



Why China Will Not Become the Next Global Power... But It Could

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Paradox

Each country and historical period is different at invalidating most analogies, but the paradoxical logic of strategy is always the same — hence the identical prescriptions of Carl von Clausewitz and Sūnzǐ 孫子, greatly separated though they were by time, distance and cultural context. Under this logic, because of the increased resistance evoked by its rising power China could even become weaker at the level of grand strategy because of its own rising strength, a truly paradoxical outcome. That result could at least be moderated if not undone, if China's rising strength were offset by increasingly conciliatory and unassertive foreign policies. The paradoxical logic thus runs counter to common sense and ordinary human instincts, because there is nothing natural about becoming more humble because one's power is increasing. Nor is it at all natural to de-militarize, because with rising wealth military growth becomes easier. Hence the paradoxical and unnatural logic of strategy is more often ignored than obeyed — and that is one large reason why history is to such a large extent the record of the crimes and follies of mankind.

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Until 2008, however, the external conduct of the People's Republic of China largely conformed to the "unnatural" rules of the paradoxical logic, as it has been shown in precise detail in the case of territorial disputes[i]. In the years 1960-1965, border treaties were signed with Burma, Nepal, North Korea, Mongolia, and Afghanistan, after the Chinese side conceded 82%, 94%, 60% 65% and 100% respectively of the disputed areas. In 1998, when China was in a far better condition, it conceded 76% of the disputed area to conclude a treaty with Laos, and 50% in a treaty with Vietnam. Boundary agreements were also signed with Kazakhstan in 1994 (with 66% conceded) Kyrgyzstan in 1996 (68%), Vietnam in 1999 (50%) and Tajikistan in 1999 (96%).

It was almost as if China's readiness to compromise increased with its relative power. By contrast, at sea where China is less favored than on land, the disputes over the Paracels and Spratlys remain unresolved till this day. With India, rival claims were not settled either, but agreements were signed in 1993 and 1996 to set aside those differences to pursue cooperation in other spheres; tacitly, the same was true of the maritime dispute with Japan, in line with China's overall "Peaceful Rise" 中国和平崛起 grand strategy[ii] (later relabeled with the more emollient "Peaceful Development" 中国和平 展) whose obvious aim was to dissuade resistance, and any coalescence of adversaries.

From 2008, however, there was a drastic change. Perhaps it was caused by the abrupt elevation of China's relative standing in the world caused by the Western economic crisis, which seemingly validated Chinese practices (The "Beijing Consensus") while badly eroding the prestige of Western-style Democratic Capitalism. Or perhaps the cause or causes were more complicated than a simple outbreak of hubris, but in any case the consequences were not complicated at all: confident assertions, ironical dismissals, and sharp warnings became more common in the language of Chinese officials commenting on international issues, with much talk of China's shift from reaction to action, from "rule taking" to "rule-

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making". Most publicly, when top Foreign Ministry officials addressed unofficial international conferences, arrogant condescension or outright triumphalism increasingly became their prevalent tone.

More important, China's long-dormant territorial disputes with India and Japan, were abruptly revived, in addition to the already active maritime disputes with Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam above all. On territorial questions, Chinese diplomacy definitely became more active, and in the case of Japan there was even a dramatic incident at sea that ended with Japan's humiliating retreat—whose effects on Japanese opinion were magnified by the Chinese Foreign Ministry's subsequent demand for an apology and compensation. It is as if, contrary to all historical experience, it was believed that such conduct would have no lasting consequences that such incidents would simply be forgotten, and that strong-arm tactics one day could be followed by a nice summit meeting on the next that would expunge their effects. That is delusional.

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As for the historical and legal rights and wrongs of these quarrels, they are of course entirely irrelevant in this context. Only the strategic outcome matters: as of now, January 2011, wide segments of public opinion in the countries at the other end of each of these disputes no longer view China's rise with equanimity but instead with concern, anxiety or even alarm. The governments of India, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam are more watchful than before, more focused on security rather than trade and some, howsoever tentatively, are beginning to coalesce against China.

That India, Japan and Vietnam in combination exceed China in total population, total economic capacity, and total technological advancement is not strategically significant in itself because nothing resembling a triple alliance is in sight, nor is it politically plausible.

But then again, no such alliance is necessary. Not coincidentally, each of the three countries has improved its own relations with the United States of late, and the one American talent that cannot be gainsaid is in the careful construction, patient maintenance, and gentle leadership of multi-lateral alliances year after year, decade after decade. The North Atlantic Alliance (b. 1949) is certainly the longest-lived multi-lateral alliance in history, and is served operationally by a standing military command organization (NATO). No similar Asian organization is likely to emerge, nor indeed any kind of formal multi-lateral alliance, but again neither is needed or even desirable. Purely bilateral arrangements would be perfectly sufficient, and would allow others to join in, starting with South Korea.

Moreover, unlike the British who had to make important colonial concessions to construct their 1904 "Entente Cordiale" alliance with France, the United States would not have to sacrifice anything to effortlessly assume the informal leadership of an eventual (and of course wholly undeclared)

anti-China coalition, in which its historic "Anglo-Saxon" allies and certainly Australia are also likely to join.

Against such a very broad coalition that need not be cohesive to be capable — a most unusual virtue in any alliance — China has only one certain ally: Pakistan, from whose nationality is as separable as those of Austria-Hungary, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Iran — if still under their present governments — are also likely to rally to China's side purely in the name of anti-Americanism, but among them only Ecuador is a Pacific power, and not one of the greatest.

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Only the addition of the Russian Federation to the Chinese side would have true strategic significance. Accordingly, if China's conduct persists on its post-2008 path inevitably evoking a coalition against it, Moscow will emerge as the true focus and prize of global diplomacy — even more so because the Russian Federation would bring with it its Central Asian allies.

So long as the West continues to badger the Russian government for being a Russian and not a Scandinavian or American government, China will have a fair chance of success in this contest, even though the Russians too have become its weary and watchful neighbors. For the other side, India may hold the key to success because its successive governments have wisely and very persistently refused to accompany their opening to the United States with the abandonment of long-standing connections with Russia and its military and aviation industries. To the contrary, even as India started to buy US military equipment, adding one more supplier to the fading Europeans and interactive Israelis, it has actually expanded its dealings with Russia's military aviation industries. India is allocating important sums for this purpose, an excellent investment strategically, because co-produced systems, starting with the successor to the versatile Sukhoi heavyweight fighter, cannot be offered to third parties without the consent of each side.

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To be sure, the very meaning of any Great Power strategic alliance is now far different from its 1914 predecessors. Those were veritable military pacts, mutual undertakings to mobilize and deploy combat forces for war. Their purely mechanical interaction could notoriously overcome whatever prudent statecraft remained to stop the path to war. In 2011, prudence is not more abundant, but nuclear deterrence is the sturdy obstacle to any war between nuclear powers,

indeed any combat that ranks above a mere incident. It is only as a theoretical end-point of military force-planning that war remains a valid concept within the circle of the greater powers — not as a realistic prospect.

Hence, these days, the defining function of alliances is not to combine combat forces and concert plans to prepare for war, but to the contrary, to dissuade war more broadly, by extending the reach of deterrence from ally to ally. This would also mean, however, that any bilateral crisis with China on one side, would become multi-lateral on the other, expanding the dimension of the crisis and its consequences on broader relations between all concerned. Thus even if war is simply ruled out or, much less realistically, crises are treated as inconsequential incidents, China's leaders would still have excellent reasons to be greatly concerned by the emergence of any coalition engendered by their own over-assertive behavior and excessively rapid military growth. Strategic alliances of course influence non-military relations as well, including international trade if only in subtle ways. If rival blocs emerge, restrictions on inter-bloc trade would be inevitable if only for dual-use equipment, and technologies, and that is only a start: as of now Chinese-made civilian telecommunications is sometimes rejected for security reasons. Even outright embargos more or less multi-lateral (there are always trade defectors) are a possibility in the event of descents into overt confrontations, as "cold war" substitutes for the impossibility of real war.

Beyond any material consequences, the purely attitudinal effects of worsening strategic relations would be very costly in themselves for the peoples on both sides. Communication and cooperation in all spheres of life would be diminished and deformed in all sorts of ways, atrophying the myriad of individual, familial, institutional, societal and national relationships that have flourished since China rejoined the world after 1976. Thus even the lesser evils of the present drifting to a multi-lateral struggle would be amply damaging for the world as a whole, but more so for a still rising China.

It follows that unless the Chinese government can somehow find ways to assemble an overwhelmingly powerful global coalition on its side, its best option at the highest level of Grand Strategy must now be to de-construct its assertive diplomatic stance over territorial disputes and much else, and decisively decelerate the pace of its military growth.

The latter has become an increasing problem in itself, not so much because of the actual, material, build-up of military strength whose dimensions are not especially immoderate, but because of accompanying displays that are highly provocative. One that preceded the 2008 turning point was the January 19, 2007 destruction of a Chinese satellite in orbit by a ballistic missile. That was not a new capability by any means, but there were no intercepts in space because of their alarming effects on all satellite-using countries, and the noxious scattering of debris in space. The very latest display seems calculated to alarm China's neighbors: the leaked photos of the J-20 fighter-bomber, whose ultra-modern appearance implies "stealth capabilities", and whose vast size significantly exceeds that of its largest US counterpart, the F-22 (whose production was stopped because it was

"too powerful"), implying a large internal bomb-bay for strike missions. It may be that many years will pass before the J-20 acquires efficient engines and advanced electronics to make it useful for combat, but by parking the aircraft in a Chengdu airfield unscreened from photography, one result has already been achieved: China's neighbors have one more reason to fear its military growth, one more reason to coalesce against it. Why that should be seen as favorable to China's overall interests is a mystery.

Perhaps it is delusional to believe that the Chinese leadership can resist powerful emotional impulses and determined institutional interests to instead subject its policies to the iron logic of strategy, with its paradoxical and "unnatural" prescriptions. The rewards would be very great — just as great as China's comparative advantage in most peaceful pursuits — but there is nothing easy about valid strategic conduct, indeed very hard things would have to be done. In China's case at this juncture, new declaratory stances with the softest and nicest words in place of arrogance would help, but could not be enough to stop the coalescence of adversarial reactions that is already underway. Nor can disputes be solved by ordinary diplomatic negotiations premised in the

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usual way on reciprocity and conditionality—to do so would merely open new venues for contention. The only option would be to set aside all disputes that cannot be ended by Chinese concessions (as in the past), or else to give them up to binding international arbitration. The Chinese government might itself assume the highly conducive task of initiating the establishment of an effective arbitration venue, and its modalities, in a very non-provocative transition from "rule-taking" to "rule-making". This would also be a good opportunity to diffuse the notion of *rén* (仁).

Most difficult of all perhaps, would be to adopt unilaterally a severe form of self-imposed arms limitation, to retain the nuclear deterrent and "defensive primacy" forces for territorial security, while allowing more offensive capabilities to atrophy, even those that are only offensive operationally, and not strategically. Militarily that would be a retrograde step, it would be unfair, and it would certainly disappoint perfectly understandable and not especially unreasonable military ambitions. But only a recessive military policy, along with an emotionally very unsatisfying emollient diplomacy, could balance the unprecedented magnitude of China's economic growth and technological advancement, keeping the whole within systemically acceptable limits. The more conventional course of continuing to forge ahead in all directions, hoping that all will turn out well after all, is certainly more natural, and politically infinitely easier. But the logic of strategy is not only paradoxical; it is also cruel to those who hope for the best instead of averting the worst.

References

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[ii] First enunciated by Zheng Bijan in 2004 at the Bo'ao Forum and more fully explained in *Foreign Affairs* (Sept./Oct. 2005) as "China's Peaceful Rise to Great-Power Status"

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