



China's peaceful rise and U.S. interests in Asia – status and outlook by Robert Sutter

Consultations over the past month with 50 Chinese officials and specialists in Beijing and Shanghai, and with officials and nongovernment specialists in Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Australia, and India, help to clarify the importance of Chinese leaders' emphasis on China's "peaceful rise" for U.S. interests in Asia. Chinese party, government, and military specialists provide a systematic outline of the purpose and scope of the recent and very moderate Chinese approach to domestic development and foreign policy captured under the heading of "peaceful rise," though they acknowledge that there remain issues of debate and uncertainty as the process of establishing a firm policy approach remains incomplete.

In contrast to Western commentary depicting the new approach as evidence of greater Chinese confidence in dealing with domestic and foreign affairs, most officials in China are at pains to stress Chinese diffidence and preoccupations. Apart from many domestic concerns and worries, the main international uncertainty they address involves the United States. Specifically, they recognize that rising powers of the past, like imperial Germany before World War I and imperial Japan before World War II, rose to power in ways that challenged the prevailing international order. In the event, other powers aligned against and destroyed them.

The U.S. is seen by Chinese officials as the dominant power in Asian and world affairs, and the main potential international danger to confront and complicate China's development and rising power and influence in Asian and world affairs. The U.S. preoccupation in the Iraq quagmire has not fundamentally altered Chinese views of U.S. power as likely to remain predominant for many years to come. Under these circumstances, Chinese officials and specialists say they are determined that the U.S. not see China's rise as a challenge to the United States. To reduce the likelihood of this outcome, they have endeavored to solidify trends evident since mid-2001 whereby Chinese commentary has curbed attacks on a wide range of U.S. domestic and foreign policies and practices. Chinese officials now say that China is prepared to mute such past attacks on U.S. "hegemony" in the interests of avoiding confrontation with the U.S. that could complicate Chinese development. In general, Chinese officials have narrowed criticism of U.S. policies and behavior to areas that relate to Taiwan. In addition, Chinese officials assert that they accept U.S. leadership in Asian and world affairs.

Chinese officials and specialists have emphasized that China's recent moderate approach is strategic, designed to last for the duration of the Hu Jintao leadership and longer. But they add that it also depends on circumstances, notably a constructive U.S. response to the moderate Chinese approach.

U.S.-China differences over Taiwan represent an immediate challenge in this regard. Chinese officials and specialists urge the Bush administration to do more to curb the Taiwan government's continued emphasis and actions leading to a more formal independent legal status for Taiwan. They want the U.S. to cut back military support for Taiwan, and they are disappointed that the U.S. continues such support as it seeks to deter China from using force against Taiwan.

Chinese officials and specialists also admit that Japan poses a special problem for China's peaceful and moderate approach to Asia, and that U.S. support for Japan feeds into this problem. Thus, Chinese moderation toward Japan is much less than that shown toward the United States, India, or others that were attacked by Chinese officials and commentary in the past. Chinese officials and specialists say the fundamental problem is Chinese domestic politics, as well as Japanese domestic politics, which make it very difficult for China and Japan to moderate differences over history, territorial issues, and other disputes. Not surprisingly, Japanese officials have a mixed view of China's rising power and influence in Asia. They generally welcome economic cooperation with China, but some Japanese officials and specialists make clear that Japan will be unlikely to fully embrace China's avowed peaceful intentions until Chinese military doctrine, force deployments, and force improvements clearly reflect a peaceful intent. Partly as a result, Japanese officials rely closely on the U.S. security alliance which is strongly supported by the United States.

Chinese officials and specialists also acknowledge that it may be difficult for the U.S. to fully embrace and reciprocate China's moderate approach. U.S. officials have been taken by surprise by the recent moderate Chinese approach, Chinese acceptance of U.S. leadership in Asian and world affairs, and narrowing of significant differences to the Taiwan issue. Though China is no longer the prime target of U.S. foreign policy debate as it was prior to Sept. 11, 2001, there remain wide ranging U.S. differences with Chinese policies and practices over values, economic issues, security concerns, and sovereignty questions that are unlikely to be silenced by the shift in China's stance toward greater moderation toward the U.S. Moreover, U.S. security planners, like their Japanese counterparts, are unlikely to fully embrace China's avowed peaceful intent until China reduces its strong military modernization efforts targeted at Taiwan and U.S. forces that might intervene in a Taiwan contingency.

Outlook

While Chinese officials and specialists are hopeful that the U.S. will reciprocate China's moderate approach to Asian and world affairs, they also recognize that China's peaceful rise has benefits for China even if the U.S. disappoints Chinese expectations. In particular, the Chinese approach to Asia has

greatly expanded Chinese influence throughout China's periphery, particularly in South Korea and in Southeast Asia, but also including Australia and India to some degree. Chinese specialists recognize that recent Chinese efforts have created a buffer around China that makes it difficult for the U.S. to gain the cooperation of Asian countries should Washington try to pressure or contain China. In addition, they advise, Chinese-backed multilateral efforts and arrangements in Asia also have the effect of impeding possible future U.S. attempts to pressure China, acting as a sort of "Gulliver strategy" tying a possible assertive U.S. policy against China in a maze of multilateral restrictions and constraints.

On balance, the advantages of China's moderate approach seem substantial for U.S. interests. China's moderation means little criticism from China over U.S. policy in Iraq, allows the Bush administration to highlight relations with China as a significant positive accomplishment, and sets a positive atmosphere for U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea and the war on terrorism. Any loss of U.S. ability to revert to a containment policy against China seems small in comparison. In the past, Asian countries were unlikely to side with the U.S. against China out of concern that China might react aggressively; now those governments are loathe to do so for fear of jeopardizing benefits they receive from China. In either case, the net effect is that it has long been true that a U.S. containment policy against China would not win much support in Asia.

Since Asian countries have long been reluctant to choose between the U.S. and China, it would be foolish for U.S. policy to react to China's rise by trying to compete directly with China for influence in the region. A more effective approach would be to build on the U.S. role as Asia's leading power and the region's economic and security partner of choice. More activism and greater sensitivity to the concerns of Asian states going through difficult transitions (South Korea is a good example) also would go far toward improving U.S. influence in this important part of the world.

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