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China's "New" Diplomacy Tactical or Fundamental Change?

Edited by Pauline Kerr, Stuart Harris, and Qin Yaqing

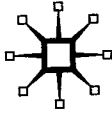


(Febr.) 2008 80 281521

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CHINA'S "NEW" DIPLOMACY

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ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60772-9

ISBN-10: 0-230-60772-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: January 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

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INTRODUCTION

Debating China's Diplomatic Role in World Politics

Pauline Kerr

A question increasingly asked by professional China watchers and policy officials—and even casual observers of China—is, what role will China be playing in world politics over the next twenty years? This interest is hardly surprising given the rapidly growing economic, political, and security importance of contemporary China. The question is usually phrased in terms of what China's strategic intentions will be as its material capabilities increase to enable it to choose more freely its international path.

Respondents to the question outside China are commonly seen as holding one or the other of two opposed viewpoints. One sees China pursuing a zero-sum game, seeking to challenge U.S. predominance first in Asia and then globally. This is viewed in the United States in particular as threatening to U.S. security and material prosperity and as undermining the United States' objective of remaining the dominant regional and global power. The opposing viewpoint is that positive gains are possible from China's growth globally and regionally, including for the United States, even if it needs to adjust to China's increased role.

The question is often put as whether China will remain a status quo power or seek to become a revisionist power reshaping the international system, including through the use of military force, to accord more with its own interests.¹ While this is an unduly simple way to look at the issues—just by having an economy that is growing at about 10 percent a year, China is changing the international status quo—China is at present behaving more like a status quo power in its broad acceptance of the international system and playing generally by the rules of that system. This is reflected in its current foreign policy and the new diplomacy it has been pursuing since the mid-1990s

We know that the future is hard to predict. It is easy therefore to understand why scholars and officials are more comfortable analyzing the past and the present and perhaps even why some prefer to adopt a pessimistic or realist perspective on the grounds that it is "better to be sure than sorry." Nonetheless, we believe that it is possible to identify factors that are important for an analysis that goes beyond the here and now and, in particular, touches upon what are the dominant views in China today about its future. In China's case, in particular given its importance, it needs to be investigated in a more systematic way.

From this perspective, three sets of variables should be given special attention. First are the strategic international factors. Here we look to the possible sources of influence on China's diplomacy, such as globalization, economic interdependence, international law and norms, and security relations with other great powers, notably the United States and regional neighbors. Second are the internal factors that drive China's diplomacy. These include its priority to economic development and its domestic politics—for example the domestic responses to international developments and its own national development goals. And third are the specific features of Chinese diplomacy, such as negotiation practices, partnerships, multilateral involvement, strategic dialogues, "unofficial" diplomacy, and the diplomatic mechanisms for implementing important policies such as energy security. These specific features provide case material for studying the extent to which there are continuities and change in the types of diplomatic instruments that China uses. In practice this suggests the need to ask questions such as, Does China's diplomacy show any signs of wanting to take over and redress historical grievances? Does China's diplomacy show any signs of expansionism or, apart from Taiwan, any military aggressiveness? And what domestic developments are likely to grow more important in shaping China's international diplomacy?

Equally importantly, these case studies provide insights into the processes of diplomacy. Processes are often overlooked as the means through which change comes about. Diplomatic processes involve different actions—communicative actions, dialogues, interactions, and formal and informal exchanges—through which diplomatic actors can learn other ways of behaving and other ways of thinking, in particular about formulating and implementing policies contributing constructively to regional and global order.

Moreover, such communicative diplomatic processes are the means through which new normative beliefs, both positive and negative, are developed by diplomatic actors. In this sense, diplomacy is much more than an instrument for implementing policy. From this perspective, diplomatic actors are agents of change. Hence we need to note whether or not these processes of diplomacy, brought to life through case studies, help to explain

that is designed to avoid negative responses to growing economic, political, and military power; to ensure a peaceful international environment within which economic development can proceed unhindered; and to soft balance against the harsher elements of U.S. policy.

What is then important is to judge whether China's changed international approach—embracing multilateral diplomacy, strategic dialogues, confidence building, and constructive international interaction together with its "peaceful development" rhetoric—indicates implementation of China's declared intention to build a harmonious world behave internationally as a responsible great power, and thereby reflect a fundamental change away from an earlier critical view of the international system and toward a peaceful engagement with it. Or should we see China's new diplomacy as a tactical and defensive response to critics' predictions that China will have a destabilizing role in world politics and to the more pointed fear that China constitutes a threat if not now then later?

The answers to these more general questions about China's present and future role are the substance of a continuing international debate among professional China watchers. Both propositions find support in that debate, and both tend to lead to judgments as to what policies should be adopted by the rest of the world toward China. Yet the ultimate outcome in China may well not be independent of the policies that are adopted.

Much of the debate largely remains at very general levels. China's new diplomacy, however, is now not simply the product of a small elite and does not simply reflect certain strongly held principles irrespective of the international environment. It is increasingly reflective of beliefs about how the international community is responding to China's growth and to its rhetoric. China's new diplomacy now comes from a widened range of inputs and responds more specifically to what are judged to be the concerns of its neighbors and more widely of the international community at large.

The general debate about China's approach is rich in scope and robustness. Yet in trying to analyze what will be the important influences in China's future, insufficient attention has been given to China's present and future approach to its diplomacy as an indicator of its view of its broader role in world politics. Certainly there have been recent analyses of China's contemporary diplomacy, although mostly by Western authors.² There is insufficient analysis, however, that looks at the processes of decision making and the specifics of its diplomatic practice as guides to China's thinking and what this implies for the future. On this view, diplomacy—the means preferred over the use of force for achieving outcomes—is an important indicator of how a country views its future role.

China's change toward engagement with the international system and how deep or ingrained such change might be domestically and internationally.

Analysis of these three broad sets of factors—the strategic, domestic, and diplomatic instruments and processes—and their specific components, some of which are canvassed above, should provide indicators of China's present view of its future role in world politics. In turn, this will position us to offer better informed judgments about the range of possibilities for China's future diplomacy. In principle China could take several diplomatic directions. For the purposes of this analysis, three possible simplified strategies are suggested: mostly coercive, mostly cooperative, and a more equal mix of both strategies. Coercive strategies comprise a continuum of threats, from those based on compellence and threats of force to those using economic levers to coerce another state to comply, often resulting in unequal outcomes. Cooperative strategies comprise a range of methods, such as integrative bargaining for achieving a "win-win" outcome, actions designed to build confidence and trust, or actions aimed at solving common problems. The "mixed" strategies comprise some cooperation and some coercion and possibly, in unusual cases, some compellence.

A final note about our analytical framework is its scholarly eclecticism. Some authors look at the three sets of factors—strategic, internal, and specific diplomatic features—through a theoretical lens to compare China's direction with those established in scholarly theories. Other authors compare past and present empirical events in China to establish continuities and change. By adopting different approaches and looking across levels and across time and issues, the book provides different types of analyses to address the factors that might inform questions about China's future.

In sum, through adopting the approach outlined above, the authors aim to contribute to the debate on China's future role in world politics by highlighting the importance of China's diplomacy as an indicator of how it sees its future role and thereby identifying factors that, in our view, are important to analyze when making judgments about China's future role.

The above proposition, one of the justifications for this book, that a balanced examination of China's diplomacy in practice is important for understanding China's future role in world politics raises the question of why, for the most part, it has been given less weight in the debate than China's policies. One explanation is that some scholarly theories, such as the various forms of realism, and some strategic concepts, such as worse-case analysis, are the dominant frameworks used by academics and practitioners for investigating China's directions. During most of the George W. Bush administration, various U.S. think tanks, the U.S. Department of Defense, and, to a lesser extent, the U.S. Department of State have been influential in setting such

frameworks for examining China. Another explanation is that most analysts prefer to focus on China's policies with the policy ends being seen as more important indicators of China's role and the diplomatic means as having little impact on outcomes. While the importance of examining China's policies is not in dispute, the assumption that ends tell us more than means and processes is one that the contributors to this book find problematic. We have already made a brief counterargument questioning this narrow focus and will continue to elaborate on it further in this chapter.

Indeed, we could ask why China's policies are causing such debate. Some will say that it is simply because any country the size of China and with a population greater than any other in the world will always be a focus of attention and concern. Although true, a more considered answer is that China's policies are changing and, as mentioned above, it is the different interpretations of the meaning of change that are the wellsprings of debate. From one skeptical perspective, China is seen as a rising great power, and U.S. policies have been contributing to China's increased power and influence. As a rising power, it will compete for power and position in the international system. Accordingly, China's policies, if not today then certainly tomorrow, threaten the current configuration of world order to the detriment of international stability and certainly of the U.S. view of order. A common refrain among those with this skeptical perspective is the "China threat" thesis or variations thereof. They argue that China's new diplomacy, one reason why this book's focus on diplomacy is important, is aimed at countering or neutralizing perceptions of a China threat. Indeed, some would say China's new diplomacy is so adept that it deflects attention away from China's policy ends, which are or will be threatening to world order. China, from this perspective, is adopting cooperative, multilateral, and soft power diplomatic instruments as a defensive tactic to allow it to get to a position of power preponderance, especially in relation to the United States. China's diplomacy is evidence of a tactical response to international developments and domestic needs for present purposes rather than evidence of its constructive longer term role in world politics.

The two changes taking place in China that are stimulating the most concern are China's economic growth and its aforementioned foreign policies. Since Deng Xiaoping's 1978 policy change, moving away from class struggle and avoidance of all things foreign toward a foreign and domestic policy of opening up and reform, China's economic growth has been unprecedented. For skeptics, this increases China's regional and global power. This power will enable enhanced military modernization programs and increased power and influence, allowing China to challenge U.S. predominance in due course. For some time now skeptics have pointed to China's military modernization

programs as evidence of the connection between economic growth and China's growing military budget. In a similar way, they see the subsequent continuation of Deng's changes to China's foreign policy—such as its integration economically and institutionally into the international system—as policies for building strength to challenge the existing system, if not now then later.

It is clear from the above discussion that many skeptics focus on strategic factors—particularly economic and military power—when making judgments about China. There is an assumption that China, as a great power, will behave as some other great powers have in other periods of history and seek aggressively to become the preponderant revisionist power. Many structural realists assume that domestic factors, such as economic development and internal stability, are less important factors for examination than factors regarding China's strategic security goals. Whatever cooperative policies are undertaken are, on this view, directed more toward enhancing China's strategic position and less toward China's internal security and cohesion. Interestingly, while classical realists point to history to make their case about the competitive behavior of great powers, China's record of minimal expeditionary behavior is viewed as an aberration of the times rather than as an authentic factor for judging China's future role.

These propositions about the China threat thesis are however challenged by others in the debate, exploring China's new diplomacy as an indicator of its future role. This alternative perspective, drawing on other scholarly theories of international relations, stresses the mitigating role of economic imperatives, economic interdependence, multilateral institutions, and positive normative standards in international society upon China. From this perspective there is evidence that China is indeed changing its policies and diplomacy in ways that make its much needed domestic development dependent on engagement with the world market and global norms of behavior. Hence it is claimed that China is increasingly locked into this path and is unlikely in the years ahead to disrupt contemporary configurations of order. This perspective on China's role in world politics tends to focus on the priority China gives to its need for a peaceful international environment, because of its overwhelming domestic imperatives on China's integration with international society and its increasing acceptance of international norms and regional expectations. From this perspective, China's new diplomacy is not simply a tactical response to counter the critics' strategic prediction of a China threat; it has become a core aspect of China's overall national development strategy.³

Optimists in the debate argue that China has a changed worldview—that it aspires to have an identity as a "responsible" member of the international community instead of being seen as a "spoiler" toward established international

society norms—and that its claim to being a responsible member is reflected in its "peaceful rise," later in its "peaceful development" arguments, and more recently in its declared objective of building a "harmonious world."

This short overview of the debate thus far outlining the contrasting views of the changes in China's foreign policy and diplomacy invites us to ask more questions about the evidence for such positions. What evidence would indicate that China, as the skeptical perspective suggests, is undergoing a tactical rather than fundamental change? If this is occurring, then how and when would we know? In reviewing the various positions, it has already been noted that the skeptics refer to scholarly theories of great power dynamics, based either on structural imperatives or their interpretation of the history of great power behavior, or to worse-case predictions. In many respects, this type of evidence predetermines an outlook that China's new diplomacy is a tactical rather than a fundamental change. This view is further consolidated by the claim that, even if the evidence is not as yet convincing, it will become so over time. Hence, in a strange way, presenting challenging evidence is unlikely to be effective given this degree of determinism.

Although the claim of positive change is resisted by skeptics, it is nonetheless important to continue to explore its possibilities. One way of thinking about this is to refer to an earlier argument and note that China's interaction with other members of the international community through the processes of diplomacy mentioned above—communicative action, negotiation, dialogue, interaction, and formal and informal exchanges—is itself a socializing process and a possible catalyst for change. China's socialization, for example, and its move to accept the benefits of multilateralism are clearly evident in its participation in regional economic processes, including Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and its involvement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)⁴ as well as in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). From this perspective, the adoption of certain diplomatic processes says less about China's tactics and more about its capacity to learn from such practices and to internalize them as international and domestic norms. Studying China's diplomatic processes then is another way of reviewing evidence for whether or not China is simply acting tactically, as claimed by the skeptics.

Adding to the Debate

As already indicated, in this book we contribute to the debate about China's future role by reexamining some of the factors that have become "givens," such as the strategic arguments that the China threat thesis is not only a source of China's diplomacy but a substantial indicator of it. We also raise

questions about some new sources of China's diplomacy, such as the strategic factors of international law and norms. The book is divided into three sections: *strategic factors*, *domestic factors*, and *particular features of China's diplomacy*. Each chapter within these sections will address factors that the author believes are important for analyzing China's diplomacy as an indicator of its future role.

The first chapter in the book goes straight to heart of the enquiry. Stuart Harris asks how far changes in China's diplomacy reflect change in China's foreign-policy objectives and its acceptance of international society behaviors; he also examines the extent to which China's diplomatic changes are responses to changes in the security, political, economic, and institutional contexts in which China operates. Harris looks to the strategic context for factors that will help him to find answers to his questions. He analyzes three strategic developments and their impacts on China: globalization and complex interdependence, the behavior of the United States toward China, and the politics of leadership among the major powers in East Asia. In investigating each of these developments, he seeks to establish the extent to which they are sources of change for China and how far China is itself an agent of change. On the basis of this analysis of the strategic factors that Harris identifies, he suggests several directions that China's future diplomatic practices could take and what each would imply for China's overall behavior.

The second chapter continues to raise questions about the international factors that might influence China's foreign policy and diplomacy. Qin Yaging's starting point is his observation that skeptics view China's recent changes as defensive tactics in response to international claims that China, if not now then later, will be a threat to global and regional stability. He weighs into this debate about the China threat by questioning the reasoning and evidence behind the thesis. Qin constructs a model that takes the three key propositions that, he argues, support the China threat thesis, namely the international factors of global structural power, global economic developments, and global institutional order. Qin's objective is to offer a reinterpretation of these same factors using evidence derived from both data and qualitative analysis to support his argument that the thesis is flawed. He builds on this reinterpretation and his proposition that China's identity is changing as it integrates into international society to offer a different view of China's current foreign policy and diplomatic practices, and on this basis he offers his judgments about China's future policies and practices.

The third chapter by Ann Kent investigates a third set of strategic factors that are the source of China's diplomacy—international law, and norms. Kent works from the premise that China, as a growing great power, engages with normative standards. She asks if, as its power increases, China is adhering

more or less to international standards. This is an important question since, for many critics, China's future role will be determined largely by the extent to which its diplomacy is driven by international norms. Kent investigates her question through a historical review of China's responses to international law and norms and then suggests what the record implies for the future.

The fourth chapter by You Ji analyzes an issue—China's defense strategies—that is at the heart of critics' concerns that China is pursuing new diplomacy because it has a tactical revisionist agenda. You examines China's perceptions of threats from the land and sea and asks whether China's strategies for dealing with these threats, particularly maritime threats connected with Taiwan's claim for independence and the protection of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), are defensive or offensive in nature. He seeks to understand what these threats tell us about the relationship between China's new diplomacy and its defense strategy.

The fifth chapter, which starts Part II of the book, turns to another level of analysis and asks questions about internal factors driving China's foreign policy and the extent to which they might explain changes in China's diplomacy. Zhu Liquan's chapter starts with her observation that China's foreign policy and diplomacy are often regarded with suspicion by many actors in the international system. Such concern by skeptics, she proposes, is based on misperceptions and misunderstandings, particularly about the important role of domestic factors on China's foreign-policy choices and diplomatic practices. Zhu looks to the domestic issues, especially economic and social factors, which prompted Deng Xiaoping's great reform and opening-up policy in 1978, to explain China's present and possible foreign policies and diplomatic processes. Specifically she looks for answers to four questions: (1) What is "new" about China's current diplomacy? (2) What domestic dynamics explain it? (3) What can be said about these dynamics that will help to dispel the misunderstandings that prompts Zhu's study? (4) What do the findings from this analysis imply for the factors that are important for analyzing China's future policies and processes?

The sixth chapter, like Zhu's, also focuses on internal factors within China as the site of explanation for its past, present, and future policies and diplomatic practices. But whereas Zhu argues that internal stability is a core Chinese interest and that it is best addressed through further reform, opening up, deepening integration, and continuing diplomatic practices, Yongjin Zhang raises further questions about the same core interest and asks if China's diplomacy does indeed address the historical internal security "problematic" of "keeping China together." For Zhang, China's current conception, understanding, and social practice of state sovereignty, as a constitutional principle of Westphalian international society, is now being challenged by

the contemporary discourse about the reformulation of state sovereignty. In this discourse, state sovereignty, or rather its evolution toward state legitimacy, is conditional upon protection of human security and human rights. Zhang examines China's response to this normative shift regarding state legitimacy and its implications for "keeping China together" in the future.

The seventh chapter begins Part III of the book, which raises a set of specific questions about the features of China's diplomatic behavior as a way of investigating the factors that might be important for analyzing China's future role. This section hones in on the details of China's new foreign policies and diplomatic processes. Zhang Qingmin's chapter begins with an examination of China's approach to negotiation. He proposes that five changes currently underway in China have significant implications for future policies and diplomacy. His study goes on to investigate one of these changes, China's negotiating behavior, in depth and finds that while change is evident so too are continuities. He seeks to explain why this is the case and whether it means China's negotiating behavior is becoming more or less like that of other major actors in the international system. On this basis, he suggests some future directions for China's diplomacy.

The eighth chapter, by Wang Yan, continues this close-up investigation of particular features of Chinese diplomatic processes by investigating in detail two approaches that are central to China's new diplomacy and that have been mentioned in previous chapters: strategic dialogue with major powers and multilateralism. Wang addresses why China is adopting these diplomatic processes, what it has achieved and expects to achieve, and what is causing these two changes in China's diplomacy. She investigates whether China's new international practices are having an impact on its practices at the domestic level. Wang's answers to these questions inform her judgments about the future.

The ninth chapter by Brendan Taylor analyzes an important aspect of China's diplomacy that has received very little attention: China's "unofficial" diplomacy within multilateral forums. Taylor's enquiry is focused on how, over time, China has responded to this type of diplomacy—has it resisted or engaged with it and why? Taylor is interested in whether China is socialized by its participation in unofficial multilateral arenas and if it, too, is seeking to socialize other states toward its understanding of regional order and what this means for the future.

The tenth chapter, by Stuart Harris, is the final analysis of specific features of Chinese diplomatic practices. He takes several case studies to illustrate some aspects of China's diplomatic approaches, which point to its attempts to reach its objectives through adopting a relatively low-key diplomacy, one that has characteristics that in some cases differ but in others are increasingly similar

to those more generally used. Each of the case studies illustrates some aspect of China's diplomacy: the U.S.-China relationship, China's relations with Latin America, the Six-Party Talks over North Korea's nuclear ambitions, China's concerns about energy security, and China's relations with its neighbors. Harris concludes with comments on some of the positive and negative factors linked to China's diplomatic approach and their implications for analyzing China's future.

The final chapter of the volume deals directly with the question of whether China's new diplomacy is a tactical or fundamental change by reviewing the arguments and evidence that are marshalled by the authors around several key themes: (1) China's involvement in globalization, engagement, and interdependence; (2) China's power in general and its defense strategies in particular; (3) China's identity; and (4) China's diplomatic processes as possible agents of change, including of its identity. It explores the evidence for the proposition that diplomacy is both an instrument of foreign policy and a learning and socializing process that fosters both positive and negative change and what this implies for China's future role.

Notes

1. For further elaboration on revisionist power, see Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 86-88.
2. See, for example, Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Bates Gill, *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2007); Bonnie Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, "The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of 'Peaceful Rise,'" *The China Quarterly*, June 2007, 190.
3. Gill, *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy*, 223.
4. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Alice D. Ba, "Who's Socialising Whom? Complex Engagement in Sino-ASEAN Relations," *The Pacific Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2006): 157-79.

↳ procedure → substance