Understanding China’s strategy: Beyond ‘non-interference’
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The principle of ‘non-interference’ is often seen, especially in relation to Sudan and Zimbabwe, merely as a cynical cloak for the pursuit of China’s national self-interest regardless of human rights and good governance issues. If so, China would hardly be unique. Beijing’s approach is not significantly different in this respect from the way other countries pursue their interests. As Professor David Kang of Dartmouth College puts it: ‘The United States is highly selective about who we’re moral about. We support Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia-huge human-rights violators-because we have other strategic interests. China’s not unique in cutting deals with bad governments and providing them arms.’(1)

But the possibility should not be overlooked that it also represents a genuine assessment of China’s national self-interest as a rising power with no capacity for military force projection on a significant global scale, and therefore with a vested interest in preserving a rule-governed international system.

The thesis that these considerations were as weighty as oil-related considerations in China’s Sudan policy, and in its gradual shift, was outlined by Stephen Morrison and Bates Gill in their memorandum to the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee in February 2007:

‘Sudan’s contributions to China’s total energy needs are very small: Sudan accounts for only 5 percent of China’s total oil imports, and less than 1 percent of China’s total energy consumption. While the relationship with Sudan is important on a microeconomic level to some of China’s oil firms, it does not represent a critical strategic relationship on a macro-economic scale. Sudan’s energy is important to China and its future, but China’s motivations for its policies in Sudan also have their roots elsewhere. An important, but often overlooked motivation is Beijing’s concern with protecting the principle of national sovereignty and non-interference. These have been cast as bedrock to China’s strategy for becoming a global power backed by robust alliances. But even on this issue, Beijing’s interests in Sudan are pulled in other directions: from within China itself, from Beijing’s interest in enhancing its standing in the UN, and in its interest in sustaining bilateral relations with Washington, European states, and African powers.’(2)

UNDERSTANDING CHINA’S STRATEGY

This view of China’s motives in no way depends on some rosy or indulgent view of China as inherently more pacific or altruistic than any other power. China does not have the physical or financial capacity for a military response on the scale of the already-established powers. One lesson the Chinese leadership is widely held to have learnt from the collapse of the Soviet Union is the folly of getting trapped in an arms race with the USA. There is also the related imperative to avoid being seen as a threat.(3)

This explanation is of course entirely compatible with the view that China’s stance could alter at a later date when its ‘rise’ has been successfully completed. But some at least of the advocates of the present policy justify it on universal rather than pragmatic and conjunctural grounds.

One of the foremost of these is Zheng Bijian, a former vice-chair of the Central Party School when President Hu Jintao was its chairman and a former propaganda minister, and originator of the phrase ‘peaceful rise.’ As he maintains:

‘Some emerging powers in modern history have plundered other countries’ resources through invasion, colonization, expansion, or even large-scale wars of aggression. China’s emergence thus far has been driven by capital, technology, and resources acquired through peaceful means... China will not follow the path of Germany leading up to World War I or those of Germany and Japan leading up to World War II, when these countries violently plundered resources and pursued hegemony. Neither will China follow the path of the great powers vying for global domination during the Cold War. Instead, China will transcend ideological differences to strive for peace, development, and cooperation with all countries of the world...’(4)

According to Mark Leonard, Zheng Bijian’s theory was backed up by a major research project
sponsored by Hu Jintao and carried out mainly by PhD students from Shanghai, which looked at 40 case studies of rising powers and concluded that ‘rising powers “which chose the road of aggression and expansion” have ultimately failed.’ (5)

Nonetheless the ‘peaceful rise’ theory, while still implicit in Chinese public statements and policy stances, appears to have fallen out of favour in its more explicit forms as a result of inner leadership factional struggles, and also as a result of a counter-offensive by more nationalist academics, fearful in particular that it might be seen as a sign of weakness over the issue of Taiwan.

This may indicate an erratic movement between the second and third of the three possible foreign policy choices identified by Professor Qin Yaqing of China Foreign Affairs University, namely aggressive nationalism, utilitarian realism, and cooperative internationalism. He maintains that China’s foreign policy decision-makers are currently between the second and third, and moving towards the third.(6)

THE OTHER MYTHOLOGY

At this point we have to consider the danger of falling into a different and older sort of Western mythologising about China. In avoiding the ‘yellow peril’ demonology often resorted to by lazy media pundits (might we not be falling into the earlier mythology of the enlightenment thinkers such as Leibnitz and Voltaire who took at face value the Confucian self-image of imperial China, and enthused over a pacific empire presided over by a rational and benevolent bureaucracy? (7)

Might its modern version not be the consoling myth of a benevolent superpower, convinced in its own rational self-interest of the need to leave behind the pursuit of military self-aggrandisement in favour of a pacific rule-governed world order?

If China’s intentions are pacific, why should she require a 17.6% increase in her defence budget for 2008(8), bringing the annual total to $58m and ranking her fourth in global defence spending?(9)

The official explanation includes the need to increase benefits for military personnel to reflect rising living standards, to cover increases in the cost of oil, and to increase education and training. But another stated aim is to enhance the ability to fight a defensive war based on information technologies.

According to Jane’s industrial quarterly: ‘The United States has the world’s biggest defense budget by far, at $696.30 billion. The rest of the top five is Britain, $79.27 billion; France, $65.74 billion; China, US$58.07 billion; and Japan, $48.1 billion.’

The announced Chinese defence budget has more than quadrupled since 1998, but some analysts put the real figure much higher. Informed defence analysts appear to agree that these increases have resulted in large pay and benefit increases in the form of new uniforms, better food and living quarters, an array of new, mostly Chinese-made equipment - especially computers and communications gear - and increased tempo and realism of training exercises.(10)

In considering how this fits with China’s claim to a purely defensive strategy it is certainly necessary to recall that the country’s definition of its national territory includes not only Taiwan but also the disputed islands in the South China Seas.

Thus the potential for offensive action to deter a Taiwanese move to independence would fit within China’s definition of ‘defensive’, although the purpose of such a stance would also be seen as an incentive to contain the conflict within non-military limits.

The recent electoral victory of the Kuomintang’s (KMT) Ma Ying-jeou in the Taiwan election has reduced cross-straits tension and increased the chances of longer-term agreement.

But despite this tensions have intensified as a result of Washington’s announcement of a $6bn arms deal with Taiwan.(11) Although the deal was originally negotiated long before the election in Taiwan, it shows the explosive potential of the Taiwan issue.
However there is no doubt that the expansion in China’s naval budget and building programme is intended to enable a key shift in China’s stance in the East Asia region. The aim is not only to achieve the hi-tech potential needed to maintain China’s defensive potential to deter a Taiwanese declaration of independence, but is also intended to ensure China’s wider access to the open waters of the Pacific, thus creating potential friction with Japan and other regional players.(12)

‘STRING OF PEARLS’?

There is no reason to believe that developments in the East and South Asian theatres could impact on Chinese strategy in Africa, even taking into account the reports that China, which currently has no aircraft carriers, is planning a three-carrier battle group.(13)

But a more assertive Chinese stance in East Asian waters would certainly impact on Indian attitudes and on India’s already active and extensive naval role in the Indian Ocean, including Africa’s east coast. India has already signed defence agreements with Kenya, Madagascar and Mozambique. It conducts regular naval patrols, by agreement, in the waters of Mozambique, Mauritius and Seychelles. In Madagascar it has opened its first listening post on foreign soil, for radar surveillance of shipping movements, and is reported to be negotiating with Mauritius for a long-term lease of the Agalega islands. It has also conducted joint naval defence exercises with South Africa.(14)

‘Its fleet in the Indian Ocean is turning into one of the most powerful naval forces of the region, including new state-of-the-art aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and other surface combatants.’(15)

This has not prevented some scaremongering about an alleged Chinese ‘string of pearls’ strategy. One American strategic analyst has claimed that:

‘Each ‘pearl’ in the ‘String of Pearls’ is a nexus of Chinese geopolitical influence or military presence. Hainan Island, with recently upgraded military facilities, is a ‘pearl.’ An upgraded airstrip on Woody Island, located in the Paracel archipelago 300 nautical miles east of Vietnam, is a ‘pearl.’ A container shipping facility in Chittagong, Bangladesh, is a ‘pearl.’ Construction of a deep water port in Sittwe, Myanmar, is a ‘pearl,’ as is the construction of a navy base in Gwadar, Pakistan. Port and airfield construction projects, diplomatic ties, and forced modernization form the essence of China’s ‘String of Pearls.’ The ‘pearls’ extend from the coast of mainland China through the littorals of the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean, and on to the littorals of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. China is building strategic relationships and developing a capability to establish a forward presence along the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that connect China to the Middle East.’(16)

Yet the same author is compelled to add:

‘China’s development of these strategic geopolitical ‘pearls’ has been nonconfrontational, with no evidence of imperial or neocolonial ambition. The development of the ‘String of Pearls’ may not, in fact, be a strategy explicitly guided by China’s central government. Rather, it may be a convenient label applied by some in the United States to describe an element of China’s foreign policy.’

The Gwadur deep-sea port is a case in point. The state-owned China Harbour Engineering Company, funded with a $198m Chinese loan, has helped Pakistan complete the first stage of this project for a major Pakistan port near the entrance to the Persian Gulf at the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz. It does indeed have a strategic significance as the possible terminus of a land route from western China and central Asia to the Indian Ocean, which would have considerable economic significance.

But there seems little or no evidence that a naval base facility is part of the package, or indeed that China has any current intention or capacity to maintain an Indian Ocean fleet for which Gwadur could be a base. The same applies to the other civil engineering and commercial projects in the region which are quoted as evidence for the ‘string of pearls’ thesis, from Cambodia to Sri Lanka. Certainly the evidence does not indicate any current Chinese intention to rival India’s comparative naval predominance in the region.
However there have been indications that one argument used in Washington to secure ratification of the controversial US-India civil nuclear agreement was the perspective of the US using India as a ‘hedge’ against China in much the same way as China was played as a card against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.(17)

If this argument were seriously to appeal to policymakers in Washington and Delhi, this could indeed strengthen the hand of military hardliners in Beijing, who are nervous for China's sea lines of communication. However if China’s policy were to take a more militarist turn this would show itself first in the Taiwan straits and South China Sea.

On balance this must be seen as unlikely. The diversion of resources needed for China to present a significant naval presence or engage in a real naval arms race in the Indian Ocean as well as in the East Asian theatres would threaten the regime’s ability to deliver continued prosperity and growth domestically which is its main continuing source of legitimacy. So the only circumstance in which one can foresee China’s policy shifting would be if there was economic downturn at home and a section of the leadership was tempted to play the jingoist card abroad.

Nor is there any immediate sign of Sino-Indian tension developing to the level that would make this a remotely serious proposition.

Short of that the rational Chinese strategy would be to continue to push a multilateral approach to peacekeeping in the region including India and accepting US and Indian predominance so long as China has enough naval and military presence to qualify for a seat at the table.

So there seems little reason to dissent from Jonathan Holslag’s conclusion that:

‘[F]or the long haul, the geo-economics in question, specifically the vulnerability of its long supply lines, will prevent China from resorting to a kind of gunboat diplomacy that many powers pursued before. Despite changing interests, perceptions and means, China is and will remain to a large extent dependent on the good-will and collaboration of other players to safeguard its economic strongholds in Africa. As long as its social stability relies on the supply of Africa’s natural riches, China will thus have to stick to the path of security cooperation. In fact, it will be the main stakeholder in terms of peace, social stability, good governance and equitable development in its African partner countries... Like no other external power, it is in China’s interest to turn regional actors into flexible and widely supported organisations, claiming strategic ownership of conflict management by doing so.’(18)

A further motive for encouraging this approach is the emerging concern over security in key global shipping lanes, an issue heightened by recent incidents of piracy around the Horn of Africa. A UN Security Council resolution in June authorised nations to send warships into Somalia’s territorial waters to stop piracy and armed robbery at sea. A US-led naval force has been patrolling the area. NATO and the EU have expressed an interest in involvement, and the issue is a major factor in India’s regional naval presence.

There is a danger that the need for all would-be players to have a presence in the region, for reasons of prestige as well as security, will be seen to be having a share in protecting key global shipping lanes, and this could lead to a ‘leakage’ into African waters of great-power naval competition elsewhere.

But there is an alternative:

‘Several years ago, as international concern mounted over pirate attacks in and around the Malacca Straits, the governments of countries flanking the waterway Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia preempted any possibility of UN or foreign intervention by taking action to reduce piracy and safeguard shipping. They launched coordinated sea patrols in 2004, combined air patrols a year later, and improved intelligence exchange in 2006. Last month, Thailand became the fourth country to join the Malacca Straits patrols, which are backed by an anti-piracy agreement among regional governments and an associated information-sharing centre based in Singapore...the Maritime Bureau of the
International Chamber of Commerce, which runs a piracy reporting network for the shipping industry, acknowledges that the number of pirate attacks in the Malacca Straits has dropped because of increased patrolling by the littoral states.'(19) Alas there is little chance of an equivalent AU-coordinated African response to take control of the issue into African hands.

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