even if overall China GDP passed that of the United States
around 2030, the two economies, although equivalent in size, would not be equivalent in
terms of equality. As to Henry Kissinger, who took part in June 2011 in one of the
Munk Debates specifically dedicated to “whether or not the 21st century will belong to
the world’s most populous country”, he believes that in the near future China will be
preoccupied with economic problems, domestic problems and also with its international
environment, at a point that it will not have the time to dominate the world.11

Actually, as the PRC’s Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng has recently pointed out
at a Forum organized by the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), “China is
the second largest economy but not the second strongest economy,” adding that “China
is unable to fully play the role of a major country.”12

The country must create several millions of jobs every year; it must reduce the growing gap between rich and poor. Statistics show that the Gini coefficient in China has risen from 0.16 (urban) and 0.21 (rural) at the beginning of the reform era (1978) to 0.46 (national average) at the beginning of the new millennium, well above the recognized warning level of 0.4. Interestingly, for the eleventh year in a row, at the beginning of 2012 Chinese officials declared they could not publish the nation’s Gini coefficient because of incomplete data on high-income groups.

However, some experts criticized the announcement, saying the government was looking for reasons to de-emphasize China’s significant wealth gap.\textsuperscript{13} China faces many problems domestically. Important segments of Chinese people are in turmoil and Chinese society may blow up at any time. According to several government-backed studies, the number of “mass incidents” (\textit{quntixing shijian})\textsuperscript{14} recorded by the Chinese government grew from 8,700 in 1993 to about 90,000 in 2010. Some estimates are even higher, but the government has not released official data for recent years. The crucial importance of such a matter is witnessed by the announcement made during the annual National People’s Congress meeting last March, concerning an 11\% increase in spending on domestic security, making China one of the few countries in the world to spend more on internal security (US$ 111 billion) than on defense (US$ 106.4 billion).\textsuperscript{15}

China must also wrestle with internal politics. Beijing is in the middle of a leadership transition which will bring into power a new political leadership (the so-called “fifth generation”) and it is not clear what its system of government will look like in the future. Over the next months, more than 70\% of China’s top jobs must be turned over to new leaders in accordance with recently introduced rules on retirement and tenure.\textsuperscript{16} There are increasing rumours that the designated successors to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao may not be up to their jobs.\textsuperscript{17} There are also rumors that China’s 18th Communist Party Congress may be postponed as a result of intensified infighting sparked by the Wang Lijun (the former Chongqing Public Security Chief) incident, whose failed defection attempt at the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu on February 6th led to


\textsuperscript{14} This is the term officially used by the Chinese government to indicate the growing number of incidents of civil unrest which occur every day in the country and that official media cannot ignore anymore.


\textsuperscript{16} For more information on this subject, see Cheng Li, “Preparing for the 18\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress: Procedures and Mechanisms”, in \textit{China Leadership Monitor}, 36, 2012.

the dramatic fall of former Chongqing Communist Party Secretary Bo Xilai, a likely candidate for promotion to the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee in Autumn 2012.  

At the same time China has to face an increasingly strained international environment. Starting from 2009 various crises have emerged between China and many of its regional neighbors since Beijing has adopted a more assertive posture, contributing to China’s strained relationships with its neighbours and indirectly with the USA to the great detriment of its regional and global image as a “responsible” actor. Among these disputes are the increased friction with ASEAN over the South China Sea, the sharpened tensions with New Delhi over territorial disputes, the diplomatic crisis with Tokyo following the Chinese fishing boat intrusion into disputed waters (in the contiguous zone of the Senkaku Islands, also known as Diaoyu Islands or Diaoyutai Islands, which are Japanese islands also claimed by China), the aggravation of Sino-South Korean ties after the Cheonan sinking, and the bombing of Yeongpyeong Island in 2010.

According to Henry Kissinger: “A country facing such large domestic tasks is not going to throw itself easily, much less automatically, into strategic confrontations or a quest for world domination.” François Godement, founder of the Asia Centre, a Paris-based think tank, and Susan Shirk – the chair of the 21st Century China Program and Ho Miu Lam Professor of China and Pacific Relations at the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies at the University of California, San Diego also come to similar conclusions - that China will be concerned for a long time with its domestic agenda. According to Godement, for China “International questions are an afterthought. Instead for a Communist Party whose overriding priority is to stay in power, domestic problems threatening social stability at home are infinitely more important.”

As for Susan Shirk, she argues that “like all politicians, China’s leaders are concerned first and foremost with their own political survival,” but in China’s case, the national leaders are facing a “troubling paradox”, that is “the more developed and prosperous the country becomes, the more insecure and threatened they feel.” Shirk recognizes that

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18 On April 11, Reuters published an article reporting that: “In one sign of Party’s unease, a source with ties to top leaders said the Communist Party was considering a proposal to delay the opening of the Party Congress to ‘shorten the transition period’. C. Buckley and B. Kang Lim, “China braces for next act in leadership drama”, Reuters, April 11, 2012.
20 Kissinger, On China, p. 525.
“viewed objectively, China’s communist regime looks surprisingly resilient,” however, beneath the surface there are many critical aspects that could derail China’s peaceful trend in the foreseeable future.\(^{23}\)

**China’s domestic debate**

As for China’s plans for the future international order and governance, which represent the current paper’s main topic, it must be said that within the Chinese IR scholars’ community there is a lively and contradictory debate over objectives, principles and values of China’s foreign policy, and more generally on the best course for China in the near future. This strategic debate revolves around the many foreign policy implications of Deng Xiaoping’s “peaceful trend” strategy. It concentrates on the distribution of world power, China’s identity as a foreign policy actor, and the course of action that should consequently be pursued. “Should China pursue the policy of peaceful rise and help create a constructive international environment” or “Would its interests best be served by acting as a traditional big power?” “What role should China play and what responsibilities should it take on the world stage?” All these are some aspects of the current Chinese debate on China’s international identity. According to David Shambaugh, no other nation has engaged “in such an extensive, animated, and diverse domestic discourse about its role as a major rising power as China did during the past decade.”\(^{24}\)

**China’s Rise: a Chinese Perspective**

While the consensus on the nature of China’s ascent has yet to be reached among China’s domestic scholars – some argue it is still a developmental country while others affirm it is only a regional power at best – the preponderance of domestic discourse recognizes that China is a major power or at least on the way to becoming one.\(^{25}\) The overwhelming majority see China’s modernization as a process of “re-emergence”. China has in fact a long history of economic supremacy. In the last 2000 years it has enjoyed superpower status several times, and on the eve before the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the subsequent imposition of the “unequal treaties” (bu pingdeng de tiaoyue 不平等的条约) which precipitated the so-called Chinese “century of shame and humiliation” (bainian chiru 百年耻辱), China had the largest GDP, accounting for about 25-30% of the world GDP. For this reason Chinese believe China’s decline is a kind of historical mistake which they should correct and that is why, according to Yan Xuetong, for Chinese “the rise of China is granted by nature.”\(^{26}\)

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 60.

\(^{24}\) Shambaugh, “Coping with a Conflicted China”, p. 8.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the Chinese elites have called upon the Chinese people to fight for national “rejuvenation” (zhenxing 振兴), a term that refers to the psychological power contained in the concept of China’s rise to its former world status. Of course, Chinese leaders were well aware that China’s rise was going to be a long-term historical process. That is why Beijing has adopted a moderate foreign policy since the end of the 1970s. Deng Xiaoping frequently told the Chinese people to be very cautious and modest and warned Chinese leaders that it was a national policy not to be the leader of the Third World. The so-called “28-character guidelines” (ershiba zi fangzhen 二十八字方针), formulated in the aftermath of Tiananmen (and coincidentally with the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the end of the Cold War) were also largely inspired by prudence.

Some of the guidelines are: watch and analyse developments calmly (lengjing guancha 冷静观察); secure our own positions (wenzhu zhenjiao 稳住阵脚); deal with changes with confidence (chenzhuo yingfu 沉着应付); conceal our capacities (taoguang yanghui 韬光养晦); be good at keeping a low profile (shanyu shouzhuo 善于守拙); never become the leader (juebu dangtou 绝不当头); and make some contributions (yousuo zuowei 有所作为). The more recent theories of “China’s peaceful rise”, “peaceful development”, “harmonious society”, and “harmonious world” are also largely inspired by prudence aiming to create a stable international environment which represents the conditio sine qua non for its internal development which is necessary for the country’s stability and indirectly the leadership’s legitimation to power.

The End of the Cold War and the New World Order: the PRC Perspective

In order to better understand the contents of the current Chinese domestic debate and clarify China’s plans for its future role in the international world system, it may be useful to spend a few words about China’s reaction immediately after the implosion of the former Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a new geopolitical context, leaving the Chinese leaders “without a clear definition of their place in the world”. Whereas during the 1970s and 1980s China had played an important role within the triangular system with Washington and Moscow, after the end of the Cold War the “Chinese card” lost its importance for both the USA and their allies.

28 Ibid., p. 326.
29 Actually, the contemporary Chinese political thinking continues to be largely inspired by the ancient Chinese military general, strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu (or Sunzi) – traditionally believed to be the author of The Art of War, one of the most influential Chinese books on military strategy – who considered “prudence” one of the basic principles of strategic thinking.
In fact, the demise of the strategic triangle weakened its strategic leverage in the global balance of power, and the Chinese leaders felt marginalized, as it appeared difficult for Beijing to carve a satisfying niche in an international system dominated by the USA. However, an analysis of the Chinese international relations literature reveals that at the beginning of the 1990s both the Chinese scholars and the leadership agreed that the end of the bipolar world order resulted in a transition process towards a new multipolar world system.\(^{31}\)

The overwhelming majority of Chinese scholars saw a multipolar world order as a useful bulwark against unilateralism, being one in which big powers were mutually checked and constrained; for that reason multipolarism has been represented as an ideal international paradigm for power relations, even if there were different opinions regarding the number of the “poles”.\(^{32}\) Chinese analysts proposed mainly three possible types of multipolar system: a tri-polar system (USA; EU; Asia-Pacific); a five-polar system (USA, Germany, Japan, Russia, and China); and a system with “one superpower (USA) and four big powers (Japan, Russia, China, and EU)” (the so-called \textit{yichao duoqiang 一超多强} structure).

This last structure, which proposes a simultaneously unipolar and multipolar world, was the preferred one. Actually, even after the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, it continues to be seen as the only viable structure in the foreseeable future. Most Chinese scholars agree that the crisis has certainly weakened American financial and economic power, but at the same time they recognize that it has impacted other powers more. Furthermore, according to them the United States has demonstrated more resilience in coping with the crisis. That is why they believe that, in the short-term, the US will likely remain as the single superpower, and the \textit{yichao duoqiang} structure will substantially remain unchanged.\(^{33}\)

**The Post-Cold War International System: A New Place for China**

The new posture aiming to regain China its former world status led many foreign observers to demand what kind of power a rising China would become; at the same time, in China IR scholars and policymakers started to discuss China’s future role in the international system - the risks of becoming a global superpower and the opportunities to “simply” be a major power.

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\(^{33}\) Li Changjiu, “Guoji geju duanqinei buhui fasheng genbenxing bianhua” (Fundamental changes will not take place in the international structure in the short term), \textit{Xiandai Guoji Guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)}, 2009, 4, pp. 11-13, esp. p. 12.
Such discussions took place primarily at the academic level, with a series of lectures on the subject given to the Communist Party members between 2003 and 2006; they were subsequently developed in a CCTV documentary series entitled *Rising powers* (*Daguo jueqi* 大国崛起). The program concerned the rise and the fall of big powers in history; the means of their rise and the causes of their fall; and so on. The big question was: “What lessons could China draw from those historical precedents?” Also, “How could China avoid the historical repetitive ‘asymmetry trap’ between the major established power and the primary rising power in which the latter challenged the former’s hegemonic position in the international system?” In other words, “how could China obtain the status of major power without triggering a counterbalancing reaction?”

**Reassuring the World: The “Peaceful Rise” Theory**

An answer to such a crucial issue was formulated through the articulation of the proposition of “China’s peaceful rise”, which Beijing thought might be useful to allay foreign apprehensions over its growing power. The proposition was first used by Zheng Bijian (at that time Chair of the China Reform Forum and Executive Vice President of CPC Central Party School) in late 2003, during the Boao Forum for Asia and soon reaffirmed by China’s top Party and military leaders, signaling its official endorsement.

The “peaceful rise” （和平崛起）theory was used primarily to reassure South-East Asian countries and the United States that the rise of China’s military and economic prominence would not pose a threat to peace and stability, and that other nations would benefit from China’s rising power and influence. Explicit in the doctrine was the notion that China’s economic and military development was not a “zero-sum game” and that China was as much an economic opportunity as an economic competitor. The doctrine emphasized the importance of soft power and was based in part on the premise that good relations with its neighbours would enhance rather than diminish its overall national power （zonghe guoli综国力）.

In diplomacy, the doctrine underlined multilateral cooperation through institutions and warned against the risks of a direct confrontation with the United States. In another article published in 2005, Zheng offered the assurance that China had adopted a “strategy to transcend the traditional ways for great power to emerge,” arguing that the

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35 The *zonghe guoli* or Comprehensive National Power (CNP) is an original Chinese political concept used to measure the general power of a nation-state. CNP can be calculated numerically by combining various quantitative indices to create a single number held to measure the power of a nation-state. These indices take into account both military factors (hard power) and economic and cultural factors (soft power).
new international political and economic order China was seeking was one that could be achieved through incremental reforms and the democratization of international relations.

According to Zheng, China would “not follow the path of Germany leading up to World War I or those of Germany and Japan leading up to World War II, when these countries violently plundered resources and pursued hegemony. Neither will China follow the path of great powers vying for global domination during the Cold War.”

Contemporaneously, Hu Jintao delivered a speech at the UN Summit marking its 60th anniversary, by which, while reiterating that China favored the trend toward democratization of world affairs (which implied a relative diminution of American power in the direction of a multipolar world) insisted that China would pursue its goals peacefully and within the framework of the U.N. system.

From then on the so-called “path of peaceful rise” has become a sort of political “mantra” that Chinese leaders did not miss to repeat at every occasion. Actually the reference to “peaceful rise” was very soon replaced by the more neutral formula of “peaceful development” (heping fazhan 和平发展), because of its aggressive impact especially in regards to a foreign public opinion increasingly worried about China’s rise. Yet China’s leaders continued to use it in a modified form, with similar if not identical conceptual substance.

A New Nationalist Pride: The “Peaceful Path” Opponents

However, in the last few years, especially as the global economic crisis spread across the West in the period after the Olympics, new voices in China began to challenge the thesis of China’s “peaceful path.” Some of its opponents started to contend that China’s main objective should not be economic prosperity but power itself. In other words, to become powerful and achieve recognition China should not only be concerned with

37 “China will, as always, abide by the purposes and principles of the U.N. charter, actively participate in international affairs and fulfill its obligations, and work with other countries in building towards a new international political and economic order that is fair and rational. The Chinese nation loves peace. China’s development, instead of hurting or threatening anyone, can only serve peace, stability and common prosperity in the world.” See Hu Jintao, “Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity”, speech at the UN Summit, New York, September 15, 2005, available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t1213091.htm.
38 The term jueqi 崛起 was seen as provocative rather than reassuring; in fact, the character jue 崛 contains the radical for mountain and carries the connotation of “abruptness”. The use of that term could thus easily cause suspicion and wariness among other countries, especially those using Chinese characters, in particular Japan and Korea, which actually expressed concern about the phrase.
economic development but with military might as well. They were rather in favour of a much more assertive policy, especially towards the U.S., according to its newly gained status.

Earlier examples of this line of thinking appeared during the 1990s with the so-called “China Can Say No” (Zhongguo keyi shuo bu 中国可以说不) school that complained about the influence of the West, and the U.S. in particular, on China, and the new genre of “nationalist literature” known as “shuobu shu” (说不书), inaugurated with the publication of the bestseller *The China that Can Say No: Political and Emotional Choices in the post Cold-War Era* (Zhongguo keyi shuo bu: Lengzhan hou shidai de zhengzhi yu qinggan jueze 中国可以说不冷战后时代的政治与情感抉择).

The most recent expression of this tendency is the increase in popular books that might be described as “dissatisfaction literature” which include two widely read nationalistic books: an essay collection titled *China is Unhappy: the Great Era; the Grand Goal, and our National Anxieties and External Challenges* [Zhongguo bu gaoxing: da shidai, da mubiao ji men de neiyou waihuan 中国不高兴大时代,大目标及我们的内忧外患] (2009), whose authors (Song Xiaojun; Wang Xiaodong; Huang Jisu; Song Qiang; and Liu Yang) include some who contributed to the “China Can Say No” series; and *China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* [Zhongguo meng: hou Meiguo shidai de daguo siwei yu zhanlue dingwei 中国梦后美国时代的大国思维与战略定位] written by Liu Mingfu, a PLA Senior Colonel and professor at China’s National Defense University – an elite academy tasked with training senior PLA officers.

The authors of *Unhappy China* point to specific examples of continuing foreign disdain for the Middle Kingdom, such as the protests along the route of the Olympic flame, or continuous complaints about pollution from China by Western nations that consume far more resources per capita. In their view, since China has already risen as a superpower (at least in economic terms) it must be recognized as such and act accordingly. For this reason China should stop debasing itself, shake off its self-doubt and passivity, abandon gradualism, and recover its historic sense of mission by means of a “grand goal” (da mubiao 大目标) which Liu Mingfu defines “become a number one in the world” (shijie di yi 世界第一) restoring China to a modern version of its historic glory, which will require the displacing of the USA.

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41 It was soon followed by the publication of other popular “say no” books such as *The China That Still Can Say No* (Zhongguo hai shi neng shuo bu 中国还是能说不), *How China Can Say No* (Zhongguo keyi shuo bu 中国何以说不), *Chinese Currency Can Say No* (Renminbi keyi shuo bu 人民币可以说不).
Both books are deeply nationalistic and both have been criticized in the Chinese press, on the web, and in the academic community. According to some authors (such as Jin Canrong) these books do not reflect the intentions of the top leadership or, in the case of Liu Mingfu’s book, of the Chinese military. Nor are they expression of the Chinese public sentiment, which is much more involved in domestic issues like the rising cost of housing or food prices. On the contrary, they represent no more than an isolated nationalistic tendency which advocates that China should adopt a more confrontational attitude in dealing with international society. Actually, such tendency is becoming increasingly stronger especially among netizens, which are currently one of the most dynamic and critical new foreign policy actors in China.

These books are the latest example of impressive books which represent a growing profitable mass market in China. In fact, over the past decade, parts of the Chinese media have become more commercialized and willing to publish a range of content designed to generate profit rather than promote political orthodoxy. This has led some publishers to focus on publishing sensationalist and nationalistic views that can attract a mass audience. As admitted by one of the authors of China is Unhappy, the publisher chose the title of the book, because it would sell well.

The Chinese Official Response

That said, some authors argue that the importance of these books relies on the fact that the Chinese government felt the necessity to respond, distancing itself from their nationalistic and enthusiastic tones, especially considering that there was a perfect coincidence between the publication of these works and the emergence of the already mentioned tensions in China’s neighborhood, which prompted speculations on whether the episodes were the product of a deliberate policy. All the more so as both books became bestsellers, which implied that their contents represented the point of view of at least a portion of China’s institutional structure. However, to chase away any doubts about it, China’s leadership decided to clarify officially its position.

In December 2010, State Councilor Dai Bingguo (the highest-ranking official overseeing China’s foreign policy) released a comprehensive statement of policy (Persisting with Taking the Path of Peaceful Development) intended as a reply both to foreign observers concerned that China harbored aggressive intentions, and to those  

44 Ph. C. Saunders, “Will China’s Dream turn into America’s Nightmare?”, China Brief, 10, 7, April 1, 2010, pp. 9-12.
46 Kissinger, On China, p. 505.
within China who argued that China should adopt a more assertive posture.\(^47\) In particular, this was directed toward Chinese neo-cons who had always firmly opposed the “peaceful rise” theory because it risked giving potential adversaries (including Taiwan) a wrong message, that is, that China would not act forcefully in order to protect its national sovereignty and interests.\(^48\)

Dai explained that the decision to stick to the path of peaceful development was not an impulsive one, but rather “a carefully considered choice based on our analysis of the great changes that have taken place in the world, in China and in China’s relations with the rest of the world”. In other words, “peaceful development” was neither “a smokescreen for its real intentions before it gets strong enough”, as some foreigners suspected; nor was it a policy trend that risked to compromise China’s advantages (as some within China charged). On the contrary, it was China’s genuine and enduring policy because it best served the country’s interests. In Dai’s view, peaceful development had to be a task for many generations, since China’s main goal was for the Chinese people to “bid farewell to poverty and enjoy a better life” and for China to become “the most responsible, the most civilized and the most law abiding and orderly member of the international community.”

Most important, according to Dai, was the fact that China had “no reason whatsoever to be conceited or arrogant” because it still faced tremendous challenges domestically. Moreover, he rejected the claims that China would seek to dominate Asia or displace the USA as the world’s preeminent power as a pure “myth” (shenhua 神话) that contradicted the country’s historical record and its current policies. One month later, during his visit to the U.S., in a speech at a Washington D.C. lunch with senior US officials and business leaders from firms like General Electric and Coca Cola, the Chinese president Hu Jintao pledged that China would “remain committed to the path of peaceful development” and that it would “never seek to dominate or pursue an expansionist policy.”\(^49\)

In September 2011, both Dai and Hu’s assertions were reiterated in a government white paper on “China’s peaceful development” (Zhongguo de “heping fazhan” baipishu

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According to Wang Yajun, head of the Central Foreign Affairs Office (which advises the top leadership), who presented the document to the press, the white paper’s publication was intended to reiterate the “defensive” nature of China’s military policy and thus to reassure that China threatened no one, that its rise would contribute to world peace, and that the “central goal of Chinese diplomacy” was “to create a peaceful and stable international environment for its development”. Even admitting that China could become strong in the future, peace would remain critical for its development; thus China had no reason to deviate from the path of peaceful development. Wang insisted that “China does not want to, nor will China, challenge the international order or challenge other countries,” pointing to the white paper declaration that China has “broken away from the traditional pattern where a rising power was bound to seek hegemony” (Zhongguo heping fazhan dapao le “Guoqiang bi ba” de daguo jueqi chuantong moshi 中国和平发展打破了国强必败的大国崛起).51

A New Perspective for the Future: A Selective Diplomacy

In the last few years – especially after the decline of the American power in the wake of the international financial crisis and the extraordinary performances played by China – also Deng Xiaoping’s main dictum “conceal our capacities” (taoguang yanghui) has increasingly been under discussion. Some Chinese scholars, in particular, have challenged the current relevance of Deng’s foreign policy prescriptions considered out of date and inadequate to China’s newfound international status. According to them, China should do “more things” (dasuo zuowei 打所作为).52

In a sort of reply to the above mentioned perplexities on the persistent relevance of Deng’s views, the eminent scholar Wang Yizhou, Vice Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, has recently introduced a new diplomatic concept – the so-called “creative involvement” (chuangzaoxing jieru 创造性介入) – calling on China to actively play a bigger role and voluntarily get involved in international affairs. In a recent interview with Beijing Review reporter Ding Ying, Wang explained the relevance of the concept and its significance for China and the world. According to him the new concept stresses a new and active attitude that should

52 Shambaugh, “Coping with a Conflicted China”, p. 18. Nevertheless, as emerged at the spring 2010 annual meeting of China’s Association for International Relations in Lanzhou, the mainstream consensus holds that the Deng’s conservative advice remains an appropriate guide for Chinese diplomacy, which contributes to defending China’s core interests. See “Zhongguo Guoji Guanxi 2010 nian nianhui zai Lanzhou zhaoxiao” (China’s international relations society 2010 annual meeting in Lanzhou Review), Waijiao Pinglun (Foreign Affairs Review), 4, 2010, pp. 156-7, esp. p. 157.
characterize China in dealing with regional and international questions on the basis of a selective analysis of the country’s core interests.

Wang specifies that “although advocating active participation in international affairs, “creative involvement” differs essentially from interventionism. In fact, it calls for active contact and involvement instead of intervention by force, which means that “creative involvement” should be conducted on the basis of international legitimacy; moreover the strategy should be carried out according to China’s capability after cautious deliberation, which means that there should be a selective move that China makes when dealing with affairs concerning its vital interests.\(^{53}\) In this regard, Wang’s position reflects faithfully the point of view of the so-called “Selective Multilateralist” school (one of the seven schools of thinking within China’s international relations community) according to which China should expand its global involvements, commensurate with its newfound position and power, but selectively, and only on issues that involve directly China’s national security interests.\(^{54}\)

**Conclusion**

Misreading about China are a quite common. One of the most frequent ones concerns the re-emergence of China as a great power, which is unquestionably one of the most important geopolitical events in this century. The extraordinary economic growth that China has sustained in the last decades has not been followed, as many had hoped, by democratic reforms. It has witnessed instead an exponential growth in its political and diplomatic weight, under the one-party rule, aiming to regain the central role it had played for millennia as the Middle Kingdom which was undermined by the incursions of imperialist Western Powers starting from the second half of the 18th century. However China’s economic success has alarmed many analysts and has prompted politicians – both in Western as well as in some Asian countries – to wonder what kind of power would an increasingly strong and assertive China become.

Many observers have subscribed to the realist argument that its rise would be a kind of “zero-sum” game where the rise of one power leads to the decline of another. Indeed, over the past decade there has been a heated debate in the West over the potential challenge of this rising power, not only to the Asia-Pacific region but also to the entire world. The common perception in the West, and especially in the USA, is that China is both a voracious economic competitor and a threatening political and military challenger, an emergent superpower with growing indefinite intention that acts exclusively in its own interests, even to the detriment of the international order. However, the Chinese leaders persist in reiterating the “peaceful” intentions of their


country, arguing that in an integrated global economy, China’s stability and development is essential for world peace and prosperity.\textsuperscript{55}

To reduce distortion about China’s current and future plans for world domination, it should be wise to try to understand the thought of China’s leaders – past and present – instead of analyzing only what they say or what they do. And, more importantly, Westerners should understand China’s domestic situation and the growing challenges the country is facing. This would certainly help to better comprehend the fact that in spite of all projections which foresee China overtaking the United States in the next few decades as the largest economy in the world, it is unlikely that China will also be automatically the leading nation.

More likely, in the close future we will probably see the country’s efforts in finding the solution to its numerous problems, both at national and international levels. It is quite probable that China will continue to strive to carve itself a niche commensurate with its international status as a “responsible great power” (fuzerende daguo, 负责任的大国), without seeking world domination.

As Mark Leonard points out in the last chapter of his book \textit{What Does China Think?}, which gives voice to many Chinese thinkers, writers and officials with regard to both internal and international issues, “The twenty-first century” will see a more self-confident China joining “the USA and the European Union as a shaper of world order, challenging Western influence in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the former Soviet Union with a different model of globalization.”\textsuperscript{56} This is exactly what China has been pursuing in the last decade through its soft power strategy for the purpose of boosting its international image, spreading its influence and contributing to build up its desired international world order.\textsuperscript{57}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Leonard, \textit{What Does China Think?}, p. 133.
\end{itemize}
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