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CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification

Evan S. Medeiros

Prepared for the United States Air Force

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



RAND PROJECT AIR FORCE

The research described in this report was sponsored by the United States Air Force under Contract FA7014-06-C-0001. Further information may be obtained from the Strategic Planning Division, Directorate of Plans, Hq USAF.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Medeiros, Evan S.

China's international behavior : activism, opportunism, and diversification /
Evan S. Medeiros.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8330-4709-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. China—Foreign relations—21st century.
2. National security—China.
3. China—Economic policy—21st century.
4. China—Foreign relations—United States.
5. United States—Foreign relations—China. I. Title.

JZ1730.A5M435 2009

327.51—dc22

2009026441

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Cover design by Carol Earnest.

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Published 2009 by the RAND Corporation

1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138

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Summary

China is now a global actor of significant and growing importance. It is involved in regions and on issues that were once only peripheral to its interests, and it is effectively using tools previously unavailable. It is no longer necessary to emphasize integrating China into the existing constellation of norms, rules, and institutions of the international community; by and large, China is already there. It is influencing perceptions, relationships, and organizations all over the world. China's international behavior is clearly altering the dynamics of the current international system, but it is not transforming its structure.

China's global activism is driven by an identifiable set of *perceptions*, *objectives*, and *policies*—some are long-standing and others are more current. Both China's foreign policy objectives and its policies have evolved in the last decade but with more change in the latter than the former. In this sense, China has a distinct foreign policy strategy, to the extent that any nation has one. China's strategy is best understood as comprising multiple layers, each adding to an understanding of the totality of it. This monograph analyzes these layers, assesses the challenges for China in implementing its strategy, and evaluates the implications for U.S. interests and U.S. policy.

China's Foreign Policy Outlook

China's international behavior is influenced by at least three historically determined lenses that color and shade its perceptions of its security environment and its role in global affairs. First, China is in the

process of *reclaiming* its status as a major regional power and, eventually, as a great power—although the latter goal is not well defined or articulated. Chinese policymakers and analysts refer to China's rise as a “revitalization” and a “rejuvenation.” Second, many Chinese view their country as a victim of “100 years of shame and humiliation” at the hands of Western and other foreign powers, especially Japan. This victimization narrative has fostered an acute sensitivity to coercion by foreign powers and especially infringements (real or perceived) on its sovereignty. Third, China has a defensive security outlook that stems from historically determined fears that foreign powers will try to constrain and coerce it by exploiting its internal weaknesses.

China's international behavior is also informed by the long-standing diplomatic priorities of protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity, promoting economic development, and generating international respect and status. These three priorities have been collectively driving China's foreign and security policy since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Yet, the policy manifestations of these three strategic priorities and the leadership's relative emphasis on them have differed over the last 30 years. (See pp. 7–18.)

Chinese Perceptions of the International Security Environment

China's view of its security environment has two overarching dimensions. The first is a widely held belief that China's success is inextricably linked to the international community, more so than ever before. The second is the pervasive uncertainty about the range and severity of threats to China's economic and security interests. For some, China has never been so secure and, for others, the numbers and types of security threats are growing, motivating deep concerns about the future.

On balance, Chinese leaders have concluded that their external security environment is favorable and that the next 15 to 20 years represent a “strategic window of opportunity” for China to achieve its leading objective of national revitalization through continued economic,

social, military, and political development. Chinese policymakers seek, to the extent possible, to extend this window of opportunity through diplomacy.

China's view of its security environment includes six mainstream perceptions:

- **No Major Power War:** There is a low probability of large-scale war among major powers, and thus the next 15 to 20 years is a unique period for China to continue to develop and modernize.
- **Globalization:** Globalization has redefined interstate economic and political interactions, bolstering China's global economic importance and enhancing interdependence among states. Globalization has imposed some constraints on China.
- **The Global Power Balance:** Multipolarity is rapidly emerging; although the United States remains a predominant power in the world, it is declining gradually and in relative terms. The United States is both a potential threat to China's revitalization as a great power and a central partner in China's realization of this goal.
- **Nontraditional Security Challenges:** China faces a variety of such challenges, including terrorism, weapons proliferation, narcotics and human trafficking, environmental degradation, the spread of infectious diseases, and natural disasters. These are redefining China's relations with major powers in Asia and globally, including by creating opportunities for tangible cooperation.
- **Energy Insecurity:** China defines energy security in terms of two issues: price volatility and security of delivery. China feels vulnerable on both fronts. Such perceptions are increasingly driving its efforts to gain access to crude oil and natural gas resources, especially in the Middle East and Africa.
- **China's Rise:** Chinese policymakers see the "rise of China" as an influential factor in global economic and security affairs. China is increasingly confident in its diplomatic reach and influence and feels it has succeeded in dampening fears of a "China threat," especially in Asia. (See pp. 19–44.)

China's Foreign Policy Objectives

Chinese policymakers have crafted a foreign policy strategy that seeks to accomplish five specific objectives: economic growth and development, reassurance, countering constraints, resource diversification, and reducing Taiwan's international space. This list of diplomatic objectives has expanded in the last decade as China became more integrated into the international community.

First, China seeks to maintain a stable international environment to facilitate continued reform and development at home—as Chinese policymakers have reiterated for decades. This domestic focus has a growing variety of external manifestations: China actively uses its diplomacy to expand access to markets, investment, technology, and natural resources. Second, China seeks to reassure Asian states and the international community that its growing capabilities will not undermine other countries' economic and security interests. Third, Chinese diplomacy, especially in Asia, seeks to reduce the ability or willingness of other nations, singularly or collectively, to contain, constrain, or otherwise hinder China's revitalization. Fourth, China is building political relationships to diversify its access to energy and other natural resources, with a focus on Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Energy security encompasses diversifying both suppliers and supply routes. Fifth, China seeks to reduce Taiwan's international space and limit other nations' ability to confer legitimacy on Taiwan. (See pp. 45–60.)

China's Foreign Policy Actions

China has developed and deployed a bevy of new and effective ways to pursue its five foreign policy objectives. It has also been more confident, flexible, creative, and assertive in using these new tools. China has established “strategic partnerships” with developed and developing countries alike and has initiated high-level “strategic dialogues” with several major powers. China has embraced multilateral institutions, in every region and on several functional issues. China's expansion of its

role in existing regional organizations and its formation of new ones have become staples of its diplomacy. China's use of economic diplomacy is robust and multifaceted, including not only bilateral trade but also outward direct investment, financial arrangements, development aid, and free trade agreements to advance both economic *and* political objectives. China's military diplomacy now incorporates extensive participation in United Nations peacekeeping activities, high-level defense exchanges, joint exercises, and joint training and education; reassurance is a major goal of these enhanced efforts. (See pp. 61–192.)

Challenges Facing Chinese Diplomacy

Beijing confronts several challenges that will constrain its ability to meet its diplomatic objectives and perhaps also skew the ability to understand China's intentions. First, as China's global presence and influence grow, China's neighbors and other states will expect more of Beijing. It is unclear whether China is prepared to respond to these demands, fearing an accumulation of too many burdens; this is already raising questions about China's predictability and its reliability. Second, China's approach to the Taiwan question, which can be inflexible and aggressive at times, undermines its ability to appear moderate and benign. Third, China's myriad and acute governance challenges limit the government's ability to manage internal problems that could spill over onto its neighbors. This governance deficit complicates Beijing's ability to comply fully with its commitments, making China appear as an unreliable actor. A fourth challenge involves weaknesses in China's decisionmaking system. The problems of excessive secrecy and the lack of coordination across the civilian, intelligence, and military bureaucracies hinder China's ability to respond rapidly and effectively to crises with international dimensions. (See pp. 193–200.)

Key Findings about China's International Behavior

China has been largely working within—indeed, deftly leveraging—the current international system to accomplish its foreign policy objectives. It sees more opportunities than constraints in using the current system to advance its interests. China's international behavior is not ideologically driven, and China is not pursuing a revolutionary foreign policy that seeks to acquire new territory, forge balancing coalitions, or advance alternative models of economic development or global security. China is not trying to tear down or radically revise the current constellation of global rules, norms, and institutions. Rather, it has been seeking to master them to advance its interests—an approach that, to date, has proven quite productive for Beijing.

China is also dissatisfied with certain attributes of the current status quo, such as the undetermined status of Taiwan and U.S. global predominance in both security *and* economic affairs. Beijing's response has been to work within the system to address its concerns; this has included attempts to reduce the relative power and influence of the United States, especially U.S. actions directly affecting Chinese interests. China does not currently seek to confront the United States to erect a new international order. But China does challenge some U.S. interests, particularly in Asia. On balance, China has been occasionally assertive but seldom aggressive in pursuing this and other objectives. China's approach has been geared toward attracting and binding others, rather than directly challenging their interests: It is more gravitational than confrontational. It seeks to create an environment in Asia in which states are drawn to, reliant on, and thereby deferential to Beijing, as a way to minimize constraints and maximize its freedom of action.

In part by design and in part by default, China is diversifying its sources of prosperity, security, and status—a trend that holds major implications for China's global influence and U.S.-China relations. China is using its diplomacy to expand its access to markets, investment, technology, and resources to fuel domestic development. It is developing new diplomatic relationships and expanding existing ones with numerous power centers including global and regional institu-

tions. It is also diversifying its sources of international status and legitimacy, to broaden China's appeal.

Chinese leaders continue to approach their foreign policy and foreign relations through the prism of internal affairs, to use foreign policy to assist the increasingly complex tasks of economic and social development at home. This does not mean that China is an insular nation that just wants to be left alone or that Chinese leaders view external affairs as a secondary concern. The reality of China's international behavior could not be further from that.

For China, acting locally now requires that it think globally. The links between domestic and international affairs for China have become stronger and have assumed new dimensions in the last decade, but it is this linkage that will continue to drive China's international behavior. China's twin goals of maintaining economic growth and domestic stability (and, thus, the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party) remain the prevailing motivations for its external behavior.

As China's global profile grows, China wants a "seat at the table" to play a greater role in shaping global rules, norms, and institutions. This is most evident in China's multilateral diplomacy: China has created new organizations and expanded its participation in existing ones. China's role as an agenda- and rule-setter will only become a more prominent feature of its diplomacy in the coming years. However, China's actual record in such rule-making is quite limited. Although China clearly wants to be part of such processes, it is unclear what new rules or norms it seeks to advance, aside from a greater voice for itself. To date, Beijing has promoted few genuinely new ideas and the institutions it has created are not meant to compete with or replace existing ones. Also, other Asian powers remain wary of China's diplomatic activism and have sought to limit China's attempts to extend its influence through participation in such organizations.

Furthermore, China's international behavior is a deeply transitional phenomenon. China's perceptions, objectives and policies are fixed for now but they are also evolving. Chinese policymakers clearly have objectives in mind, but they are groping their way forward with newfound power, influence, responsibilities, expectations, and constraints. China's international behavior is increasingly driven, as well as constrained, by

both domestic imperatives and a dynamic global security environment. Chinese foreign policy reflects a precarious balancing of competing internal and external demands, which are growing in number and variety. These demands, ultimately, will determine the content and character of China's future international behavior—contributing, at times, to seemingly contradictory or inconsistent behaviors. (See pp. 201–207.)

Implications for U.S. Security Interests

China does not seek to displace the United States as the predominant global power. Its elites do not currently want China to be a global leader on par with the United States—a peer competitor. They view their domestic challenges as too great to assume the risks and responsibilities associated with such a role, and they recognize that they lack the material resources to do so. They also fear that such a global role would divert much needed resources from national development and could foster regional backlashes against China. To be sure, Chinese leaders welcome a more multipolar world, one in which multilateralism reigns and U.S. power is constrained. Chinese leaders also want China to be eventually recognized as a great power—although that aspiration has very general attributes and is not well defined. Chinese leaders aspire to such a status as external validation of China's achievements, but they are also wary of the burdens and costs associated with it.

Some of China's foreign policy actions are directed at eroding relative U.S. influence in certain regions and institutions. Russia has been a useful Chinese partner in this effort. However, relations between the two countries remain complex, and they do not currently constitute a united front against the United States. The most competitive aspects of China's foreign policy are evident in the Asia-Pacific, which China views as its strategic periphery. China is not now trying to push the United States out of this region; Chinese leaders recognize the high costs and likely failure of such an effort. Some Chinese policymakers recognize the stability provided by U.S. security commitments. Rather, China seeks to constrain the U.S. ability to constrain China; that is, China seeks to maximize its freedom of action and leverage as a way

to counter perceived U.S. efforts to limit Chinese choices. Thus, China seeks to challenge U.S. influence when it directly touches Chinese interests (especially core ones), but China does not seek to confront the United States or expel it from the region.

Furthermore, China's diversification strategy is altering the conduct of U.S.-China relations. As the sources of China's prosperity, security, and status have broadened (and during a period in which China perceives that the United States is in relative decline), Beijing is becoming less willing to accommodate U.S. preferences and more able to resist pressure from Washington, and even to generate countervailing forces. The traditional U.S. approach of relying largely on bilateral diplomacy to shape China's international behavior faces new limitations.

China's ascendance in the Asia-Pacific region is changing the nature of U.S. relations with its allies and partners in the region. As China becomes more relevant to their economic, financial, and military affairs, the needs of U.S. allies and partners and their demands on Washington will change. In some cases, this makes U.S. policy and U.S. commitments more relevant, allowing Asian nations to engage China with more confidence. At the same time, none of these nations wants to choose between the United States and China; none wants the United States to leave the region; none wants China to dominate the region; and none wants to be drawn into an effort to contain China. As China looms larger in their economic development and regional security planning, this will complicate Washington's ability to set exclusively the terms of interaction and cooperation with allies, partners, and others in the Asia-Pacific region and likely beyond. (See pp. 208–220.)