



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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China's Premature Rise to Great Power

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China's so-called rise to great power status is usually taken for granted. Still, a convincing argument can be made that Beijing's post-Cold War grand strategy is based on fear of failure rather than management of success.

China only qualifies as a great power by the skin of its teeth, if the lower limit of such status is defined as the ability to decide how to do things in either the economic, military or political sectors of the international system.¹ China's position as a political great power is largely determined by the implosion of the Soviet Union. Its ascendancy to this rank has been based on psychology in that a successor challenging U.S. pre-eminence was expected and pronounced before the fact. While Beijing has convinced the surroundings that China is a great power, it is struggling to catch up both economically and militarily with the United States.

Contemporary China faces three major challenges: economically and militarily it continues to lag far behind the United States, U.S. grand strategy threatens its rise, and a Chinese alternative to the liberal model of state-society relations has not been developed. Beijing's foreign policy is therefore based on the premise of how to avoid China's descent into the ranks of secondary powers.

Economic and Military Capabilities

Chinese foreign policy is best compared to the diplomacy of Austria's Metternich (1812 to 1822).² Metternich was instrumental in creating the preconditions of the Concert of Europe that maintained peace for almost one hundred years. At the beginning of the 19th century, Austria was the weakest European power and did not have the military and economic means to exercise pre-eminence. However, by succeeding in defining a common political framework that regulated state conduct, Metternich made Austria the most influential power on international security.

Contemporary China's economic and military capabilities are stretched to a breaking point. Beijing can ill afford a financial crisis or a war. China's GDP was US \$2,229 bil-

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lion in 2005, which is only a fraction of the U.S. GDP at US \$12,455 billion.³ China is a country struggling with poverty. More than 160 million Chinese have consumption levels below one dollar a day. The government has to reform the state sector and the administration to solve problems such as growing income inequality, economically lagging western and northeastern regions, unsustainable and inefficient resource exploitation, and growing demands for energy imports.⁴ China has not yet adopted a financial regime of currency flexibility, which indicates that China is vulnerable to fluctuating exchange rates.

China's armed forces also need an upgrade. Beijing's military capabilities are considerable. They include nuclear and space capabilities and China pursues advanced defensive and power projection capabilities. China's defense budget, estimated to be US \$104 billion in 2005, is only superseded by the United States.⁵ However, Chinese dependency on Russian arms deliveries and its arduous efforts to catch up with the Revolution in Military Affairs imply that China is far from the U.S. level of military prowess, especially in naval and aerial capabilities. A well-equipped and well-trained navy and air force is a necessary condition for exercising strategic influence in large parts of China's Asian home region, such as the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, the Taiwan Strait and the Japanese isles. This goal remains out of China's reach for several decades.

China's Grand Strategy

Contemporary Chinese foreign policy is Metternichian in that it encourages international agreement on acceptable aims and methods of state conduct. Metternich protected Austria against the forces of nationalism that spread from Napoleonic France and against the expansionary goals of Russia and Prussia. These concerns were shared by secondary European powers. They supported Metternich's preference for a status quo policy that embedded the balance of power in common principles of state conduct. The balance of power was therefore driven by political influence rather than by mere military and economic power.

In today's international system, the United States is well aware that it has a strong chance of killing a future Chinese challenger in its infancy. To curb China's economic growth, Washington may be motivated to demand revaluation of China's currency. Militarily, Washington is consolidating the U.S. alliance system to maintain its position of pre-eminence. Politically, the United States is promoting the spread of liberalism. Washington's policy encourages China to construct an alternative based on diplomacy and persuasion rather than imposition and military force postures. Contemporary Chinese foreign policy reflects the determination of the weaker power to ensure its say on future international security arrangements and that the United States does not achieve hegemony.

The attractive elements of Beijing's proposal are cooperative security, multipolarity and China's defense of the old UN system. China's concept of cooperative security is about building trust, confidence and multilateral cooperation with the purpose of removing the risk of armed conflict. This concept has been applied widely to China's numerous territorial and maritime conflicts with neighboring countries.⁶ At minimum, the disputes are being negotiated, as with the Sino-Indian territorial conflict. At maximum, the contested borders have been permanently settled, as with the Sino-Russian territorial conflict. The Chinese concept of multipolarity does not imply traditional power balancing through alliances, but through the concept of strategic partnerships with powers such as Russia and the European Union. These partnerships form the basis for warding off U.S. hegemony by poaching on Washington's alliances and partnerships. China also supports the old UN system's principles of absolute sovereignty, effective territorial control as a basis for regime recognition, and the authority of the UN Security Council in global security management. The UN is the plat-

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form for China to demonstrate that its pursuit of national interests is embedded in globally accepted principles of state conduct. China's affiliation with UN-based institutions is used to expose the alleged immorality of U.S. policies such as the 2003 Iraq war. According to China, the war has not been carried out within the confines of the UN system. In addition, China's proactive approach to UN-based institutions is used to confirm China's image as a responsible power committed to protect the common interests of states without using force. An example is Beijing's accession in 2003 to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia that commits the signatory states to peaceful conflict resolution.

Beijing advocates the preservation of the old UN system as the political framework underpinning state conduct for two reasons. First, a Westphalian type of order wards off U.S. demands for the spread of political liberalism and allows China to concentrate on its domestic economic and social development. For example, the growing gap between rich and poor segments of Chinese society is considered an immediate security concern by China's political elites because it threatens the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.⁷ Second, Beijing's commitment to the old UN system is supported by secondary powers such as the Southeast Asian states, Russia, South Korea and India. These states share China's concern that the U.S. alliance system will form the basis of a hegemonic order that minimizes their international clout.

Domestic Problems of Political Legitimacy

Like Austria's designs for European order, China's proposal for international order is conservative. Metternich's system contained no inherent mechanisms of reform save from references to the old principle of dynastic rule. It was designed to prevent revolution by sustaining a balance of forces between the states on the basis of a consensus on the principles of absolute sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of states. This moral basis encouraged political authorities to use means of oppression to secure their hold on power. They did not think in terms of political reforms that would satisfy demands from groups whose interests were at odds with existing domestic political power structures.

Beijing's designs for international order are conservative in that they do not suggest an alternative to the liberal model of state-society relations. China retains an authoritarian political system, which the government has taken very limited steps to democratize. The justification for this policy is that stability protects the interests of China's people better than extensive popular influence on the government.

The political philosophy of Confucianism, and its notions of collectivity and hierarchy, has been suggested as a basis for constructing an alternative model of state-society relations if translated into workable political arrangements. Beijing is developing a Confucius-based notion of a harmonious society that

integrates the economic, political, cultural and societal aspects of China into one coherent entity based on fairness and justice. This effort reflects the Chinese leadership's awareness of the necessity to develop an attractive model of state-society relations. However, Confucianism has predominantly been used as a pretext to fend off demands for liberal political reform rather than as a basis for constructing a viable model for state-society relations.

Confucianism holds some appeal across the Asian region, but its notion of hierarchy is not seen as an attractive alternative even in Asia when it emerges in China's relations with neighboring states. For example, China's agreement to shelve sovereignty disputes without clearly renouncing its claims in the South China Sea is conceived as a generous gesture of resource sharing with states that, in Beijing's view, do not have a priori rights to the area. This Chinese outlook implies that the interim settlement is based on mercy rather than on merit.⁸

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Consequences for International Order

A main difference between 19th century Austria and contemporary China is that the majority of secondary powers only partially support Chinese designs for international order. Instead, the secondary powers maximize their national interests by buying into both U.S. and Chinese designs for international order.

For China, this means that the secondary powers will only support Beijing's policies on the basis of a U.S. military presence. Ironically, the U.S. alliance system is a precondition of China's ability to undermine it. The result is an in-between international order dominated by pure power politics but with significant elements of common interests. Although the United States is likely to maintain hegemonic aspirations, Washington benefits substantially from an order based on the U.S. alliance system as the fundamental security structure. The current in-between order may therefore remain in place for the foreseeable future.

article footnotes

- ¹ On definitions of dominant, great and secondary or middle powers: Liselotte Odgaard, *The Balance of Power in Asia-Pacific Security: US-China policies on regional order* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- ² On Metternich's system: Alan Sked, "The Metternich System, 1815-48", in Alan Sked, ed., *Europe's Balance of Power 1815-1848* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 98-121; Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822* (London: Phoenix Press, 1957).
- ³ The World Bank Group, "WDI Data Query", 6 April 2007, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/data-query/>.
- ⁴ The World Bank Group, "World Bank in China: Economic Achievements and Current Challenges", March 2005, http://www.worldbank.org.cn/English/Overview/overview_brief.htm
- ⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2007* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 408.
- ⁶ On China's territorial borders: M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes", *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005).
- ⁷ Interviews with twenty-five think tank academics, scholars and government officials in Beijing, October 2006. Sixteen listed domestic economic and social policy instruments as urgent measures to protect contemporary China's national security.
- ⁸ On China's South China Sea policy: Liselotte Odgaard, *Maritime Security between China and Southeast Asia: Conflict and cooperation in the making of regional order* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), particularly pp. 208-9, 224-5.



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