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The Rising Chorus of Chinese Exceptionalism

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ABSTRACT

The rise of China as a major player in international politics ranks as one of the defining features of 21st century global politics. China's rise however has been met with considerable suspicion among many political watchers who view Beijing's growing influence with suspicion, especially concerning China's long-term intentions within the Asia-Pacific region. China has clearly moved from a position of passivity to a more active one, as its national interests become increasingly globalized. Furthermore, China is clearly eager to present its credentials to the international community and is determined to be taken as a major global stakeholder. This paper will argue that China enthusiasm to demonstrate its international influence now takes the form of a rising chorus echoing China's claim to exceptionalism in world affairs. Unlike American exceptionalism, the Chinese version is not done in order to remake the world in its own image, but to (i) assert greater influence on the world stage; (ii) consolidate its widening orbit of interests and to ensure its ongoing prosperity; and (iii) present itself as a moral (credible) stakeholder of the global community.

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The Rising Chorus of Chinese Exceptionalism

The rise of China as a major player in international politics ranks as one of the defining features of 21st century global politics. China's rise however has been met with considerable suspicion among many political watchers who view Beijing's growing influence with suspicion, especially concerning China's long-term intentions within the Asia Pacific region.¹

In the 2010 China's National Defence White Paper, it was stated that China would pursue a national defence policy that is "defensive in nature," one which has its stated goal of achieving a "harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity."² This however, has not mollified concerns that China is a power that is simply biding its time in order to achieve its goal of regional, if not global dominance. As one Chinese scholar observes, "Deng Xiaoping's admonition that China should 韬光养晦 [to bide our time and build up our capabilities] still dominates China's strategic thinking."³ As such, there remains substantial debate, both within and outside China, about what Beijing's strategy or its goals might be.⁴ Furthermore as Wang Jisi puts it, "China's grand strategy is a field still to be plowed" and will be coloured by the manner "other countries respond to the emergence of China as a global power."⁵

But while Chinese ultimate long-term intentions and interests may remain elusive, at least for the time being, Beijing's expressed worldview is not. In September 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao introduced the notion of 和谐世界 [harmonious world] as a new concept of world

¹ Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony: Confucian Culture & Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Michael Swaine, "Perceptions of an Assertive China," *China Leadership Monitor* 32 (2010): pp. 1-19; Michael R. Chambers, "Rising China: A Threat to Its Neighbors?," in Carolyn W. Pumphrey ed., *The Rise of China in Asia: Security Implications* (North Carolina: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), pp. 65-93.

² White Paper on China's National Defense in 2010, accessed on 01 November 2011 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-03/31/c_13806851.htm.

³ Zhiqun Zhu, "Chinese Foreign Policy: External and Internal Factors," *China: An International Journal* 9:2 (2011): pp. 185-195.

⁴ Aaron Friedberg, "The Future of U.S. – China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30 (2), 2005, pp. 7-45; Harry Harding, *China's Second Revolution: Reform After Mao* (Brookings: Washington, 1987), pp. 261; Dingding Chen & Jianwei Wang, "Lying Low No More? China's New Thinking on the Tao Guang Yang Hui Strategy," *China: An International Journal* 9:2 (2011): pp. 195-217.

⁵ Jisi Wang, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way", *Foreign Affairs* 90.2 (2011): pp. 68-79.

order in his speech at the United Nations in New York.⁶ Such a pronouncement marked a shift in China's understanding of itself, and its place in the world. As Callahan observes, "for the past thirty years, Beijing has very carefully formulated its economic reform strategy to challenge neither the West nor the current world order... Yet Beijing's active promotion of a 'harmonious world' suggests that the era of Deng's 'lay low' strategy is coming to an end; but what comes next is still not clear."⁷

China's Rising Exceptionalism

In recent years, top Chinese government officials have reiterated Beijing's rights on various issues, from territorial claims in the South China Sea, Taiwan, Diaoyu Islands to having greater economic parity with the United States.⁸ In its interactions with the global community, China has clearly moved from a position of passivity to a more active one, as its national interests become increasingly globalised. As evidenced from China's three recent global spectacles – Beijing's Olympic Games in 2008, the PRC's sixtieth-anniversary celebration in 2009, and Shanghai's World Expo in 2010 – China is clearly eager to present its credentials to the international community and is determined to be taken as a major global stakeholder. Writing in 2001, Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong puts it, " (China's) history of superpower status makes the Chinese people very proud of their country on the one hand, and on the other hand very sad about China's current international status. They believe China's decline is a historical mistake which they should correct."⁹

This "correction" of China's international status, I argue, now takes the form of a rising chorus echoing China's claim to exceptionalism in world affairs. But unlike 20th century American exceptionalism (some scholars term it Americanism) which has "crusaded abroad

⁶ Hu Jintao, "努力建设持久和平共同繁荣的和谐世界" [Making an effort to build a sustainable, peaceful, and united prosperous harmonious world, speech at the UN 60th celebration], *People's Daily*, 16 September 2005.

⁷ William A. Callahan, "Introduction: Tradition, Modernity and Foreign Policy in China," in William A. Callahan & Elena Barabantseva, eds., *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), pp. 1-21.

⁸ Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Reiterates China's Solemn Position on the issue of Diaoyu Islands, accessed on 6 November 2012 at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cesg/eng/zt/diaoyudao2012/t975578.htm>; Barry Wain, "Asean Caught in a Tight Spot," *The Straits Times*, 16 September 2010 ; Luo Lan, "IMF: Widening RMB trading band not a 'baby step,'" *People's Daily*, 01 May 2012.

⁹ Yan Xuetong, "The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2001), 10 (26): pp. 33-39.

in a Wilsonian way”¹⁰ in order to reconstruct the world in its own image, Chinese exceptionalism does not seem to possess a similar proselytising objective in mind. Indeed Chinese military strategists often highlight the defensive character of China’s strategic culture and that Beijing has a long tradition of honouring peace.¹¹ A 2005 foreign policy white paper also proclaimed Chinese culture to be a “pacific one”¹² while Premier Wen Jiabao in an address at Harvard University in 2003 stated, “Peace loving has been a time-honoured quality of the Chinese nation.”¹³ Outside China, international analysts have also suggested that Confucian culture has somewhat limited China’s use of military force. John K. Fairbank observed that Chinese Confucian culture has a “pacifist bias,” rendering the use of force a “last resort” while Daniel Bell notes that “Confucian theorising on just and unjust war has the potential to play the role of constraining China’s imperial ventures abroad.”¹⁴

Without casting undue aspersions on these “peaceful pronouncements” nor uncritically accept them as ultimate expressions of Beijing’s intentions, I argue that what needs to be interrogated further is not so much whether Beijing is telling the truth or not, but how it views its present position in the globe vis-à-vis other global powers and the interests that it intends to preserve. According to one study, the emerging exceptionalism that has been witnessed in light of China’s rise is seen through Beijing’s emphasis on three key components, namely, great power reformism, benevolent pacifism and harmonious inclusionism.¹⁵ Taken together, these three aspects suggest a desire to “present China as a peaceful power so as to create a

¹⁰ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, (Florida: Harcourt Brace, 1991), p286.

¹¹ Li Lijun, “论战略文化 [On strategic culture],” *中国军事科学* [China Military Science], no. 1 (1997): pp. 8-15.; Gong Yuzhen, *中国战略文化解析* [An analysis of Chinese strategic culture] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社, 2002).

¹² “China’s Peaceful Development Road,” State Council Information Office, accessed on 7 November 2012 at http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200512/22/eng20051222_230059.html.

¹³ “Remarks of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao: Turning Your Eyes to China,” Harvard University, 10 December 2003, accessed on 7 Nov 2012 at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/zt/wfm/t56090.htm>.

¹⁴ John K. Fairbank, “Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience,” in *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, ed. Frank A. Kierman Jr. and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 7-9; Daniel Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 35.

¹⁵ Feng Zhang, “The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* (2011), pp. 1-24.

‘China opportunity’...to facilitate China’s rise.”¹⁶ As Kishore Mahbubani observes, “China is aware that the world has changed. China does careful global geopolitical calculations in which it tries to objectively analyse its geopolitical assets and liabilities. It then works out a long-term plan to enhance its assets and minimise its liabilities. Each time a new problem surfaces, China looks for advantage in it...”¹⁷ Such opportunistic endeavors however, are not new in international politics as states always aim to maximise their gains. However, the question concerning how the Chinese view themselves – both at the upper echelons and within the rank-and-file – remains largely unanswered. Without understanding the lens by which China sees itself and the world, it would be difficult to reconcile competing claims – benign or belligerent – over Beijing’s intentions and the future that is charted in China’s relations with the rest of the globe.

Return of a Great Civilization

Indeed if the claim that a brand of Chinese exceptionalism is present is to be proven true, then some form of “civilisation consciousness” must first exist in the minds of the Chinese people. As Yan Xuetong observes, China’s history of superpower status (in the Han dynasty, the Tang dynasty, and the early Qing dynasty) have infused the Chinese people with great pride for their country.¹⁸ The slogan 振兴中华 [rejuvenation of China] started by Sun Yat-sen in the early 20th century and continued by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin all reflects the thinking of a Chinese people who, in the words of eminent Chinese scholar Wang Gungwu, are increasingly desirous of a “strong and prosperous China being taken seriously again in world affairs.”¹⁹ This has created a sense of Chinese nationalism which has been “invoked generically to explain China’s conduct in territorial and resource disputes as well as in international forums such as climate-change negotiations.”²⁰ In his memoirs, former

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 13.

¹⁷ Kishore Mahbubani, “Smart Power, Chinese Style,” *The American Interest*, Mar/Apr 2008., accessed on 21 December 2012 at <http://www.mahbubani.net/articles%20by%20dean/smart%20power.pdf>.

¹⁸ Yan Xuetong, “The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (2001), 10 (26): pp. 33-39.

¹⁹ Wang Gungwu, “Greater China and the China Overseas,” *The China Quarterly* (1993): pp. 926-948.

²⁰ Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, “China’s Nationalist Heritage,” *The National Interest* (Jan/Feb 2013): pp. 45.

Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan likens China's contributions to the world as "a gentle breeze" which had brought peace, friendship, cooperation and development.²¹ Indeed, this positive sense of China's greatness is best evinced in a speech made by Xi Jinping at the unveiling of China's 5th generation leaders during the Chinese Communist Party's 18th Congress in November 2012. Xi, who is slated to become China's next President, proclaimed China as a "great nation... (and having) made indelible contribution to the progress of human civilization."²²

This sense of China's greatness – as a civilisation and as a nation – however is quite unlike American exceptionalism, which is best epitomised by the belief that "what is good for America is likewise good for the rest of the world."²³ China holds no such pretensions. Instead what is often trumped by Beijing's policy makers is arguably somewhat more modest, that is, what is in China's own interests may not necessarily be equally beneficial for the rest of the world, or for that matter, its neighbours. Indeed, China is frequently criticised by the West for free-riding on others and not doing enough to protect the global good. As Wang Jisi also admits, "China will serve its interests better if it can provide more common goods to the international community and share more values with other states."²⁴

One often cited argument – especially among Western scholars – is that as China becomes increasingly confident about its own abilities vis-à-vis the West (read: the United States), it would behave in a manner that is in line with big powers and that it would seek to dominate its neighbours. According to Yuan-Kang Wang, Beijing's current non-confrontational strategy is a rational, calculated response to American preponderant power. However this will not be the case in the future when China has accumulated sufficient power. It would instead shift to an "offensive grand strategy (and) be more assertive in regional and global affairs, expand political and economic interests abroad and dictate the boundaries of acceptable state

²¹ Tang Jiaxuan, *Heavy Storm & Gentle Breeze: A Memoir of China's Diplomacy* (New York: Harpercollins, 2011), pp. xiv.

²² Xi Jinping, Speech at the unveiling of new Chinese leadership, accessed on 22 November 2012 at <http://www.scmp.com/news/18th-party-congress/article/1083153/transcript-xi-jinpings-speech-unveiling-new-chinese>.

²³ Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2012).

²⁴ Jisi Wang, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way," *Foreign Affairs* 90.2 (2011): pp. 68-79.

behaviour.”²⁵ Likewise, Johnston and Chestnut share the view that one of the long-time goals of Chinese foreign policy has been to “catch up” with the great powers thus resulting in a security dilemma whereby China adopts what it believes are defensive strategies designed to prevent other countries, in particular the United States, from constraining or preventing its rise.²⁶ One Washington-based scholar also argues that the Chinese nationalism rhetoric is being used to mollify deep-seated anxiety of Chinese leaders concerning the durability of the party’s achievements in the domains of unification, prosperity and international prestige.²⁷ Not surprising, the United States and its Western allies are often seen to be the perpetrators of such external pressures.

In this respect then, I argue that China’s rise should not be viewed in isolation but in relation to what is often perceived as a decline in America’s geo-political influence and economic fortunes. Many Chinese scholars, in their assessments of China’s growing influence, inadvertently make comparisons or references to the United States, be it in Washington’s military priorities or soft power influence.²⁸ This suggests that despite Beijing’s efforts to articulate for itself a unique brand of political system described as “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” its rise remains substantially beholden - at least for now - to the American liberal world order.²⁹

As such, any attempt to analyse the Chinese worldview must be done in reference to how the Chinese perceive the United States and the extent to which these perceptions influence the way China sees itself, as part of an international order that includes the United States. It is this that I turn to next.

²⁵ Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony: Confucian Culture & Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 208.

²⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston & Sheena Chestnut, “The People’s Republic of China at Sixty: Is It Rising?,” in William C. Kirby, ed, *The People’s Republic of China at 60: An International Assessment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2011), pp. 108-118.

²⁷ Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, “China’s Nationalist Heritage,” *The National Interest* (Jan/Feb 2013): pp. 53.

²⁸ See for instance, Zhiqun Zhu, “Chinese Foreign Policy: External and Internal Factors,” *China: An International Journal* 9:2 (2011), pp. 188; Wanfa Zhang, “Tapping Soft Power: Managing China’s Peaceful Rise and the Implications for the World,” in Sujian Guo and Shiping Hua, eds., *New Dimensions of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 109-133; Deng Yong, “Hegemon on the offensive: Chinese perspectives on US global strategy,” *Political Science Quarterly* (2001) 116 (3): pp. 343-365.

²⁹ G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China, the United States, and the Future of the Liberal International Order,” in David Shambaugh, ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), pp. 53-75.

Chinese Exceptionalism Encounters American Power

Among Chinese scholars and policy makers, distrust of the US continues to exist. Indeed, one study from the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) typifies a common mindset among many Chinese towards America's global presence. According to the authors, America's "court and commonality have reached the mainstream consensus that the U.S. should seek world hegemony and establish a unipolar system based on the further strengthening of America's economic and military superiority."³⁰ According to one Chinese scholar, the increasing institutionalisation and consensus building character of China's emerging leadership have also predisposed domestic voices in urging China "to take a stronger stance against American demands and to defend China's core interests."³¹ This is seen most evidently in the global financial crisis where Chinese and Americans' views of each other diverge. While China urges Americans to spend less and save more, insisting that internal U.S. fiscal policies and practices have been largely to blame for Washington's economic woes, Americans blame China for job losses and threaten punitive tariffs. Furthermore, "as more and more people (in China) believe that China deserves equal international status and equal treatment on many issues, there will be strong popular reactions whenever people in China feel that China is treated unfairly by the United States."³² One can argue "as China rises, due to the favourable conditions brought about by American global order, it would at the same time challenge the very order that birthed its rise." As such, Chinese exceptionalism represents a response that is both a reaction to America's actions as well Beijing's need to: (i) assert influence on global affairs; (ii) consolidate and preserve its growing international interests; and (iii) present itself as a moral (credible) stakeholder of the global community.

Chinese Parrot to America's Pacific Pivot

Since Barack Obama assumed the United States presidency in 2009, there has been significant policy shifts in American foreign policy objectives. Among others, these include Washington's "back in Asia" policy which was reinforced by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary

³⁰ Lu Qichang & Ding Sheng, "Viewing American global strategy from the atrocity of NATO," *Contemporary International Relations* (June 1999) 9 (6).

³¹ Yufan Hao, "Domestic Chinese Influence on U.S. – China Relations," in David Shambaugh ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), pp. 125-151.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 143.

Clinton's announcement in October 2011 that the 21st century would be the US' Pacific Century.³³ In June 2012, Defence Secretary Leon Panetta at the Shangri-La dialogue reiterated the US' Asia Pacific priorities when he spoke of Washington's decision to reposture its naval forces from today's 50-50 per cent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to a 60-40 split.³⁴

Not surprising then, the past few years have witnessed growing tensions between U.S. and China both at the international and individual level. David Shambaugh during a one year sabbatical visit to China speaks of the "frosty reception" offered by the Chinese during President Obama's state visit to Beijing and Shanghai in November 2009. Observing, "In conversations with professional Chinese colleagues as well as average citizens across the country – from taxi drivers to shopkeepers to students – it became clear that the appealing allure of the United States, so present previously, had worn off and had been replaced by a combination of disinterest and disgust."³⁵

Likewise from the US perspective, China's growing military strength and military assertiveness in the East Asia region are seen as posing a challenge to U.S. military primacy in Asia and that Washington needed to tweak its foreign policy strategy to contend with Beijing's growing maritime power.³⁶ In his analysis of US-China relations, Shambaugh notes that the "competitive elements in the relationship are growing and now becoming primary, while the cooperative ones are secondary and declining...mutual distrust is pervasive in both governments, and one now finds few bureaucratic actors in either government with a strong mission to cooperate."³⁷

³³ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

³⁴ Leon Panetta, "The US Rebalance Towards the Asia Pacific," *Speech made at the IISS First Plenary Session*, 2 June 2012.

³⁵ David Shambaugh (ed.), *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), pp. xv .

³⁶ Tan Seng Chye. "Changing Global Landscape and Enhanced US Engagement with Asia – Challenges and Emerging Trends," *Asia Pacific Review*, 2012, 19:1, pp. 108-129; Kurt Cambell, "Lessons for Dealing with the Rise of China," *The Rise of China in Asia: Security Implications* (US: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), pp. 49-63; Li Mingjiang, "China's South China Sea dilemma: balancing sovereignty, development, and security," in Sam Bateman and Ralf Emmers, eds., *Security and International Politics in the South China Sea: Towards a cooperative management regime* (NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 140-155.

³⁷ David Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans*, pp. 5.

It would seem then that in 2012, much of China's international political maneuvering has been a result of what Beijing views as the United States increasing encroachment into its orbit of interests. The United States' Asia Pacific "pivot" has resulted in somewhat a tit-for-tat response among China's policy makers. The view of Beijing is that the U.S. pivot is largely military-centric in focus and that Washington seeks to restrain, if not contain, China's rise. As China's official Xinhua News Agency bluntly puts it, "The U.S. sees a growing threat to its hegemony from China. Therefore, America's strategic move east is aimed in practical terms at pinning down and containing China and counterbalancing China's development."³⁸ Indeed, the American assumption that a strong China should and would be friendly to, even aligned with, the United States³⁹ has been found to be untrue, if events of the past few years are any indication.

Furthermore, Beijing's success in fighting the global recession compared to its Western counterparts (in U.S. and Europe) has also shaped a more "nationalistic, confident, assertive, some say truculent, behavior beginning in 2008."⁴⁰ This has also resulted in a sense of "global entitlement" as far as Chinese policy makers are concerned. In his keynote speech during the 2012 World Economic Forum, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made mention of China's "resolute decision and scientific response"⁴¹ during the 2008 economic crisis when it unveiled a Four trillion Yuan stimulus package which allowed Beijing greater success in fighting and recovering from the global recession. The fact that Europe turned to China for help in solving its economic crisis, not to the U.S. (as was the case post World War II with the Marshall Plan) have further strengthened the belief in Beijing that it ought to be viewed with parity – at least economically – with the United States. In this respect, "Beijing's hostility towards American pivot strategy is an expression of its parrot strategy in that it seeks to counter what it perceives as Washington's counter-strategy towards its rise." This parrot strategy can be seen in the following three ways:

³⁸ Christopher Bodeen, "Beijing is Wary of Obama's Assertive China Policy", Associated Press online, 17 November 2011 .

³⁹ Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China* (New York: Columbia University Press, fourth edition, 2000), pp. 242.

⁴⁰ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "The Evolution of US-China Relations," in David Shambaugh ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), pp. 43.

⁴¹ Premier Wen predicts China's future in Davos address, *Xinhua News*, 11 September 2012, accessed on 12 December 2012 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-09/11/c_123702732.htm.

1) Assertion of influence over global affairs

According to Chinese scholars Guo and Hua, the Chinese leadership under President Hu Jintao recognises that it is in the fundamental interest of China to maintain a stable and peaceful international environment for China's modernisation programmes and had therefore proposed the notion of 和平发展 [peaceful development] foreign policy. Such a strategy would oblige Beijing to accept the unipolar structure of the international system with the US maintaining its hegemonic power.⁴²

As pointed out by Ikenberry, it is not in China's interests to challenge the existing international order and push for fundamentally different rules and institutions due to the enormous constraints and obstacles that would precipitate such a move.⁴³ Of late, however, Chinese political elites have spoken of a Chinese model, or Beijing Consensus which lies in sharp contrast with the patterns of political governance seen in the West.⁴⁴ Whether this can be achieved is open to question; however what is clear is that as China rises, it would necessarily wish to assert its influence over global affairs, in particular, matters concerning its regional interests.

While such assertions are not unique in the history of international politics, what makes Beijing's claims potentially worrisome – as evinced by its territorial claims over the South China Sea, Senkaku/Diaoyu islands etc. – are the claims made on the basis of its historical rights, which as one scholar puts it (within the context of China's maritime claims), “opens the door for China to use force in the South China Sea.”⁴⁵ Further, it is also observed that

⁴² Sujian Guo and Shiping Hua eds., *New Dimensions of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 1-7.

⁴³ G. John Ikenberry, “Rise of China, United States, and Future of the Liberal International Order,” in David Shambaugh ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), pp. 53-75.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Bruce A. Elleman, “Maritime territorial disputes and their impact on maritime strategy: A historical perspective,” in Sam Bateman and Ralf Emmers, eds., *Security and International Politics in the South China Sea: Towards a cooperative management regime* (London: Routledge, 2009) pp. 42-59.

Chinese historic memory of its “century of humiliation” by other maritime powers have created the emphasis on China’s maritime frontier “a strategic necessity.”⁴⁶

This is problematic for it leaves the issue concerning Beijing’s endgame open to question. According to one Chinese scholar, “power and prosperity” is the ultimate goal of state construction in China and that the efforts made by Chinese leadership have been aimed at building a strong and wealthy country, a country that is not taken advantage of by any other powers, a country that is respectable and independent in the international politics (and) a country that maintains justice and peace in the world.⁴⁷

Such grandiose proclamations of Beijing’s end goal however do not provide clues as to how China intends to achieve its objectives. Indeed Chinese opacity in their foreign policy objectives have led to criticisms that Beijing would ultimately resort to force to protect its interests if they are being threatened, thus negating its claims concerning its peaceful rise.

In this respect, my contention is that Beijing’s increasing assertive behavior can be best explained by two reasons: one, for pragmatic purposes; and two, to prevent external (read: Western) influence and control over the future of the country. In the case of the former, it is best epitomised by Deng Xiaoping’s famous saying “It doesn’t matter whether it is a white cat or black cat, a cat that catches mice is a good cat.” Indeed this emphasis on pragmatism – as a core value of Chinese foreign policy have allowed Chinese leaders considerable leeway in their policy making decisions. As Henry Kissinger noted, it was Deng’s pragmatic stance that established non-intervention in domestic affairs into a general principle of foreign policy.⁴⁸ Since then, China has maintained a strong pragmatic streak in her relations with the rest of the world as its fortunes become increasingly intertwined with other nations.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Michael McDevitt, *The PLA Navy: Past, Present and Future Prospects* (Alexandria, VA: The CAN Corporation, May 2000), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁷ Jing Men, “Changing Ideology in China and Its Impact on Chinese Foreign Policy,” in Sujian Guo and Shiping Hua eds., *New Dimensions of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 7-41.

⁴⁸ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), pp. 427.

⁴⁹ Chenghong Li, “Increasing Interdependence between China and the U.S. and its Implications for Chinese Foreign Policy,” in Sujian Guo and Shiping Hua eds., *New Dimensions of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 203-233.

Beijing's insistence that it would not be subjected to Western influence is a second factor behind its assertive behavior. Since 1949 when Chairman Mao announced that the "Chinese people have stood up," much of China's external behaviour has been conditioned to demonstrate that it has come of age and that its destiny would be decided by the Chinese themselves. While such a revolutionary stance led China to meet with international resistance during the 60's, it also resulted in China having a positive image (especially among the Afro-Asian world) as it converged with these countries' own nationalistic desires to overthrow the shackles of Western imperialism.⁵⁰ As Jonathan Spence writes, "The Chinese, in their turn, seem strong enough now to ensure that if the Westerners come to China (as advisers), they will do so on strictly Chinese terms and will not insinuate unwanted values in the pursuit of extrinsic goals."⁵¹

As such, I argue that the historical argument concerning Chinese rights masks a larger issue at stake, which is, the sense of entitlement that China ought to receive from the rest of the world if it had not been subjected to Western intrusion for the most part of the past two hundred years. As such, Chinese leaders view the country's rise as providing an opportunity to claim an existential right to react against a Western-dominated international order which have in the past resulted in Chinese misfortunes. Such a reading, rightly or wrongly, demonstrates the deep-seated ambivalence the Chinese have towards Western presence in the Asia Pacific region.

2) Consolidate and preserve its growing international interests

As Beijing's influence in international affairs increase, so would naturally its interest. One now finds Chinese footprints in almost every conceivable area of global affairs that are of significance. In a speech made at the Central Party School in Beijing in September 2012, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong commented that China has now become a "major player in the global system, highly interdependent with the rest of the world...(and that) no global issue can be resolved without China's participation, be it climate change, the Doha Round or nuclear non-proliferation."⁵²

⁵⁰ Jing Men, "Changing Ideology in China and Its Impact on Chinese Foreign Policy," in Sujian Guo and Shiping Hua eds., *New Dimensions of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 12.

⁵¹ Jonathan Spence, *To Change China: Western Advisers in China* (NY: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 293.

⁵² Lee Hsien Loong, China and the World: Prospering and progressing together, *Speech at the Central Party School in Beijing, China* on 6 September 6 2012.

A less sanguine view towards China's global influence is to view China's growing presence as a threat to international peace, especially if China attempts to swing the global balance of power in its favour. As John Mearshimer points out, in an anarchic world marked by uncertainty and fear, "states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their (ongoing) survival is to be the most powerful state in the system."⁵³ In this respect, one sees China's rapid military modernisation as a cause for concern. While attending the 2005 Shangri-La dialogue, U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld famously asked of China's military expenditure: "Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder why this growing investment, why these continuing large and expensive arms purchases, why this continuing robust deployment?"⁵⁴ Between 2000 and 2011, China's defence expenditure increased a stunning 13.4 per cent, making it the biggest spender on defense in Asia.⁵⁵ This fuels further speculation – and suspicion – that China is out to achieve regional hegemony. But as Robert Jervis observes, one needs to also differentiate between "defensive weapons and policies from offensive ones, and whether the defence or the offence has the advantage."⁵⁶ Understood in the broader context of the East Asian security architecture, one can argue that Chinese military modernisation is done with the purpose of *hampering U.S. interference in East Asia*⁵⁷ while simultaneously legitimising Chinese interests in the region.

This is most vividly seen in Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea which have caused increasing tensions over the past year between China and several of its Southeast Asian neighbours. In November 2012, both Vietnam and the Philippines criticised China's decision to include disputed South China Sea islands on maps printed inside new Chinese passports. Similarly, China's relations with the ASEAN community, which it historically has good relations with, have also come under increased stress of late. Earlier in July 2012 during an ASEAN meeting in Phnom Penh, foreign ministers of the ten-country bloc were unable to issue a joint communiqué following heated political wrangling between the incumbent Cambodian chair and other member states over the South China Sea issue. Evidently, Beijing

⁵³ John Mearshimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (NY: Norton, 2001), pp. 31.

⁵⁴ Donald Rumsfeld quoted in Scott Bobb, "Rumsfeld Questions China's Military Buildup," *Voice of America*, 4 June 2005.

⁵⁵ David Isenberg, "Shifting Defense Expenditure in East Asia," *Time Magazine*, 26 October 2012.

⁵⁶ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Umbrella," in Michael E. Brown, Owen Cote, Sean M.Lynn-Jones and Steven Miller eds., *Offence, Defence and War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 22

⁵⁷ Richard Fisher, *China's Military Modernization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

had been intimately involved in influencing the Cambodian decision, resulting in an outcome that some scholars term as China having “picked ASEAN apart.”⁵⁸ Notwithstanding Chinese territorial claims, other issues that have generated concerns among its Southeast Asian neighbours also include fears in Indonesia regarding the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, Mekong River issues, tensions on the China-Myanmar border and the political crisis in Thailand which has weakened Sino-Thai relations.⁵⁹

All these have raised the further question on Beijing’s definition of what it considers its national interests. While it is hardly unnatural for a rising power to have armed forces that reflect its growing economic clout, the fact that China chooses to engage with the rest of the world on its own terms, and is generally suspicious of institutions it believes are run to serve Western interests, makes it difficult for others to trust that its military rise poses no danger to its neighbours.⁶⁰ According to a RAND report, China is well on its way to having the means, by 2020, to deter American aircraft-carriers and aircraft from operating within what is known as the “first island chain” – a perimeter running from the Aleutians in the north to Taiwan, the Philippines and Brunei, states which have all traditionally relied on American military assistance.⁶¹ The limited transparency in China’s military and security affairs further heightens uncertainty and increases the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculations.⁶² While Beijing’s military capabilities still lag far behind those of the U.S., thus mitigating the extent to which it would contest American military presence in the Asia Pacific, nonetheless on present evidence, it would seem that China, at a minimum, wants to make clear that it is a major power in Asia.⁶³

⁵⁸ Benjamin Ho & Ristian Supriyanto, “ASEAN buffeted by choppy China waters,” *The Global Times*, 3 August 2012.

⁵⁹ Ian Storey, “China’s Charm Offensive Loses Momentum in Southeast Asia,” *China Brief* 10, no. 9 (29 April 2010)

⁶⁰ China’s military rise, *The Economist*, 7 April 2012.

⁶¹ Roger Cliff, John Fei, Jeff Hagen, Elizabeth Hague, Eric Heginbotham & John Stillion, *Shaking the Heavens and Splitting the Earth: Chinese Air Force Employment Concepts in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).

⁶² Ryan Clark, “America Looks to China: Defence and Strategic Issues,” *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 3 No. 3 Jul/Sep (2011): pp. 5-17.

⁶³ Joseph Grieco, “China and America in the New World Polity,” in Carolyn W. Pumphrey ed., *The Rise of China in Asia: Security Implications* (North Carolina: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), pp. 21-49.

3) To present itself as a moral (credible) stakeholder of the global community

Over the years, Chinese policy makers have also made mention of Beijing's need to be responsible stakeholders of the global community. In an address made at Harvard University in 2003, Premier Wen Jiabao alluded to the history of the Chinese people who had contributed to the vitality of the global community:

*To ordain conscience for Heaven and Earth, to secure life and fortune for the people, to continue lost teachings for past sages (and) to establish peace for all future generations.*⁶⁴

Similarly outgoing President Hu Jintao in his speech at the 18th Communist Party Congress also signaled Beijing's intention to play a more active role in global affairs:

*The Chinese people love peace and yearn for development. We are ready to work with the people of other countries to unremittingly promote the noble cause of peace and development for mankind.*⁶⁵

These ideals, as Callahan explains, are premised upon “an idealised version of China’s imperial past” which has in turn inspired Chinese scholars’ and policymakers’ plans for China’s future – and the world’s future.⁶⁶ In his discussion of a Chinese model of world order, Zhao Tingyang argues that the present Westphalian world order had resulted in conflict as it was based on competing national interests; what was needed instead was a truly global perspective which viewed the world in an “all-inclusive” way, as compared to a national or localised perspective.⁶⁷ This is being captured in the idea of 天下 [All under heaven], which as Wang Gungwu explains “embodied the idea of universalism and a

⁶⁴ Turning Your Eyes to China, *Speech made by Wen Jiabao at Harvard University*, 10 December 2003, accessed on 18 December 2012 at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/wenvisituscaeth/t56076.htm>.

⁶⁵ Hu Jintao, *Keynote Speech at the 18th CPC National Congress*, 17 November 2012 accessed on 18 December 2012 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm.

⁶⁶ William A. Callahan, “Tianxia, Empire, and the World: Chinese Visions of World Order for the Twenty-First Century,” in William A. Callahan & Elena Barabantseva, eds., *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), pp. 91-118.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Callahan, pp. 95.

superior moral authority that guided behavior in a civilised world.”⁶⁸ Such a notion also provided the Chinese people, through centuries of division and subjugation, with the goal of “ultimate oneness that remains an ideal till this day.”⁶⁹

Likewise Yan Xuetong also argues on the need for morally informed political leadership which would bring blessings to other countries instead of a narrow pursuit of economic interests.⁷⁰ Writing on China’s rise, Yan observed that Chinese leaders were beginning to realise that “political influence and moral impact are of great significance in attaining world leadership.”⁷¹ Yan also highlights three areas in which Beijing should seek to position itself differently from what Washington has done: (i) China should promote an international order that takes as its principle a balance between responsibilities and rights; (ii) China should reflect on the principle of reversed double standards, namely, that more developed countries should observe international norms more strictly than less developed one; and (iii) China should promote the open principle of the traditional idea of all under heaven as one, that is, China should be open to the whole world and all the countries in the world should be open to China. As Yan observes, the U.S. has been found wanting in all three areas and that China should not follow suit but instead chart its own path using the repository of ideas gleaned from its own civilisational history (particularly pre-Qin).⁷²

Following the death of Chairman Mao Tse-tung in 1976, the clarion call for reform has been constantly sounded by subsequent generations of top Chinese leaders. Deng Xiaoping, who was instrumental in opening up China to the world, exhorted the Chinese people on the need to “seek truth from facts” and to abide by “practice” – not idealised theory – as the final arbitrator of what is true.⁷³ According to Xing Bensi, former vice president of the Central Party School, this emphasis on practice – and practical results – have had the effect of

⁶⁸ Wang Gungwu, “Tianxia and Empire: External Chinese Perspectives,” *Inaugural Tsai Lecture, Harvard University*, 4 May 2006.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, translated by Edmund Ryden (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 216

⁷² Yan, pp. 219-221.

⁷³ Deng Xiaoping, *Speech at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee*, 18 December 1978, accessed on 24 December 2012 at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64563/65371/4441902.html>.

shifting the Party's work from class struggle to economic development, thus lending voice to a Chinese worldview that is considerably more politically pliable and philosophically less dogmatic.⁷⁴ Indeed this somewhat ambivalent stance has also led to a Chinese developmental process characterised by “flexibility politics and informal practices.”⁷⁵

According to Peter Katzenstein, the political developments attending China's rise can be best described as a “recombination” of past and present elements. The concept of Sinicisation, which shapes the way China thinks and engages with the world, is constituted by “historical and spontaneous interactions of individuals, societies, and states, with each intentionally and unintentionally affecting the other.”⁷⁶ The idea then, that both China and the global community are mutually accountable to each other was emphasised in Xi Jinping's speech at the 18th party congress when Xi made mention of the need for “China to learn more about the world just as the world needs to learn more about China.”⁷⁷

Implicit then in Chinese calls for reform is the belief that China, in order to further its economic and social growth, would have to adjust and align its interests to that of the international order which it finds itself benefiting from, and which it has no intention of reforming entirely. However as the West flounders from its economic struggles, it behooves China to chart her own path towards its own destiny, one that is not overly reliant on Western thought forms or processes. Whether this can be achieved is still open to question; what is certain is that as China continues its rise, it would demand a greater say at the global bargaining table, and it would pursue outcomes that may not be congruous with what the West often terms as “universal values”, which Beijing sees as narrowly particularistic, or Western-centric.

⁷⁴ Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *How China's Leaders Think, revised edition* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), pp. 52.

⁷⁵ Tianbiao Zhu, “Compressed development, flexible practices, and multiple traditions in China's rise” in Peter Katzenstein ed., *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational processes beyond East and West* (NY: Routledge, 2012), pp. 99-120.

⁷⁶ Peter Katzenstein ed., *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational processes beyond East and West* (NY: Routledge, 2012), pp. 27.

⁷⁷ Xi Jinping, Speech at the unveiling of new Chinese leadership, accessed on 26 December 2012 at <http://www.scmp.com/news/18th-party-congress/article/1083153/transcript-xi-jinpings-speech-unveiling-new-chinese>.

Conclusion

Whither Chinese Exceptionalism?

In a series of wide-ranging interviews with top Chinese leaders, Robert Lawrence Kuhn highlights four key guiding principles that have informed the substance of Chinese political thought: (i) a sense of pride in Chinese ancient civilisation; (ii) the need for social stability; (iii) a sense of responsibility to the Chinese people and; (iv) a vision of a peaceful development and harmonious world.⁷⁸ Taken together, these principles evince a spirit of Chinese exceptionalism that seeks to achieve the objective of being respected as a great civilisation whose time on the global stage has arrived. This does not necessarily mean that China would use force to accomplish its objectives, though it is not beyond the political will and military capability of Beijing's policy makers to do so if it perceives that its interests are being threatened. As Robert Kaplan observes, "China does not take a missionary approach to world affairs, seeking to spread an ideology or a system of government... (it's) actions abroad are propelled by its need to secure energy, metals, and strategic minerals in order to support the rising living standards of its immense population."⁷⁹ Notwithstanding Beijing's strategic distrust of Washington's intentions to contain it, there is also a desire, I argue, for China to defend its interests on its own terms without being overly restricted by the international system which is perceived to be Western-biased. Indeed China's nascent leadership team would have its hands full in focusing on power consolidation and domestic issues. On the external front, Beijing's desire not to be seen as weak especially on issues concerning its national interests will compel its new leaders to take proactive steps in its international engagements. Chinese exceptionalism then, as one scholar puts it, is a "creation of the complex interplay between contemporary political needs (both domestic and foreign), international structural constraints, and the exploitability of China's vast historical and cultural resources."⁸⁰ The challenge for Beijing however, is to ensure that its suspicion of the international community does not become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which a paranoid China adopts an increasingly confrontational regional posture. Growing economic

⁷⁸ Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *How China's Leaders Think, revised edition* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

⁷⁹ Robert D. Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power: How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?" in *Foreign Affairs* May/June (2010): pp. 22-42.

⁸⁰ Feng Zhang, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* (2011), pp. 19.

interdependence between China and the world is a good thing, provided it is being reciprocated favourably by the relevant parties and does not result in a tit-for-tat, competitive exchange of political low blows. If Chinese exceptionalism is to become a force for greater global goodwill, then China has still some way to go in building trust and favourable relations with its neighbours.

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