

China's Peaceful Rise: Peace through strength?

by Yun Sun

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Debate over whether China's rise is and will be peaceful continues. Chinese strategic culture seems to support the idea of a "peaceful rise," not because of China's peace-loving nature, but rather because it deems fighting as inferior and less effective for attaining a goal. As argued by the military strategist Sun Tzu, "winning without fighting" is the supreme "art of war." Consequently, China is building its strength by avoiding conflicts, in the hope that someday its superior power will be the most effective deterrent against war.

For more than a decade, China has argued that "peaceful rise" ("peaceful development" is the less threatening Chinese term) is the country's fundamental principle of modernization. The strategy stipulates that China seeks a path of rising peacefully in the international system in ways that differ from other rising powers; historically, new international orders were shaped and established through power competition and military conflict. In the most recent attempt to achieve this "peaceful rise," China proposed "a new model of major country relations" with the United States. Beijing hopes to assure the US that a rising China does not seek confrontation with it, nor does it wish to change the power equilibrium through force. Therefore, the argument goes, the US and China should be able to work peacefully and cooperatively through their competition till presumably one day China replaces the US as regional – and global – superpower.

There are two questions that the "peaceful rise" strategy does not answer. First, it does not offer a genuine explanation for why China desires peace. Indeed, other than the empty rhetoric that China is a peace-loving nation, there are more practical reasons behind China's pursuit of peace. For example, China wishes to avoid military conflicts most directly because it would undermine the friendly external environment Beijing needs for domestic economic development. On a deeper and more pragmatic level, China will not fight a war that it knows it won't win. Given the US regional role and power, a confrontation with the US is most likely inevitable if China decides to fight its smaller neighbors. This is the most fundamental reason that Beijing "bides its time" through peace and focuses on building its strength.

Second, because "peaceful rise" has been designed and propagated during China's rise, it hardly provides a realistic assessment of China's behavior after its rise. As Chinese officials and analysts deftly defend China's policy inconsistencies by citing "changing circumstances," there are fears that "peaceful rise" might simply be tossed aside after

China achieves primacy and no longer finds the policy "convenient."

Still, China seems intent on a peaceful rise today. Under the principle of "all-directional" foreign policy, it has tried to play nice with most countries regardless of political system or power status. From Africa to the Middle East, from Europe to Latin America, China has worked hard to build friendly political ties and provide generous economic packages. Even in the thorniest relationship with the US, Beijing has strived to manage conflicts and promote cooperation.

The only issues where China is not backing off are those that it deems to be "core national interests": Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and arguably the territorial disputes with its neighbors. China's military, diplomatic, and economic attempts to coerce compliance on these issues have won itself an "assertive" reputation globally in the past few years. When dealing with its maritime disputes, China has not hesitated to exploit its military superiority against smaller Southeast Asian claimant countries; nor did it wait long before taking the region to the brink of military confrontation with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. On the land border disputes, China has had no problem engaging India in the "Tents Confrontation" despite a real danger of miscalculation and escalation. In addition, from boycotting Norwegian salmon to suspending rare earth elements exports to Japan, China adeptly implements its "economic diplomacy" to coerce countries.

Whether these "assertive" moves reveal non-peaceful intentions is debatable. In fact, coercion does not need to involve actual use of military force, though the threat of doing so can be very effective and important. From the viewpoint of Tokyo, Manila, or Hanoi, Beijing's determination to use its comprehensive national power and its resort to military and economic coercion in territorial disputes clearly indicate aggressive motives. From another perspective, one can argue that China has attempted to pursue a peaceful course of development except in clear cases where compromise could threaten the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese government.

While China pursues strength through "peace," such strength, once it becomes superior, will be China's ultimate guarantee of peace. As argued by PLA generals, China's military buildup is the "most effective deterrence against foreign containment and provocations." Therefore, China's seemingly offensive moves, such as ballistic missile tests, the development of aircraft carriers, the establishment of the Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, along with its rising defense budget, are "peaceful" from a Chinese perspective, however coercive they may ultimately be.

Therefore, China's policy is not necessarily aimed at fighting a war with either the United States or China's neighbors. However, Beijing strives to develop the ability to win if conflict occurs. This is Beijing's version of "peace

through strength” and “winning without fighting.” By pursuing superior power to ensure victory, China sees deterrence and coercion as its strongest defense to prevent war. If China and China’s opponents both understand that China will prevail in any conflict, this understanding is hoped to erode an opponent’s desire to fight in the first place.

This may not be good news for the international community. This logic and China’s track record suggest that China’s preferred strategy might lie in preventing war and maintaining peace through strength, but they don’t indicate that China would be any less coercive. This may not answer the ultimate question of whether China’s rise will be peaceful, but people should aim for a more nuanced understanding of China’s claim of peaceful rise and the challenges it presents.

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