

Neo-china politics essay



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Neo-China Politics

China is interested in modernizing itself while at the same time maintaining security' is the only general statement that can be made about China's foreign policy. To achieve these two ends, China is willing to ignore conflicts that do not substantially affect its development or security. Economic organizations are welcomed because they facilitate economic development but security multilateralism is employed only where feasible, resulting in most security concerns solved bilaterally. This case-by-case determination of policy results in China supporting the status quo in some issues while challenging it in others. To better understand China's foreign policy requires an investigation into these three characteristics.

Post-Cold War Asia has been witness to a China that increasingly focuses its foreign policy on its neighbors rather than on a regional or global context. This stems from China's realization that free markets have triumphed over centrally planned economies and that a world revolution is not going to happen. This has two implications. One, China no longer needs to divert resources to involve itself in global politics since the proletarian revolution is not going to take place. Second, China needs to embark on a program of economic development and modernization (F. Wang p. 32 and J. Wang p. 80).

China has decided that economic growth should receive first priority before any other concerns because of two reasons. One, economic growth allows China to upgrade its aging military by purchasing advanced weapons or developing new weapons based on the infusion of technology from consumer

goods. Second and perhaps more importantly, economic development has become crucial to the Party's legitimacy to rule.

During Mao's era, ideological fervor provided the basis of the Party's right to rule. However, since Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in the late 70's and 80's, the CCP has increasingly relied upon economic progress as a source of political legitimacy. The Party has promised economic prosperity in return for the undisputed right to rule. Any slowdown in economic growth could potentially lead to political instability. Therefore, all available resources are directed to maintaining a healthy pace of economic growth (Yu p. 186).

At this point in development, China does not feel that it has the resources to be involved in remote conflicts that do not substantially affect China (J. Wang p. 80). Since closer conflicts tend to affect China more strongly, the bulk of China's foreign policy is directed at her neighbors. For example, China has been politically active in neighboring Korea for two reasons. First, a war on the Korean peninsula has the potential to develop into a broader regional battle that might possibly draw the United States and China in. Such a conflict would obviously be detrimental for economic development and could possibly result in the United States retaining entire control over Korea (Yu p. 188). Therefore, China has pursued a policy of maintaining stability (Roy p. 207) and the current power equilibrium (Yu p. 188). This has been achieved by careful foreign policies and diplomatic maneuvering with both Koreas and the United States.

With North Korea, Chinese leaders have frequently visited North Korea (Yu p. 188) and been a source of friendship when the world condemned North

Korea for the Rangoon explosion and the 1987 bombing of the South Korean Airline (although China did not defend North Korea's actions). In addition, the Chinese advocate direct US-North Korean dialogue and supports North Korea's call for renegotiation of the Armistice Agreement that ended the Korean War (Roy p. 209). China has also declared publicly " that it supported only ' peaceful' and ' reasonable' means for Korean reunification (Yu p. 188)." China has also attempted to influence North Korea to join the rest of the world by showing North Korean leaders examples of Chinese reform and ' domestic changes' (Yu p. 189). These efforts demonstrate China's commitment to stability on the Korean peninsula. The second reason for China's interest in Korean politics is because China has found South Korea to be a viable trading partner. Trade between the two countries was \$2 billion in 1990 and had grown to \$20 billion by 1992. China is now the third largest trading partner of South Korea. But trade with South Korea is not only important for the revenue that it brings in but also for the technology that South Korea brings into China (Yu p. 188).

The Korean example demonstrates how China is willing to commit resources and energy to foreign affairs when it has a potential effect on China's program of modernization and economic development. Since few remote conflicts have the potential magnitude of effect that Korea has on China, China has been relatively apathetic towards global politics. Even though China is no longer as interested in global politics as it once was during the Cold War, Taiwan is one issue that the Chinese are firmly committed to at any cost. When it comes to the Taiwan issue, China is willing to play regional or global politics because it feels there is enough at stake. The PRC is

adamant against any sort of diplomatic recognition of Taiwan as a separate nation. China has insisted that any nation who wants to establish normal diplomatic relations with China needs to adhere to the one-China principle (Roy p. 200). Failure to do so has proven to be an impasse as China had illustrated on several occasions.

For example, China used its UN Security Council veto to prevent the deployment of peacekeepers in Guatemala or an extension to peacekeeping forces in Haiti because both had diplomatic relations with Taiwan (Roy p. 201 and J. Wang p. 81). China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman explained, 'Guatemala cannot expect on the one hand to do something that harms the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China while on the other hand requesting China to cooperate in peacekeeping' (Tyler p. 5). Even the United States conceded to China by switching diplomatic ties as a friendly gesture to China. The Taiwan issue illustrates that China is willing to dabble in global politics only when it has a vested interest but is 'generally not interested in remote conflicts where China's interest is not significantly affected' (J. Wang p. 80).

It may seem that the only possible exception to China's actions would be when multilateral security bodies such as the UN or NATO have involved itself militarily in the affairs of sovereign states. But even such a fundamental offense to one of China's most highly regarded political principles (sovereignty) has not caused China to act little more than just rhetoric (J. Wang p. 80). China has consistently frowned upon such measures and insisted that military involvement is not the answer (J. Wang p. 92). However, China has stood out of the way by never casting its veto power on

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the UN Security Council in such cases except for the veto in 1992 on a resolution calling for an economic embargo on Cambodia (J. Wang p. 78).

Why China has stood out of the way can be explained from two perspectives. First, China may genuinely feel that military involvement has its limitations in enforcing collective security (J. Wang p. 79). Since the UN and NATO have limited resources, it would be unfeasible to go after every single potential problem (J. Wang p. 79). Second and perhaps more convincingly, China does not want to be seen as an obstructionist. A favorable international image would be beneficial to economic development so appearing as an obstructionist would damage that already shaky appearance. This example illustrates China's commitment to global politics only when it has a significant effect on its modernization. Since China's neighbors tend to have a greater impact on its development, China has been active in dealing with its neighbors but largely absent in global politics. The preceding example also exemplifies China's relatively new involvement in multilateral foreign policy.

In this age of globalization, China has become increasingly receptive to multilateral diplomacy especially in economic matters. There are several developments that have caused this shift in perception. First, China has come to the realization that the world has changed since the end of the Cold War. Economically, the countries of Asia have become more interdependent than ever, causing a need for "more standardization and coordination of economic activities" (J. Wang p. 82). Instability is detrimental for business so there exists a strong incentive to maintain regional stability by taking collective measures against possible trouble areas such as Cambodia, the

Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea” (Wang p. 82). China sees the world changing from a unipolar world immediately following the Cold War to a multipolar world. It is only natural that in a multipolar world, conflict resolution is most effective with a multilateral system (J. Wang p. 91 and Deng p. 55). Under these conditions, economic and security multilateral forums like ARF, ASEAN, Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), etc. have sprung up or gained in significance. Being neighbors with an ASEAN that is highly supportive of a multilateral security framework also puts pressure on Beijing to participate (Roy p. 179). Several implications follow. China has to a certain extent involved itself in multilateralism because it does not want to be left out in shaping the new world order (Christensen p. 245). In other words, to prevent from being acted upon, China has taken to be one of the actors.

Ironically, China may also see an inherent advantage in multilateralism that her neighbors use against China. While China’s neighbors see multilateralism as a vehicle to prevent China from throwing around its weight, China sees the same characteristic as being useful to prevent the United States from unilaterally or bilaterally influencing Asian politics (Christensen p. 246). An example of this would be China’s joining the ARF. The Chinese have hoped that by joining the ARF, they could break free of ‘ US dominance over political/security discussions in the Asia-Pacific region’ (Roy p. 179) on issues such as human rights, US-Japan plans to build a theater anti-ballistic missile defense system and the role of Japanese soldiers in international peacekeeping forces. In return, China has had to consider issues such as the South China Sea dispute in a multilateral forum (Roy p. 180). Second, Asian countries are generally fearful and concerned about a rising China’s

intentions and as a result, China has had to show not only in its bilateral foreign policy but also in its multilateral foreign policy that it is interested in a smooth transition into a global power and onto the world scene (J. Wang p. 92). For example, China in recent years has strengthened its relationship with ASEAN out of concern about the increased purpose of ASEAN to counter China's influence. By the early 90's China had established normal relations with all ASEAN nations and began to act as a dialogue partner in 1991. In 1996, China indicated its willingness to join as a full dialogue partner and was subsequently granted that status.

China-ASEAN cooperation culminated in 1997 when the first China-ASEAN Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur. President Jiang Zheming proclaimed that the meeting “ marks the beginning of a new stage of development in Chinese-ASEAN relations” (J. Wang p. 85). These Summits have gradually evolved from covering only economic issues to security issues, including ‘ promotion of confidence building measures, peacekeeping, maritime search and rescue, preventive diplomacy, nonproliferation and even sensitive topics such as the South China Sea’ (Wang p. 85). It is important to note that China makes a careful distinction between formal multilateral security mechanisms and unofficial security discussions.

In general, China is extremely hesitant about the former but supports the latter. This tendency results from the Chinese assertion that national sovereignty and non-interference in internal matters should be the ‘ highest principles of international relations’ (J. Wang p. 92). China is only willing to support multilateralism to the extent that this principle is reconcilable with their actions. Therefore Beijing supports multilateral organizations such as

the ARF, APEC, UN Collective Security, and ASEAN being characterized by weak institutionalization and informal dialogue rather than formal institutionalized regimes.

Collective security should not resort to military action, but should instead act as a supplement to political solutions (J. Wang p. 92). However, China is not willing to sacrifice its international image in defending this principle. Beijing has refrained from using its UN Security Council veto to impede multilateral security forces in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Rwanda because it does not want to be seen as an obstructionist (J. Wang p. 80) and thereby tainting its image in the UN. This raises the question whether China's new embrace of multilateralism is based just on a tactical adjustment (policy adaptation Hu p. 121) or is actually rooted in deeper perception shifts (learning p. 121). The lines defining these two terms are sometimes blurry but generally, a tactical shift would be if China simply saw multilateralism as a tool to gain advantages while learning would be characterized by a major shift in 'world outlook' (Hu p. 121) resulting in a genuine appreciation for multilateralism. There is evidence to support either assertions.

On one hand, it seems that Beijing has developed a genuine appreciation for multilateralism as demonstrated by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty issue. China has realized that nuclear proliferation threatens world and national security (Hu p. 121). Consequently, the pursuit of egalitarianism in international relations is not worth this risk. Beijing has shifted from opposing the Non-Proliferation Treaty to genuinely supporting its cause. However, it seems that the majority of China's new involvement in multilateralism results from Beijing's desire to balance US bilateralism with Japan

(Christensen p. 248) and the need to ease the transition into a global power by allaying its neighbors fears. Yong Deng argues that China sees growing multilateral networks through a “ state-centric prism, focusing only on how China could take advantage of these new ‘ external environments’ to protect and maximize its national interests (Deng p. 52). In that case, China has not really undergone any fundamental change in perceptions but rather just a tactical shift (Christensen p. 248). Instead, bilateral relations remain the default.

There are several reasons that account for this tendency. First, China has not had a positive experience with multilateral diplomacy because it was of the first targets of UN collective security when the Korean War broke out (Wang p. 74). The United States was allowed to operate its armed forces under the UN flag and the US influenced UN General assembly adopted a resolution that “ recommended all states embargo strategic and military material to China” (Wang p. 75). China has therefore cast a wary eye on all multilateral collective security. Second, China still prefers security matters especially internal matters remain bilateral and not ‘ internationalized’ because China really does not have any direct threats from the outside at least in the near-intermediate future. For the first time since the Opium War in the 1840’s, China faces no direct military threats. Instead, China sees internal problems such as the separatist movements in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang as the greatest potential source of instability (Wang p. 83). China considers these internal security concerns and therefore should be solved internally without any third-parties. In addition, China believes that each Asian state has their own distinct view of national security and the best way to achieve it (Roy p.

179). Multilateralism would only serve to complicate matters and invite foreign influence into an internal security problem.

Another reason China is still hesitant of multilateralism is because their realist perception dictates that a power struggle will almost always take place within any multilateral organization. Since China does not feel that it is yet strong enough to compete for power, it is hesitant to involve itself in “such a struggle too early, as it could find itself in an unfavorable position” (Wang p. 84). In addition, Chinese analysts may still believe that multilateral security organizations often require an enemy and Beijing fears that they may be cast into the enemy’s role. Therefore, the Chinese obviously do not want to commit themselves to something that may limit their freedom of action in the future (Wang p. 84).

Finally and perhaps most importantly China favors dealing with its neighbors bilaterally is because this lacks the complications that might arise from a multilateral security framework and maximizes its leverage over its smaller neighbors. A perfect example of this would be the Spratly Islands dispute. Currently there are six claimants to the Spratly Islands- China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines (Roy p. 185-186). China has insisted that each claimant deal bilaterally with China on this issue (Roy p. 190). Obviously, this is done to maximize China’s greater power, as each individual claimant is much smaller than China. China regards any efforts to resolve this issue in a multilateral forum an unnecessary complication or as a ganging up on China. Both territorial disputes and separatist movements are considered threats to China’s security and as a result China insists upon dealing with these concerns bilaterally without foreign intervention. It should

be noted that this fear of containment is a very real possibility as neighboring Asian states and the United States vacillate between containment and embracement.

Beijing hopes that neighboring countries will react to a Chinese emergence by jumping on the bandwagon rather than attempting to balance out or contain China's rising powers (Roy p. 192). This partly explains China's new enthusiasm in multilateralism but with minimum costs. Economic multilateralism has proven to be relatively costless considering the amount of benefits Beijing gets from it. In return for economic cooperation such as lower tariffs, technology and capital infusions, as well as ameliorating the apprehensions of her neighbors, all China has to give up is lowering tariffs (which is has reluctantly somewhat done). In contrast, security multilateralism would give China the important result of soothing its neighbor's fears but at the high cost of limiting its freedom of action in dealing with potential security concerns. This is a tradeoff Beijing is not yet ready to accept on a mass scale. Its then no surprise to see China warming up to economic multilateralism while remaining cold to security multilateralism.

For the time being, China would like to keep the status quo in security multilateralism because it does not see any advantages in a more comprehensive security framework in the region. This perception may change as China becomes more modernized, more familiar with multilateralism in general and gains confidence that its neighbors and the world are not out to contain its growth through the use of multilateralism. However, this may never happen if indeed the United States, ASEAN and the

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rest of China's neighbors embark on a realist foreign policy towards China. Then China's fears will be realized and a institutionalized security framework will never be supported by China. But at least in the present state, these questions remain unanswered and Beijing is content as long as China is allowed access to the tools of modernization, e. g. technology infusion and access to world markets.

There are several other security issues that China is contending with at the present. Two of these are territorial disputes- Taiwan and the South China Seas. In both cases, China has a significant stake in the outcome. The Spratly islands are vital to China not only because it potentially possesses a hoard of natural resources that China can use in its modernization but more importantly it has implications on other pending Chinese territorial disputes such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Senkaku Islands, etc. (Roy p. 186). Beijing could follow three logical possibilities in dealing with this issue. It can decide to unilaterally seize control of these islands with force. But this would obviously alarm ASEAN since several claimants are members of it. Most likely, Beijing would end up isolated diplomatically from at least the rest of Asia if not the world. China could also decide to back down and make concessions on the issue. But this would result in a show of weakness and would have negative implications in China's other territorial disputes. The last option China has is to 'shelve' the issue, to put it off until a later date. This is the option Chinese leaders have pursued. In addition, China has proposed that 'joint explorations' be conducted (Roy p. 190 and F. Wang p. 37) on the Spratly Islands.

Beijing has insisted upon keeping the status quo in this issue because it has little to gain from pressing the issue. Although the outcome of the Taiwan issue is more important than the outcome of the South China Seas dispute, China also seeks to maintain the status quo there. The outcome in Taiwan is more important because (F. Wang p. 36) it represents the Party's legitimacy and ability to restore rule 'over all rightful Chinese territory' (Roy p. 196) and a declaration of independence by Taiwan would destroy this hope, with 'shattering ramifications for the self-image of the Party and of China as a whole' (Roy p. 196). Essentially, the policy towards Taiwan has been: 'reunification is desirable, temporary separation is tolerable, but Taiwanese independence is unacceptable' (Roy p. 196). Military action is a very real possibility if independence is declared even if it means openly opposing American forces (F. Wang p. 36). The current 'temporary' separation does not prevent China from modernizing and since development is the short-term goal (and the consequences of independence are too staggering to be risked), the Chinese are willing to accept this temporary separation.

The Korean reunification issue is another security concern China is actively seeking to preserve the status quo. China desires above all stability on the Peninsula because any change in situation would most likely be unfavorable to China. For example, if the North were to militarily attack the South, this would likely draw China into the conflict. But any reunification at present time would most likely result from a collapse of North Korea (Roy p. 212). This would have several negative implications for China. First, a collapse might cause 'disruptions which could spill across the border into China' (Roy p. 208). Second, a South dominated unified Korea would be more

sympathetic to the West than to China and perhaps may even become part of an anti-China coalition (Roy p. 213). Third, a unified Korea would more effectively pursue territorial claims against China (Roy p. 213). Finally, reunification would result in South Korean investment funds diverted from China into developing a unified Korea (Roy p. 213).

These potential disadvantages have resulted in Beijing currently engaged in keeping North Korea from collapsing more importantly, has also resulted in Beijing pushing for quadripartite talks for a peace treaty in Korea (Yu p. 190). However, China does not seek to keep the status quo everywhere. For example, perhaps the most glaring example of China challenging the status quo is its desire to shatter China's image as a weak, cumbersome, and backward nation and become a global power. Beijing feels that this modernization is most effectively attained through economic development while simultaneously maintaining both internal and external security.

Since economic development is one of the keys to its ultimate goal, China is not interested in remote conflicts that do not significantly affect its economy or security. Due to their proximity to China, China's neighbors tend to have a greater economic impact on China or pose a more serious security concern. Subsequently, China seems to focus its foreign policy on its neighbors rather than on a global context. In security matters, this has resulted in China standing firm on controversial issues such as Taiwan, Spratly Islands, Tibet, etc. But despite Beijing's firm stand on security issues, economic and security multilateralism have developed albeit to different extents. Their acceptance is the result of a realization that globalization will continue to occur and that it is only natural for multilateralism to most effectively solve

problems in such an interdependent world. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders make a careful distinction between economic and security multilateralism.

Economic multilateralism such as the WTO and APEC are generally welcomed by Chinese leaders while informal security is still preferred over formal security frameworks. Chinese leaders are fearful that a rigid security framework might be used to balance or contain Chinese power but are willing to cede to informal discussions on security to prove that China is a responsible international actor and because any refusal might result in China being left out of international decision making. However, except in the nuclear non-proliferation issue, China's new acceptance of multilateralism is based on a calculated tactical adjustment rather than a true fundamental shift in appreciation for multilateralism.

China must feel secure in its new place as a global power before any true shift may occur. This can only happen if several conditions exist. First, Beijing must no longer feel threats of containment from its neighbors and the United States. Second, China must become content with its military power and begin to see preserving a status quo in military strength as desirable. Third, the outstanding territorial disputes must be resolved. Finally, the security of each Asian nation must become so intertwined that bilateralism becomes ineffective in dealing with rising issues. Until all these conditions exist, China will not truly embrace economic and security multilateralism, and the result will continue to be the incohesive, hypocritical foreign policy that China practices today.