

HEINONLINE

Citation: 90 Foreign Aff. 68 2011



Content downloaded/printed from
HeinOnline (<http://heinonline.org>)
Wed Apr 13 07:04:30 2016

- Your use of this HeinOnline PDF indicates your acceptance of HeinOnline's Terms and Conditions of the license agreement available at <http://heinonline.org/HOL/License>
- The search text of this PDF is generated from uncorrected OCR text.
- To obtain permission to use this article beyond the scope of your HeinOnline license, please use:

[https://www.copyright.com/ccc/basicSearch.do?
&operation=go&searchType=0
&lastSearch=simple&all=on&titleOrStdNo=0015-7120](https://www.copyright.com/ccc/basicSearch.do?&operation=go&searchType=0&lastSearch=simple&all=on&titleOrStdNo=0015-7120)

China's Search for a Grand Strategy

A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way

Wang Jisi

ANY COUNTRY'S grand strategy must answer at least three questions: What are the nation's core interests? What external forces threaten them? And what can the national leadership do to safeguard them? Whether China has any such strategy today is open to debate. On the one hand, over the last three decades or so, its foreign and defense policies have been remarkably consistent and reasonably well coordinated with the country's domestic priorities. On the other hand, the Chinese government has yet to disclose any document that comprehensively expounds the country's strategic goals and the ways to achieve them. For both policy analysts in China and China watchers abroad, China's grand strategy is a field still to be plowed.

In recent years, China's power and influence relative to those of other great states have outgrown the expectations of even its own leaders. Based on the country's enhanced position, China's international behavior has become increasingly assertive, as was shown by its strong reactions to a chain of events in 2010: for example, Washington's decision to sell arms to Taiwan, U.S.–South Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea, and Japan's detention of a Chinese sailor found in disputed waters. It has become imperative for the international community to understand China's strategic thinking and

WANG JISI is Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, in Beijing.

try to forecast how it might evolve according to China's interests and its leaders' vision.

THE ENEMY WITHIN AND WITHOUT

A UNIQUE FEATURE of Chinese leaders' understanding of their country's history is their persistent sensitivity to domestic disorder caused by foreign threats. From ancient times, the ruling regime of the day has often been brought down by a combination of internal uprising and external invasion. The Ming dynasty collapsed in 1644 after rebelling peasants took the capital city of Beijing and the Manchu, with the collusion of Ming generals, invaded from the north. Some three centuries later, the Manchu's own Qing dynasty collapsed after a series of internal revolts coincided with invasions by Western and Japanese forces. The end of the Kuomintang's rule and the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 was caused by an indigenous revolution inspired and then bolstered by the Soviet Union and the international communist movement.

Since then, apprehensions about internal turbulences have lingered. Under Mao Zedong's leadership, from 1949 to 1976, the Chinese government never formally applied the concept of "national interest" to delineate its strategic aims, but its international strategies were clearly dominated by political and military security interests—themselves often framed by ideological principles such as "proletarian internationalism." Strategic thinking at the time followed the Leninist tradition of dividing the world into political camps: archenemies, secondary enemies, potential allies, revolutionary forces. Mao's "three worlds theory" pointed to the Soviet Union and the United States as China's main external threats, with corresponding internal threats coming from pro-Soviet "revisionists" and pro-American "class enemies." China's political life in those years was characterized by recurrent struggles against international and domestic schemes to topple the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership or change its political coloring. Still, since Mao's foreign policy supposedly represented the interests of the "international proletariat" rather than China's own, and since China was economically and socially isolated from much of the world, Beijing had no comprehensive grand strategy to speak of.

Then came the 1980s and Deng Xiaoping. As China embarked on reform and opened up, the CCP made economic development its top priority. Deng's foreign policy thinking departed appreciably from that of Mao. A major war with either the Soviet Union or the United States was no longer deemed inevitable. China made great efforts to develop friendly and cooperative relations with countries all over the world, regardless of their political or ideological orientation; it reasoned that a nonconfrontational posture would attract foreign investment to China and boost trade. A peaceful international environment, an enhanced position for China in the global arena, and China's steady integration into the existing economic order would also help consolidate the CCP's power at home.

But even as economic interests became a major driver of China's behavior on the international scene, traditional security concerns and the need to guard against Western political interference remained important. Most saliently, the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 and, in its wake, the West's sanctions against Beijing served as an alarming reminder to China's leaders that internal and external troubles could easily intertwine. Over the next decade, Beijing responded to Western censure by contending that the state's sovereign rights trumped human rights. It resolutely refused to consider adopting Western-type democratic institutions. And it insisted that it would never give up the option of using force if Taiwan tried to secede.

Despite those concerns, however, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, China's strategic thinkers were depicting a generally favorable international situation. In his 2002 report to the CCP National Congress, General Secretary Jiang Zemin foresaw a "20 years' period of strategic opportunity," during which China could continue to concentrate on domestic tasks. Unrest has erupted at times—such as the violent riots in Tibet in March 2008 and in Xinjiang in July 2009, which the central government blamed on "foreign hostile forces" and responded to with harsh reprisals. And Beijing claims that the awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, a political activist it deems to be a "criminal trying to sabotage the socialist system," has proved once again Westerners' "ill intentions." Still, the Chinese government has been perturbed by such episodes only occasionally, which has allowed it to focus on redressing domestic imbalances and the unsustainability of its development.

China's Search for a Grand Strategy

Under President Hu Jintao, Beijing has in recent years formulated a new development and social policy geared toward continuing to promote fast economic growth while emphasizing good governance, improving the social safety net, protecting the environment, encouraging independent innovation, lessening social tensions, perfecting the financial system, and stimulating domestic consumption. As Chinese exports have suffered from the global economic crisis since 2008, the need for such economic and social transformations has become more urgent.

With that in mind, the Chinese leadership has redefined the purpose of China's foreign policy. As Hu announced in July 2009, China's diplomacy must "safeguard the interests of sovereignty, security, and development." Dai Bingguo, the state councilor for external relations, further defined those core interests in an article last December: first, China's political stability, namely, the stability of the CCP leadership and of the socialist system; second, sovereign security, territorial integrity, and national unification; and third, China's sustainable economic and social development.

Apart from the issue of Taiwan, which Beijing considers to be an integral part of China's territory, the Chinese government has never officially identified any single foreign policy issue as one of the country's core interests. Last year, some Chinese commentators reportedly referred to the South China Sea and North Korea as such, but these reckless statements, made with no official authorization, created a great deal of confusion. In fact, for the central government, sovereignty, security, and development all continue to be China's main goals. As long as no grave danger—for example, Taiwan's formal secession—threatens the CCP leadership or China's unity, Beijing will remain preoccupied with the country's economic and social development, including in its foreign policy.

THE PRINCIPLE'S PRINCIPLE

THE NEED to identify an organizing principle to guide Chinese foreign policy is widely recognized today in China's policy circles and scholarly community, as well as among international analysts. However, defining China's core interests according to the three prongs of sovereignty, security, and development, which sometimes are in tension, means that it is almost impossible to devise a straightforward organizing principle. And

the variety of views among Chinese political elites complicates efforts to devise any such grand strategy based on political consensus.

One popular proposal has been to focus on the United States as a major threat to China. Proponents of this view cite the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, who said, "A state without an enemy or external peril is absolutely doomed." Or they reverse the political scientist Samuel Huntington's argument that "the ideal enemy for America would be ideologically hostile, racially and culturally different, and militarily strong enough to pose a credible threat to American security" and cast the United States as an ideal enemy for China. This notion is based on the long-held conviction that the United States, along with other Western powers and Japan, is hostile to China's political values and wants to contain its rise by supporting Taiwan's separation from the mainland. Its proponents also point to U.S. politicians' sympathy for the Dalai Lama and Uighur separatists, continued U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, U.S. military alliances and arrangements supposedly designed to encircle the Chinese mainland, the currency and trade wars waged by U.S. businesses and the U.S. Congress, and the West's argument that China should slow down its economic growth in order to help stem climate change.

This view is reflected in many newspapers and on many Web sites in China (particularly those about military affairs and political security). Its proponents argue that China's current approach to foreign relations is far too soft; Mao's tit-for-tat manner is touted as a better model. As a corollary, it is said that China should try to find strategic allies among countries that seem defiant toward the West, such as Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Some also recommend that Beijing use its holdings of U.S. Treasury bonds as a policy instrument, standing ready to sell them if U.S. government actions undermine China's interests.

This proposal is essentially misguided, for even though the United States does pose some strategic and security challenges to China, it would be impractical and risky to construct a grand strategy based on the view that the United States is China's main adversary. Few countries, if any, would want to join China in an anti-U.S. alliance. And it would seriously hold back China's economic development to antagonize the country's largest trading partner and the world's strongest economic and military power. Fortunately, the Chinese leadership is not about to carry out such a strategy. Premier Wen Jiabao was not just

being diplomatic last year when he said of China and the United States that “our common interests far outweigh our differences.”

Well aware of this, an alternative school of thought favors Deng's teaching of *tao guang yang hui*, or keeping a low profile in international affairs. Members of this group, including prominent political figures, such as Tang Jiaxuan, former foreign minister, and General Xiong Guangkai, former deputy chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army, argue that since China remains a developing country, it should concentrate on economic development. Without necessarily rebuffing the notion that the West, particularly the United States, is a long-term threat to China, they contend that China is not capable of challenging Western primacy for the time being—and some even caution against hastily concluding that the West is in decline. Meanwhile, they argue, keeping a low profile in the coming decades will allow China to concentrate on domestic priorities.

Although this view appears to be better received internationally than the other, it, too, elicits some concerns. Its adherents have had to take great pains to explain that *tao guang yang hui*, which is sometimes mistranslated as “hiding one's capabilities and biding one's time,” is not a calculated call for temporary moderation until China has enough material power and confidence to promote its hidden agenda. Domestically, the low-profile approach is vulnerable to the charge that it is too soft, especially when security issues become acute. As nationalist feelings surge in China, some Chinese are pressing for a more can-do foreign policy. Opponents also contend that this notion, which Deng put forward more than 20 years ago, may no longer be appropriate now that China is far more powerful.

Some thoughtful strategists appreciate that even if keeping a low profile could serve China's political and security relations with the United States well, it might not apply to China's relations with many other countries or to economic issues and those nontraditional security issues that have become essential in recent years, such as climate change, public health, and energy security. (Beijing can hardly keep a low profile when it actively participates in mechanisms such as BRIC, the informal group formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and the new member South Africa.) A foreign policy that insists merely on keeping China's profile low cannot cope effectively with the multifaceted challenges facing the country today.

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

A MORE SOPHISTICATED grand strategy is needed to serve China's domestic priorities. The government has issued no official written statement outlining such a vision, but some direction can be gleaned from the concepts of a "scientific outlook on development" and "building a harmonious society," which have been enunciated by Hu and have been recorded in all important CCP documents since 2003. In 2006, the Central Committee of the CCP announced that China's foreign policy "must maintain economic construction as its centerpiece, be closely integrated into domestic work, and be advanced by coordinating domestic and international situations." Moreover, four ongoing changes in China's strategic thinking may suggest the foundations for a new grand strategy.

The first transformation is the Chinese government's adoption of a comprehensive understanding of security, which incorporates economic and nontraditional concerns with traditional military and political interests. Chinese military planners have begun to take into consideration transnational problems such as terrorism and piracy, as well as cooperative activities such as participation in UN peacekeeping operations. Similarly, it is now clear that China must join other countries in stabilizing the global financial market in order to protect its own economic security. All this means that it is virtually impossible to distinguish China's friends from its foes. The United States might pose political and military threats, and Japan, a staunch U.S. ally, could be a geopolitical competitor of China's, but these two countries also happen to be two of China's greatest economic partners. Even though political difficulties appear to be on the rise with the European Union, it remains China's top economic partner. Russia, which some Chinese see as a potential security ally, is far less important economically and socially to China than is South Korea, another U.S. military ally. It will take painstaking efforts on Beijing's part to limit tensions between China's traditional political-military perspectives and its broadening socio-economic interests—efforts that effectively amount to reconciling the diverging legacies of Mao and Deng. The best Beijing can do is to strengthen its economic ties with great powers while minimizing the likelihood of a military and political confrontation with them.

A second transformation is unfolding in Chinese diplomacy: it is becoming less country-oriented and more multilateral and issue-oriented. This shift toward functional focuses—counterterrorism, nuclear nonproliferation, environmental protection, energy security, food safety, post-disaster reconstruction—has complicated China's bilateral relationships, regardless of how friendly other states are toward it. For example, diverging geostrategic interests and territorial disputes have long come between China and India, but the two countries' common interest in fending off the West's pressure to reduce carbon emissions has drawn them closer. And now that Iran has become a key supplier of oil to China, its problems with the West over its nuclear program are testing China's stated commitment to the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

Changes in the mode of China's economic development account for a third transformation in the country's strategic thinking. Beijing's preoccupation with GDP growth is slowly giving way to concerns about economic efficiency, product quality, environmental protection, the creation of a social safety net, and technological innovation. Beijing's understanding of the core interest of development is expanding to include social dimensions. Correspondingly, China's leaders have decided to try to sustain the country's high growth rate by propping up domestic consumption and reducing over the long term the country's dependence on exports and foreign investment. They are now more concerned with global economic imbalances and financial fluctuations, even as international economic frictions are becoming more intense because of the global financial crisis. China's long-term interests will require some incremental appreciation of the yuan, but its desire to increase its exports in the short term will prevent its decision-makers from taking the quick measures urged by the United States and many other countries. Only the enhancement of China's domestic consumption and a steady opening of its capital markets will help it shake off these international pressures.

The fourth transformation has to do with China's values. So far, China's officials have said that although China has a distinctive political system and ideology, it can cooperate with other countries based on shared interests—although not, the suggestion seems to be, on shared values. But now that they strongly wish to enhance what they call the “cultural soft power of the nation” and improve China's international

image, it appears necessary to also seek common values in the global arena, such as good governance and transparency. Continuing trials and tribulations at home, such as pervasive corruption and ethnic and social unrest in some regions, could also reinforce a shift in values among China's political elite by demonstrating that their hold on power and the country's continued resurgence depend on greater transparency and accountability, as well as on a firmer commitment to the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, all values that are widely shared throughout the world today.

All four of these developments are unfolding haltingly and are by no means irreversible. Nonetheless, they do reveal fundamental trends that will likely shape China's grand strategy in the foreseeable future. When Hu and other leaders call for "coordinating domestic and international situations," they mean that efforts to meet international challenges must not undermine domestic reforms. And with external challenges now coming not only from foreign powers—especially the United States and Japan—but also, and increasingly, from functional issues, coping with them effectively will require engaging foreign countries cooperatively and emphasizing compatible values.

Thus, it would be imprudent of Beijing to identify any one country as a major threat and invoke the need to keep it at bay as an organizing principle of Chinese foreign policy—unless the United States, or another great power, truly did regard China as its main adversary and so forced China to respond in kind. On the other hand, if keeping a low profile is a necessary component of Beijing's foreign policy, it is also insufficient. A grand strategy needs to consider other long-term objectives as well. One that appeals to some Chinese is the notion of building China into the most powerful state in the world: Liu Mingfu, a senior colonel who teaches at the People's Liberation Army's National Defense University, has declared that replacing the United States as the world's top military power should be China's goal. Another idea is to cast China as an alternative model of development (the "Beijing consensus") that can challenge Western systems, values, and leadership. But the Chinese leadership does not dream of turning China into a hegemon or a standard-bearer. Faced with mounting pressures on both the domestic and the international fronts, it is sober in its objectives, be they short- or long-term ones. Its main concern is how best to protect

China's Search for a Grand Strategy

China's core interests—sovereignty, security, and development—against the messy cluster of threats that the country faces today. If an organizing principle must be established to guide China's grand strategy, it should be the improvement of the Chinese people's living standards, welfare, and happiness through social justice.

THE BIRTH OF A GREAT NATION

HAVING IDENTIFIED China's core interests and the external pressures that threaten them, the remaining question is, how can China's leadership safeguard the country's interests against those threats? China's continued success in modernizing its economy and lifting its people's standards of living depends heavily on global stability. Thus, it is in China's interest to contribute to a peaceful international environment. China should seek peaceful solutions to residual sovereignty and security issues, including the thorny territorial disputes between it and its neighbors. With the current leadership in Taiwan refraining from seeking formal independence from the mainland, Beijing is more confident that peace can be maintained across the Taiwan Strait. But it has yet to reach a political agreement with Taipei that would prevent renewed tensions in the future. The Chinese government also needs to find effective means to pacify Tibet and Xinjiang, as more unrest in those regions would likely elicit reactions from other countries.

Although the vast majority of people in China support a stronger Chinese military to defend the country's major interests, they should also recognize the dilemma that poses. As China builds its defense capabilities, especially its navy, it will have to convince others, including the United States and China's neighbors in Asia, that it is taking their concerns into consideration. It will have to make the plans of the People's Liberation Army more transparent and show a willingness to join efforts to establish security structures in the Asia-Pacific region and safeguard existing global security regimes, especially the nuclear nonproliferation regime. It must also continue to work with other states to prevent Iran and North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons. China's national security will be well served if it makes more contributions to other countries' efforts to strengthen security in cyberspace and outer space. Of course, none of this excludes the possibility that

China might have to use force to protect its sovereignty or its security in some special circumstances, such as in the event of a terrorist attack.

China has been committed to almost all existing global economic regimes. But it will have to do much more before it is recognized as a full-fledged market economy. It has already gained an increasingly larger say in global economic mechanisms, such as the G-20, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Now, it needs to make specific policy proposals and adjustments to help rebalance the global economy and facilitate its plans to change its development pattern at home. Setting a good example by building a low-carbon economy is one major step that would benefit both China and the world.

A grand strategy requires defining a geostrategic focus, and China's geostrategic focus is Asia. When communication lines in Central Asia and South Asia were poor, China's development strategy and economic interests tilted toward its east coast and the Pacific Ocean. Today, East Asia is still of vital importance, but China should and will begin to pay more strategic attention to the west. The central government has been conducting the Grand Western Development Program in many western provinces and regions, notably Tibet and Xinjiang, for more than a decade. It is now more actively initiating and participating in new development projects in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Central Asia, and throughout the Caspian Sea region, all the way to Europe. This new western outlook may reshape China's geostrategic vision as well as the Eurasian landscape.

Still, relationships with great powers remain crucial to defending China's core interests. Notwithstanding the unprecedented economic interdependence of China, Japan, and the United States, strategic trust is still lacking between China and the United States and China and Japan. It is imperative that the Chinese-Japanese-U.S. trilateral interaction be stable and constructive, and a trilateral strategic dialogue is desirable. More generally, too, China will have to invest tremendous resources to promote a more benign image on the world stage. A China with good governance will be a likeable China. Even more important, it will have to learn that soft power cannot be artificially created: such influence originates more from a society than from a state.

Two daunting tasks lie ahead before a better-designed Chinese grand strategy can take shape and be implemented. The first is to

improve policy coordination among Chinese government agencies. Almost all institutions in the central leadership and local governments are involved in foreign relations to varying degrees, and it is virtually impossible for them to see China's national interest the same way or to speak with one voice. These differences confuse outsiders as well as the Chinese people.

The second challenge will be to manage the diversity of views among China's political elite and the general public, at a time when the value system in China is changing rapidly. Mobilizing public support for government policies is expected to strengthen Beijing's diplomatic bargaining power while also helping consolidate its domestic popularity. But excessive nationalism could breed more public frustration and create more pressure on the government if its policies fail to deliver immediately, which could hurt China's political order, as well as its foreign relations. Even as it allows different voices to be heard on foreign affairs, the central leadership should more vigorously inform the population of its own view, which is consistently more moderate and prudent than the inflammatory remarks found in the media and on Web sites.

No major power's interests can conform exactly to those of the international community; China is no exception. And with one-fifth of the world's population, it is more like a continent than a country. Yet despite the complexity of developing a grand strategy for China, the effort is at once consistent with China's internal priorities and generally positive for the international community. China will serve its interests better if it can provide more common goods to the international community and share more values with other states.

How other countries respond to the emergence of China as a global power will also have a great impact on China's internal development and external behavior. If the international community appears not to understand China's aspirations, its anxieties, and its difficulties in feeding itself and modernizing, the Chinese people may ask themselves why China should be bound by rules that were essentially established by the Western powers. China can rightfully be expected to take on more international responsibilities. But then the international community should take on the responsibility of helping the world's largest member support itself. 🌐