

Chapter 12

UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL BEHAVIOR*

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Analytical Framework

China has sometimes been regarded as an enigma especially when it emerged as a superpower. However, its actions are not necessarily inscrutable or shrouded in secrecy. Actually, its international behavior is predictable. We simply have to understand how the Chinese worldview has evolved.

We begin by reviewing the central geographical location of China, surrounded by Russia and Mongolia from the north, as well as adjacent neighbors in West, South, Southeast and Northeast Asia. Its geography has been largely responsible for the experiences of China and has shaped its worldview, strategic culture, and international behavior in different periods of its history.

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Origins of the Middle Kingdom Status and Tributary System

Since the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1000 BC), China's self-image has been that of being the Middle Kingdom (*zhong guo*). It literally means middle or central country, kingdom, or region and was based on the original notion that China is the center of the civilized world surrounded by "barbarians" (*yeman ren*).

Its Middle Kingdom status was institutionalized by its tributary relations with close neighbors, which had dated back to the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD). Chinese rulers received foreign envoys bearing tributes that symbolized their acquiescence to the Chinese world order. In return, tributary countries secured guarantees of peace and trading opportunities (Fairbank, *et al.* 1989).

The littoral zone of East Asia had served as a transmission belt for Chinese culture and prestige, as well as for Chinese commerce. From the Tang Dynasty (618-907) to the end of dynastic rule in China in 1912, the peoples of this sea-bound region often found ways to defer to China, acknowledging its centrality and loosely following its lead (French 2017).

Chinese Identity

The Han has been the majority ethnic group in China since Qin Shi Huang became the first Emperor of a unified China and founded the Qin Dynasty. He belonged to the Hua Xia, a major tribe of Han ethnicity. He ruled from 246 to 210 BC and was

famous for his magnificent construction projects, including the Great Wall of China.

However, the Hans were repeatedly invaded by other ethnic groups. The Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan conducted small-scale raids into Western Xia in 1205 and 1207. In 1279, his grandson Kublai Khan established the Yuan Dynasty in China.

The second time that China was not ruled by the Han people was when the Manchus conquered China. They established the Qing Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty of China (1644-1912).

Century of Humiliation

It was during the last years of the rule of the Manchus that the Chinese people suffered what they called the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949). This period marked the darkest age for the Chinese people. Major foreign powers cut up China for themselves and imposed unequal treaties and extraterritorial rights (Kaufman 2010).

The Century of Humiliation can be traced back to the First Opium War, initiated by the United Kingdom from 1839 to 1842 and the Second Opium War, waged by the United Kingdom and France from 1856 to 1860. The Chinese were defeated in almost all of the wars they fought. Other conflicts faced by China included the Sino-French War (1884-1885), the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Japanese Invasion of Manchuria (1931-1932), and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) (Kaufman 2010).

Liberation from feudal and colonial rule was attained under the leadership of Mao Zedong. In his opening address at the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference 70 years ago, he declared: "Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation!" His words resonate to

this day and have driven his country to aspire for a superpower status.

Foreign Relations During and After the Maoist Era

In 1949, China believed that international law and international organizations like the United Nations are but creations of the former colonial powers of the West. China resents the Western premise that the “general principles of law subscribed to by civilized nations” reflect only the Western countries’ interpretation of the rules, principles, and practice of international law. After all, China is the oldest surviving civilization which has existed for 5,000 years.

Under Deng Xiaoping, China’s foreign strategy was based on the maxim: “*Taoguang yanghu*,” or “Keep a low profile and bide your time” (Daekwon 2017). When Deng assumed office as vice premier of the State Council in 1978, talks began for the exchange of diplomatic relations with the United States. The joint communiqué of China and the United States concerning establishment of their diplomatic relations was issued on December 16, 1978, declaring that “Starting from January 1, 1979, the Chinese and American sides will acknowledge each other and establish diplomatic relations.” They signed a scientific and technological cooperation agreement, a cultural agreement and an agreement on establishing consular relations and opening consulate generals in each other country. Each side also agreed to sign air and shipping agreements and send students and resident journalists to the other country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China 2014).

Improved relations with the US was an impetus for transformative economic reforms, which facilitated the Chinese

embrace of globalization. Deng Xiaoping was the architect of the concept of the socialist market economy and the movement for reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang*).

However, after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, China launched “a nationalist education drive ... with the aim of centering history education on the so-called Century of Humiliation” (French 2017).

In December 2001, China became the 143rd member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). China experienced tremendous trade growth brought about by tariff reductions. China’s trade in goods leaped from USD 516.4 billion in 2001 to USD 4.1 trillion in 2017. Advanced economies in the WTO have complained against China’s self-designation as a developing country. China coalesced with India and seven other developing members to garner support for allowing members to self-designate their status (China Power Team, 2020).

President Xi Jinping, who assumed his position in March 2013, believes that it is time for China to assume a high profile in international relations. During the 2017 Party Congress, he stated that an amicable external environment has been shaped during the last five years, and that China will take an active role as “constructor of global peace, a contributor to development of global governance, and a protector of international order” (Daekwon, 2017).

Responses to the Arbitral Ruling

China refused to participate in the deliberations of The Hague arbitral tribunal and did not accept its ruling in 2016. China’s contention was that it has historic rights over the South China Sea – a position that the arbitral tribunal did not recognize (Fu Ying 2016).

Madame Fu Ying, chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China's National People's Congress and former Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines, explains China's official view:

...Beijing's position is clear: no acceptance, no participation, no recognition, and no implementation. There is solid international legal basis for China to oppose this case. And by doing so, China is not only safeguarding its national interests, but also protecting the integrity and legitimacy of the international maritime order... Why does China refuse to accept and participate in the proceedings of this tribunal, being heard at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague? Because China, as a sovereign state, is entitled to choose its preferred means of dispute resolution — a legitimate right under international law (2016).

Traditional Foundations of Chinese Worldview and Strategic Culture

For a deeper understanding of China's approach to foreign relations, it is essential to be familiar with the teachings of Sun Tzu (545-470 BC), the oldest guru on military and diplomatic strategy. Their application were incorporated in Marxist-Mao Zedong Thought.

Sun Tzu's prescriptions in his book, *The Art of War* (Sun Tzu *bing fa*), were heavily influenced by the yin-yang concept of harmony and complementariness of opposites. The yin-yang archetype, which was also included in the teachings of Lao Tzu in *Tao Te Ching*, is inextricably embedded in the consciousness and algorithm of the Chinese as a framework for problem-solving and analysis. It is applied in business, martial arts, traditional medicine, divination, courtship, *feng shui*, and board games (*xiangqi*).

Among Lao Tzu's famous quotes are:

- “Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak.”
- “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

- “Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.”
- “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.”
- “Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”
- “Engage people with what they expect; it is what they are able to discern and confirms their projections. It settles them into predictable patterns of response, occupying their minds while you wait for the extraordinary moment – that which they cannot anticipate.”

China’s Territorial Disputes

China has long been involved in various territorial disputes not only with the states with which they share borders but also with other countries that have overlapping island and maritime claims on the South China Sea. Some of these disputed territories include Senkaku Islands, which are also being claimed by Japan and Taiwan, as well as areas along its border with India, Nepal, and Bhutan. China, as delineated by their “nine-dash line,” is also claiming almost the entirety of South China Sea. Their claims in the region overlap with the exclusive economic zones of and areas disputed by other sovereign states, which include Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

According to Prof. M. T. Fravel (2005), regime insecurity explains why in the past, China became open to compromises when negotiating some territorial disputes:

Most of China’s disputes are located on its long land border adjacent to frontier regions where the authority of the regime has been weak... China’s leaders have been much more willing to offer concessions in exchange for cooperation that strengthens their control of these areas, such as denying external support to separatists or affirming recognition of Chinese sovereignty over these regions.

Nie Hongyi (2009) observes that while China has resolved border disputes with 12 neighboring countries, “sovereignty disputes over more than 22,000 kilometers of territory along China’s borders have yet to be settled.” But since the establishment of the People’s Republic, “China has successfully resolved territorial and border disputes with many neighbour states through a peaceful and concessionary diplomatic approach based on mutual understanding. But border issues involving India, the USSR, and Vietnam have exploded into armed conflict.”

China’s Vision of a New World Order

The power that China wields as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the vast influence it has on the members of the UN General Assembly, which are composed mostly of developing countries, shape in large measure that country’s long-term vision.

In addition, the major factors that contribute to China’s evolving view of the world and its role in global development are:

1. China’s leadership experience in the Third-World Movement and in the Bandung Conference of 1955. Premium given to peaceful coexistence, nationalism, historical sovereignty and resistance to foreign interference in domestic affairs.
2. The Belt and Road Initiative, which is reminiscent on the Zhou Dynasty mythology of Tianxia, All Under Heaven (Zhou Dynasty). Serves as a further motivation for China to enhancing its soft power and to being more open to other cultures and values as well as compromises in diplomatic and commercial negotiations.
3. Perceived weaknesses of the Capitalist World and the former Icons of Liberal Democracy (US, UK, France). Exemplified

by the US abdication of world leadership and international obligations, e.g., its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

4. Complementarities with ASEAN countries. Common experience as former colonies; geographical proximity and long historical relations antedating the colonial period; shared values influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, animistic heritage, e.g. respect for authority and gratitude and care for the elderly, social harmony and smooth interpersonal relationship; collective good over individualism, importance of face-saving and family honor; high priority for education and discipline; intergenerational perspective.
5. ASEAN-China official economic and political relations – one of the leading dialogue partners in investment, trade and tourism; Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC); and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The thoughts articulated by President Xi Jinping at the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) Congress (2017) provide us with clues on China's vision of the future world order:

1. China as an example of modernization for developing countries: "...the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving problems facing mankind" (Xi Jinping 2017b).

2. Goal for China's military modernization: "We will make it our mission to see that by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is basically completed; and that by the mid-21st century our people's armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces" ("Profile: Xi Jinping" 2017).
3. Lagging behind on the military front is lethal to national security: "I have read a lot on China's modern history, and it gives me great pain whenever I come across a time when we dropped back (in military building) and fell victim to invasions" ("Profile: Xi Jinping" 2017).

Scenarios

What are possible outcomes in the mutual containment between China and the US? The Cold-War analogy in the rivalry of the two superpowers no longer applies. There is validity in the analysis of former US State Department Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Senior Fellow Jake Sullivan (2019) that, "China today is a peer competitor that is more formidable economically, more sophisticated diplomatically, and more flexible ideologically than the former Soviet Union ever was. And unlike the Soviet Union, China is deeply integrated into the world and intertwined with the US economy."

1. **Worst-case scenario (Non-accommodation – win-lose, if not lose-lose).** Fierce competition between the two world superpowers, mustering all their capabilities in technology and political-economic-military power. Consequences: endless brinkmanship diplomacy, global recession, risk of nuclear accidents, and worsening climate crisis. Intensified polarization among the powers will further aggravate international terrorism and ignite popular uprisings.

2. Best-case scenario (Win-win accommodation). China, the US, and their allies will arrive at a *modus vivendi* in which the two world superpowers will not give priority to containing each other but will choose instead to cooperate with each other, for the benefit of mutual interests, global wellbeing and survival of mankind. Middle powers will actively contribute to the further enhancement of peace and economic growth.

It is hoped that our examination of China's image of itself and of the world has given us a better perspective of how its enhanced power status will weigh in on the "new normal" relationships among nations.

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