


CHINA IN THE 21ST CENTURY: IS GLOBAL LEADERSHIP POSSIBLE?

Sustainable Development, Political Legitimacy and Foreign Policy

 hina's rising star on the world stage is accompanied by significant economic challenges that bring extensive domestic and foreign political implications. To ensure its growth and stability, China must turn to sustainable development, which, accompanied by rising personal wealth, will cause problems for the current one-party political system in China. Beijing must adjust to allow more political pluralism if it hopes to gain the internal political legitimacy to be a global leader in legitimating a multilateral foreign policy in the context of an increasingly multipolar world.

The 21st century is witnessing the decline of the United States as the foremost power in the world, and the gradual emergence of a multipolar order with China at the top, on track to becoming the world's economic powerhouse. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overarching survey of China's future role in the world, in parallel with some of the challenges it faces in the coming years and decades. The central theme is going to talk about sustainable development and the corresponding need for China to provide both political leadership and the lead in materializing policies that respect and work with the natural environment, rather than destroy it. At stake is the idea and vision that will replace the American-led world order since the end of the Cold War and it may very well fall to China to provide the needed leadership and insight.

Why is China important?

Since the death of Mao Tse Dong in 1976, China began a gradual opening to world markets, in a framework that combined strong political control of economic policy with a capitalist-influenced model of production and demand. For over three decades now, China has grown at astounding annual rates and has effectively become the second largest economy in the world after the United States¹. Alongside, it has overtaken America as the biggest exporter and consumer of energy². In the foreseeable future, we are going to witness America's gradual decline from the world stage, to be taken up by China in the 21st century. America came to the fore after World War II largely due to the fact that it was the only intact economy not destroyed and decimated by war. However, today

we live in a unique time – our world is bigger and more connected than anytime in recorded history. China is becoming a central engine that must not only provide economic leadership, but also a vision for the world with the political will to carry it out.

Sustainable Development

On a world scale, fossil fuels continue to be the primary method of meeting the energy needs of major countries. One exception is France, whose energy mix is heavily favoured towards nuclear power. However, since sustainable development became a mainstream phrase in the 1980s, the ecological footprint of human activity has become an important consideration for projects both in developed and developing countries. The first step in sustainable development lies in developing power generation techniques that minimize the reliance on fossil fuels. In the first decade of this century, we have seen several major milestones achieved toward renewable energy production. In absolute numbers, the growth of solar and wind investment has been startling, but relative to overall world energy production, still retains a very small share³. Policy-wise, Europe is a leader in encouraging the development of renewable energy: by 2020, 20% of power generated in the EU must come from renewable sources⁴. While China's investment in renewable energy is greater than that of any other country, it is still only having a small impact on the overall energy mix of the country and it is necessary for Beijing to implement a long-term focus in this regard⁵. However, the emissions of CO₂ emitted by China in the coming years are set to increase, and that must be taken into account when talking about renewable energy targets.⁶

Sustainable development extends beyond power generation. It also encompasses industrial capacity, particularly capital-intensive industries, such as mining and heavy industry. As the world's manufacturing center, emissions and waste products from factories in China are a growing environmental and health problem. Polluted air in cities, acidified soil, unacceptably quality of drinking water and the negative impact on groundwater and rivers are fundamental challenges for Beijing to address, if it has any pretensions for becoming a superpower in this century⁷. Carbon neutrality is a term that refers to developing manufacturing processes that ideally have a net emission of no sulphur and carbon-based gases. On a practical level, it means developing means of scrubbing emissions for harmful gases, storing them underground or developing links with other industries that might have a use for these waste products; they are not limited to gaseous emissions, but also solid waste products that can be used in different manufacturing processes.

An additional challenge that comes to China with a rapidly growing economy is increased prosperity. While a new wealthy class of industrialists, bankers and other professionals is taking shape in China, the average person will also feel the effects of a more powerful economy: better wages and a higher level of consumption of both goods and services. When talking about 1,3 billion people, one needs to consider the kind of demand increased consumption will create on existing infrastructure, energy usage, the surrounding natural environment, and the global impact it might have from additional imports as demand for more and different kinds of goods increases. The response by the Chinese government can take a number of dimensions: from slowing the growth of incomes, and thus, demand, to creating a culture in the general population that is sensitive to environmental issues, or promoting goods and services that are construed with an appreciation of minimizing their ecological impact. In essence, the role of the government is central in creating a hybrid of these policies that will give priority to ecologically-sensitive consumption habits and the goods and processes that will support them. ►

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Overall, the premise of this section is as follows: the first tier of China's coming global role is found in encouraging and implementing sustainable development. The three main themes are an emphasis on emission-free power generation (wind, solar, nuclear), reforming heavy industry and capital-intensive activities to ultimately achieve carbon neutrality, and finally encouraging ecologically-friendly habits in a large population that will, on average, become increasingly wealthier in this century and consumer more as a consequence. China must consider these three areas very carefully, because they can set the paradigm for environmental global leadership by the Celestial Empire.

Implications of Economic Growth for Internal Political Challenges and Foreign Policy

The growing affluence of China is going to bring with it a set of political problems that the country's one-party rule will find increasingly difficult to confront. The first challenge is that the average person will have the ability to increasingly question the existing order, catalysed by greater personal wealth. In other words, democratic tendencies in a population are correlated with increased economic means and this development will come to odds with the paradigm of one-party rule in China.

The effective question is qualitative: can pluralism exist in the context of a charismatic or one-party political system? The historical precedents point to a negative answer: the USSR, for instance, or Franco's Spain, show that this kind of regime does not stand the test of time and once collapsed, is replaced by imperfect, nascent pluralism.

The trouble for China's Communist Party is that economic growth has the potential to hasten the demise of its political legitimacy. The historical experience of the last major democratic throes in China is not flattering: the forceful suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprisings raised questions about Beijing's ability to deal with large-scale protest⁸. Dealing with dissent is crucial for political legitimacy, because a regime that does

not have ability to change in the long run is not sustainable. In other words, China needs to find a different, peaceful means of handling difference of opinion and dissent in order for the current regime to maintain political legitimacy.

Domestic political legitimacy, gained through wider spaces for public discussion, participation and influence in the political process, will be crucial if Beijing is to have a more influential global role in turn. There are several political reasons for this: one is that predictable domestic politics with conflict management methods that do not involve military means give China the ability to pro-

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mote political predictability in other conflict-prone areas of the world, such as the Middle East or conflict-ridden areas of Africa without being perceived as hypocritical. The second reason is the heightened trust credit it would receive from other major international partners on issues related to a wide variety of policy types: security cooperation, environment, economic and trade relations and peace promotion.

Chinese foreign policy will operate in a multipolar world.⁹ With the gradual exit of the United States as the dominant power in international relations, there is no single power to replace it that can exercise the kind of political, economic and military dominance that the United States did for the second half of the 20th century. In effect, we are seeing the formation of several power centres in the

world, of which China will be likely the most powerful, but not the dominant one.

Decisions in a multipolar world are taken in a multilateral manner. The unique circumstances of our world that I mentioned in the first paragraph – population and interconnectivity – will mean that the problems we face in the world will be global in nature, and so will their solutions. This is precisely the challenge to Chinese foreign policy: if America set global paradigms according to its own prisms in the 20th century, China has to invent the prisms of effective multilateralism in the 21st to a much higher degree than any country has up until this point in history that also converge its national interests with those of other countries to equivalent depths – also a practice without precedent in history in the perceived complexity it will have when applied to the modern international system.

However, to meet the above goal, Chinese politics have to mature to a higher level, to match the accelerating economic influence of the country. The challenge there, as also mentioned above, is to bring about effective domestic pluralism in the medium to long term, if a multilaterally-based leadership on foreign policy is going to have any credible legitimacy on the international stage. One might ask why cannot tight political control,

tied with gradual economic liberalization, as is the current trend in China, not produce an outcome that would make China a world leader in producing a style of effective foreign policy that is comprehensive, robust and multilateral in nature and make it a global trend of foreign policy design? The answer is straight-forward and complex at the same time: this kind of foreign policy requires a culture of nuanced decision-making that is hard to find in the current behaviour of Chinese domestic, let alone foreign policy.

Contemporary practices of Chinese domestic and foreign policies are not encouraging: the imprisonment of political dissenters¹⁰, a more confrontational military presence in Southeast Asia¹¹, and shaky and unstable relations with some regional powers – such as Japan and India – need to be resolved before China can effectively begin to think about a global presence in *political*, and not just economic terms.¹²

The point of this section is simple: China will have the economic might to be one of the global leaders in a multipolar world, and perhaps the most influential one, as the United States gradually declines over the 21st century. Yet, to become that leader, a political maturation is required that would enhance the political legitimacy of the Communist Party in China through much greater political pluralism and from there, give Chinese foreign policy both the culture of nuance and the needed legitimacy to become an effective multilateral leader in the emerging multipolar world.

Conclusion

To sum up the paper, China's economic growth makes it one of the engines of the global economy and it gives Beijing an enhanced position in global affairs. Yet, a focus on sustainable development through the implementation of environmentally-friendly electricity production capacities and vast industrial reform that will not only make industry cleaner, but also sustain its rate of growth, must become the two main policy objectives if China's economic experiment is to be sustainable in the long term. The more important



consideration concerns the political implications of China's more influential global position, because it is happening in a time of increasing pressures to open up space for political pluralism, which has the potential to overwhelm the current regime. Combined with the two unique aspects of our world, in terms of population and interconnectivity, the challenge is doubled when Chinese foreign policy is taken into consideration, because it will have to function in a multipolar world; in that world, the legitimacy of foreign policy is derived from the domestic political legitimacy of the regime. The reason is that China will never be able to replicate American unilateralism of the post-war period – the world is simply too big and complex now. To function in a multipolar world then, Chinese foreign policy needs to learn to be grounded in popular public legitimacy and have a nuanced approach to global problems and solutions that involves negotiating and convincing a number of international partners. Much of this attitude can be learned through opening up space for pluralism domestically, and it is the only way for China to mature politically to have the foreign policy needed in a multipolar world – thus the imperative for Beijing to focus not just on growing the economy, but also to vastly improve its political sophistication as soon as possible.

Notes:

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