The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Playing By the Rules? China's Growing Global Role

Zhongying Pang

Playing By the Rules? China's Growing Global Role

Pang Zhongying, Director, Institute of Global Studies, Nankai University

Signs abound of China's emergence as a significant status quo power in the international order in step with its emergence as a major world economy. In its leading role in the 6-Party talks on North Korea, in its opening to ASEAN and to Africa, in its pivotal role in the Shanghai group of nations, China's geopolitical reach has expanded. So, too, in its economic and financial reach as China, with Japan, prop up the US dollar through their massive purchase of US securities at a time of financial crisis, and China extends its search for resources globally. In the following overview of six decades, Pang Zhongying speaks to international concerns about the nation's growing international presence and highlights distinctive features of China's approach to diplomacy including its prioritization of UN-sanctioned roles as reflected in its growing participation in UN peacekeeping and relief missions, and its criticism of unilateral intervention. The author emphasizes the importance of an expanded Chinese global role at a time of declining US power and envisages Chinese participation in an international order that is not simply dominated by the US. Pang places heavy emphasis on environmental issues, noting China's developmental dilemma, its rise to a position as the world's leading producer of greenhouse gases as well as recent efforts to address environmental issues. But like the nostrums of other powers, it is difficult to discern in China's policies anything approaching the steps that will be required to avert ecological disaster in the coming years. The author calls for major changes including progress toward democratization in China and in that nation's international policy while also spelling out the need for change in Western approaches to China. MS

As China engages ever more actively in the world system, it is coming under increasing pressure from a number of international actors who see its growing profile as one of the world's biggest challenges. Some in the West are wary of China's deepening cooperation with the developing world and especially its relations with "problematic" countries like North Korea, Myanmar, and Sudan. And then there is China's demand for oil in the international market, as well as its environmental issues. Concerns about China's policies toward its ethnic minorities were voiced in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics earlier this year.

The 6-Party talks

Questions like "Is China playing by the rules?" [1] and "What will happen if political and economic power shifts to China?" are being raised in the West. The first meeting of the Transatlantic Economic Council in November 2007 focused specifically on the question: "How do we react if and when we recognize that China does not fully respect the rules?" [2] As EU-US relations continue to improve, China will undoubtedly face more concerted Western pressure. One of America's current strategies is to treat China as a "responsible stakeholder" in the world order. This does not mean that America approves of China's current activities; rather, it reveals that many in the United States continue to doubt China's intentions and therefore need to encourage its good behavior. The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, which monitors for Congress the national security implications of trade with China, has been highly skeptical of China's commitment to "the rules." Europe too is wary of China's rise. The European Union has forged a "strategic partnership" with China, but there are many new developments that have offset the momentum of Chinese-European relations. The intensification of European trade protectionism and European interference in Chinese domestic disputes in Taiwan and Tibet are just two examples.

China faces pressures from all directions: Domestically it is challenged to protect its growing interests and citizens abroad. At the same time, the West presses ever harder for China to take its international obligations seriously. The West has not only interfered in China's internal affairs but also hopes to persuade China to abandon its policy of "nonintervention." Within this complex context, China continues to advocate the principles of sovereignty and "non-interference," while paradoxically it has become more and more involved in international interventions.

China's International Intervention Policy

In the 1950s China together with other Asian and African countries found itself on the defensive and as a result helped create a new international

principle called "noninterference." Before the principle was fully institutionalized, China entered the Korean War and then the conflicts in Indochina, which included the Vietnam War and other regional battles involving the "international communist movement." However, by the late 1970s and during most of the 1980s, China again played a small role in international affairs. In 1982 China declared its "independent foreign policy for peace." After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, China strictly pursued a "low key" foreign policy.

But since the late 1990s China's attitude toward international intervention has changed. While it still adheres to the principle of "noninterference," China no longer opposes international intervention organized by the West, as long as the intervention is legitimate and justifiable. For example, in 2001 a new doctrine of "the responsibility to protect" (R2P) was promoted by the West. Initially, some Chinese analysts worried that this concept would be used to justify unwarranted military intervention by the United States or some European powers, but gradually they recognized that R2P could be used to bridge the divide between supporters of "humanitarian intervention" and supporters of state sovereignty and nonintervention. They stressed that international intervention based on R2P must be only carried out under certain conditions. Particularly, they argued that a United Nations Security Council mandate for military intervention -- humanitarian or not -- is a necessary precondition.

In 2004 China signed on to the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change that released an influential policy report entitled A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility, which endorsed the R2P concept. China also agreed to the United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome, which states: "The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian, and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity." [3] A year later, China supported the similarly worded Security Council Resolution 1674, and UN Resolution 1679 to assist UN peacekeeping operations in Sudan.

Participation in UN peacekeeping operations further reflects this major shift in China's foreign policy. Since the 1990s, under UN mandates China has sent peacekeeping troops to conflict-stricken areas across the globe, most often to Southeast Asia. In 1992 the United Nations carried out a large-scale peacekeeping operation in Cambodia, and around 800 Chinese engineers and more than 100 Chinese military observers took part. In 2000 China was involved in peacekeeping activities in East Timor. All in all, China has contributed more than 7,000 peacekeepers to at least 21 missions around the world, more than the rest of the UN Security Council's permanent five members combined. In sum, China is the 13th largest contributor of peacekeeping troops in the world. [4]

China dispatched 135 peacekeepers to the Congo

Beyond peacekeeping missions, China has also become involved in other forms of international engagement. China provided civilian and military relief in the aftermath of the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia. And currently China is providing more than $10 million in aid for cyclone-devastated Myanmar. As a member of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, China supports the global efforts to control, reduce, and remove the danger that nuclear proliferation poses to global security. China has cooperated with the international community and major powers such as the United States and Germany to negotiate nuclear issues with North Korea and Iran. As the chair of the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's denuclearization, China has played a key role in maintaining an effective multilateral process. And as a member of the newly created UN advisory body, the Peacebuilding Commission, China supports post-conflict peace-building projects aimed at helping nations recover from war.

Broadly speaking, China's role in sponsoring, building, and organizing regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the East Asia Summit has gone significantly beyond its traditional policy rhetoric of noninterference. More importantly, China has participated in or sponsored regional and international military exercises with a number of key countries and regions.

Nonetheless, China is and will only be a part of international joint efforts mandated by the United Nations or another multilateral regional organization. China cannot carelessly involve itself in every offensive military intervention. Yet as it faces the strategic challenges of globalization, there is already mounting pressure on China to protect the growing number of Chinese citizens and interests abroad. Following the examples of noninterference policies in the African Union and ASEAN charters, China needs to carefully consider its right to intervene in humanitarian crises and severe attacks on China's interests or nationals.

ASEAN + 3

Although some in the West have harshly criticized China's noninterference policy when they talk about China's engagement in the Third World (for example, China's no strings attached aid policy), the West has also benefited from China's nonintervention policy. As a result, China's increasing de facto intervention may create new friction between China and the West, especially if Chinese interventions are unilateral. China and the West need to coordinate and even harmonize their actions when it comes to international intervention.

Security Cooperation Between China and the West

Since the end of the Cold War, a number of new security challenges have come into sharper focus, such as energy and climate change. The unequal distribution of wealth, power, and opportunity also threatens global security. China has played a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. Domestically, China's efforts over the past three decades in ameliorating mass poverty and in stabilizing a hugely diverse society have contributed greatly to global security. Internationally, China also supports dialogue between the South and the North and dialogue among the civilizations to prevent a "clash of civilizations."

There are key interests and challenges shared by China and the West. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is a great example of the need for cooperation. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that the input of China and other rising actors such as Russia, India, and Brazil is required to tackle global security challenges. For various reasons, America's willingness and its capacities for dealing with global security issues are declining. [5] As a result, the importance of China's constructive role is increasing.

Effective Sino-West cooperation on global security requires not only China's continued willingness but improved treatment of China by the West. Currently, the West's China policies are riddled with contradictions and anachronisms. For example, the West presses China to accommodate Western-centric international norms without considering China's aspirations, concerns, and interests. There is still a distinct difference between the reality of the "Western-dominated" or US-led international society and a truly universal international society. Many thinkers in the West feel that China should simply join the former rather than try to jointly build the latter. As one American scholar writes, the "Western-centered" or the "US-led international order can remain dominant even while integrating a more powerful China." [6] There has been an "expansion" of the West-dominated "international society." The question is: When this international society has expanded to include countries like a changed China, does the society of states need to be reformed?

The Climate Change Challenge

Since the late 1970s China has been a major factor in globalization, and China's sustained modernization has sped up global environmental changes. China has paid huge environmental costs in the name of developmental progress and now faces an unprecedented ecological crisis. Climate change will continue to have an adverse impact on China's natural ecosystem and socio-economic system. [7] This said, it is a legitimate right of the Chinese people to modernize their country. Given its size and economic growth rate, China cannot help but be one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases. International pressure over global warming has put China under unfair scrutiny.

Beijing confronting emission problems

China clearly recognizes the serious consequences of ecological degradation and it has taken measures to curb its pace. As Johanna Lewis, a senior fellow at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, explains, "increased international attention to the issue is reflected in China's domestic policy circles ... primarily through institutional restructuring aimed at better government coordination on climate-related policy activities. China released its first national climate change plan in 2007." [8] China's plan outlines six guiding principles: (1) to address climate change within the framework of sustainable development; (2) to place equal emphasis on both mitigation and adaptation; (3) to integrate climate change policy with other policies; (4) to rely on the advancement and innovation of science and technology; (5) to follow the principles of "common but differentiated responsibilities;" (6) to actively engage in international cooperation.

The international community has taken notice of China's climate policies. Though at times slow, China has moved to face the ecological challenge head on. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon writes: "Much is made of the fact that China is poised to surpass the United States as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Less well known, however, are its more recent efforts to confront grave environmental problems. China is on track to invest $10 billion in renewable energy this year, second only to Germany. It has become a world leader in solar and wind power. At a recent summit of East Asian leaders, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao pledged to reduce energy consumption (per unit of gross domestic product) by 20 percent over five years -- not far removed, in spirit, from Europe's commitment to a 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020." [9]

Protect or perish, China is at a crossroads: Should it continue to allow economic growth to dominate or slow down its greenhouse gas emissions? China wants "scientific development," and is also seeking international cooperation to help tackle that challenge. At the 2007 APEC summit on climate change, Chinese president Hu Jintao said "only cooperation can bring about progress in dealing with climate change." If other countries, especially those in the West, want China to develop sustainably, they must assist its effort to do so.

Steps for the Future

Regretfully, China has not fully defined its new role in international society. China is still using its old foreign policy principles and approaches. It has honored its commitments to international society but has played a relatively small role in shaping the system. Much of what China has done was driven not by China itself but by international pressure. In this sense, China's attitude can be described more as reactive than proactive. Its role in global governance is not yet commensurate with its ambition to be a "big power."

Inevitably, under the old principles and approaches, China and the West will clash. They have common interests but few common values. Because China is aware of its political disadvantages in a Western-dominated world, China has carefully avoided mention of political differences in its relations with others. As a consequence, the base of China's shared norms with international society is relatively weak and cooperation between China and the West always is restricted or troubled by their political differences.

Since China's rise in the 1990s, "democracies" in the world have been aligned against non-democratic China. As Singapore's prime minister Lee Kuan Yew points out, China's non-democratic system is one of major reasons why China comes under more international pressure than other countries such as India: "India's navy has an aircraft-carrier force; its air force has the latest Sukhoi and MiG aircraft; its army is among the best trained and equipped in Asia. India can project power across its borders farther and better than China can, yet there is no fear that India has aggressive intentions." He also said that Americans and Europeans "still have a phobia of the yellow peril... [and] China will have to live with these hang-ups." [10] A majority of Americans view China's growing economic and military power as a serious potential threat.

For a better world and a larger role in it, China needs to restructure its current foreign policy. Along with its economic and social transformation and ongoing political reform toward real democracy, China must harmonize its policies and actions with the mainstream of international society. But, at the same time, for cooperation rather than confrontation with China, the West needs to revise its failed and dysfunctional policies toward China.

NOTES

[1] "Is China Playing by the Rules? Free Trade, Fair Trade and WTO Compliance," a statement by Yasheng Huang at the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, September 24, 2003. Quote from Yongjin Zhang, "China Goes Global," the Foreign Policy Centre (2005) p. 8.

[2] Agence France Presse, "US, EU team up to tell China to play by the rules," November 9, 2007.

[3] United Nations World Summit Outcome Document (September 15, 2005).

[4] Rebecca Jackson, "There's method in China's peace push," available here.

[5] Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," International Security, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007) pp. 7-44; and John Shaw, "Barry R. Posen MIT Professor Sparks Debate By Advocating U.S. Restraint," Washington Diplomat (January 2008).

[6] G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" Foreign Affairs (January 2, 2008).

[7] China's National Climate Change Program from 2007, see documents, page 109.

[8] Joanna I. Lewis, "China's Strategic Priorities in International Climate Change Negotiations," The Washington Quarterly (Winter 2007-08).

[9] Ban Ki-moon, "A New Green Economics: The Test for the World in Bali and Beyond," Washington Post, December 3, 2007.

[10] Lee Kuan Yew, "India's Peaceful Rise," available here.

Pang Zhongying is Professor of International Studies and Director of the Institute of Global Studies at Nankai University; Senior Fellow at the China Institute of International Studies; and Director of International Studies Research Division at the Institute of World Economics and Politics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

This article appeared in Der Spiegel and at Internationale Politik, the English language journal of the German Council of Foreign Relations, on October 17, 2008. It is published at Japan Focus on October 18, 2008.

See Peter J. Katzenstein, Japan in the American Imperium: Rethinking Security

Created by Datamomentum