

Chinese Perspectives on China's Place in the World and its Foreign Policy

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I'm pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you today about different perspectives within China's foreign policy elite about China's place in the world and about China's relationships with countries other than the United States, which Bob Sutter has covered.

My first job in the China field in the State Department was as an analyst of China's internal political leadership, so I'm not a complete stranger to this kind of analysis. In 1982, as a political China watcher for the American Embassy in Beijing, I was told by my boss, a distinguished and experienced China analyst, to write an obituary on Li Xiannian, who he told me was dead or virtually so. I wrote what I thought was an informative cable summarizing his life, his legacy, and the significance of his death. A year later, this dead man became President of China, and he lived more or less happily another nine years till his death, which I hope did not occasion a review of the American Embassy archives on Li. So I do have a track record of sorts as a student of China's political leadership.

My first mentor on China-watching was Bob Suettinger. Bob has written many superb articles and a fine book talking about China's internal politics. Invariably, early in his article or book, Bob says words to the effect that it is impossible for an American to read what is really going on in China behind the walls, the facades, the empty communiqués and press releases. I am not about to prove Bob wrong by identifying by name the leaders of different factions or schools of belief. I can't, as I proved long ago with my cable on Li Xiannian. I also should add that I am not a scholar of China's internal politics, or indeed a scholar of anything. I've been a practitioner, not a student, of relations between the U.S. and China for most of the last quarter century. So what I offer in the way of observations reflects experience rather than deep research.

What I can say is that there are significantly differing views on a number of important foreign policy issues. Here are the ones where we have seen, and are likely to continue to see, debated:

1) China's overall strategy: Long-standing leading Party propagandist Zheng Bijian put forward the doctrine of "China's peaceful rise" in November 2003. The essence of the theory was that China faced enormous domestic challenges in building its economy and a stable and developed society for at least a generation. In order to achieve its objectives, it needed a peaceful international environment. That included peace with its neighbors and with the United States. China's rise in no way would resemble Germany's or Japan's, would not result in imperialism or aggression, and should be viewed with ease by its neighbors.

This theory came under attack from the left and the right. On the left, critics, who were relatively vocal in defense and security agencies, argued that the use of the word "peaceful" (*heping*) in the theory seemed to preclude China's military options with regard to reunification vis-à-vis Taiwan. Others argued that for China to unilaterally declare its unconditional peaceful intent was a form of appeasement, or emboldening, of the United States and/or Japan vis-à-vis China. On the right, primarily in the Foreign Ministry, critics argued that use of the word "rise," particularly in its Chinese form (*jueqi*), which implies a suddenness, would be viewed as menacing by China's neighbors. The issue ultimately went to the Politburo Standing Committee (after Premier Wen Jiabao had used the term publicly). The Standing Committee refused to endorse the term, but there were objections to the notion that the phrase should be deemed unacceptable. The result was that the term "peaceful development" became the Party norm, but since then some scholars and other non-officials also have continued to use the term "peaceful rise."

2) Japan: There has been significant debate within the foreign policy elite on relations with Japan. Over the last year, there seemed to be emerging a view at the top of

the leadership, said to be endorsed by Hu Jintao, that China should seek to improve relations with Japan. The movement in that direction shifted abruptly this past March, not because of an internal split but, uniquely in modern Chinese history, because of popular feeling: in this case, publicly manifest antagonism toward Japan. This is not the presentation in which to offer a comprehensive description of what has happened in Sino-Japanese relations in the last year, but the relevant point here is that the demand for a tougher position came from outside the leadership. The campaign to deny Japan a permanent seat in the UN Security Council began among Chinese living in the United States and soon garnered 44 million Internet supporters, this in a country where the total number of Internet users is between 100 and 130 million. The popular anger against Japan is due, in no small part, to the Party's "patriotic education" campaign of the last decade, but the leadership concluded in April that it had created a monster that had gotten out of hand. The leadership recruited some of China's senior-most retired diplomats to go to the campuses to explain why Japan mattered to China, to persuade them that the Government knew how to defend China's national interest, and to urge them to stop their protests. It was apparent from press articles at around that time that some Chinese scholars believed, however, that China should take no steps to patch up relations with Japan, that the burden was entirely on the Japanese side, and that to argue that Japan was important to China was to surrender leverage. I believe that the present consensus to freeze relations with Japan because of Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, but not to allow them to deteriorate further, is only a temporary papering over of differences that will reemerge if and when a future Japanese Prime Minister deals with history issues differently.

3) Energy security. Since Hu Jintao proclaimed the "going out" investment policy in 2002, with concentration on primary resources principal among which are sources of energy, there has not been significant debate over whether Chinese investment abroad is a good thing. That issue is settled. With 800 billion dollars in foreign exchange reserves, it is a natural development. But there are a number of subsidiary debates of consequence. One is over how much China can rely upon the fair and adequate functioning of international oil markets to provide it the massive imports it will

need. Some, particularly younger economists and technocrats, believe that China can rely upon the markets and it will save money if it does so. Others, especially in the National Development and Reform Commission and the national oil companies, believe that in the interest of national and energy security China must acquire equity shares in foreign companies, paying a premium if necessary, and acquire the technology to allow its companies to compete with the international companies. There are differences among specialists about which countries are more and less reliable as suppliers, with unhappy experiences in Russia and Iran creating skeptics about the degree to which China can rely upon them, even as national policy builds strategic partnerships with both. And cutting across these divisions are those who argue that China's overwhelming top foreign policy priority is to maintain a stable relationship with the U.S., which may occasionally mean exercising caution in their energy-related relationships with at least some of the bad actors who seem to predominate in the oil sector.

4) While I have not been asked to talk about policy toward the United States, I would like to mention a tangential issue: The role of views about America broadly, and the role of the America hands specifically, in affecting relations with countries other than the United States. One frequently hears, and sees evidence, that China's America hands tend to be rather cautious in arguing their case for fear of being seen as "pro-American," apparently not a healthy identification. Those of us who have dealt with a succession of Chinese Vice Ministers and Ambassadors have certainly seen this phenomenon, such as when former Ambassador Li Zhaoxing cemented favor back home with his blistering reaction on American television to the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade back in 1999. But it would be a mistake to see the so-called America hands as crippled by identification with the U.S. There are a number of issues outside the purely bilateral relationship between our two countries where their voice is heard, though not always dispositive, or where leadership concern for the relationship with the U.S. affects discussions. For example,

- The development of an East Asian community. The America hands understand that the more robust such a community becomes, the more the U.S. will object. They do

not want to project the appearance that China is seeking to dominate Asia, or to expel the U.S. from the region for risk of retaliation. Therefore, they seek to slow-walk the rapid or extensive development of East Asian institutions.

- Relations with bad actors, especially Iran. The America hands realize that Iran not only is engaged in problematic international behavior by its pursuit of nuclear weapons, but also is regarded as a national security concern by the U.S. As China deepens its energy reliance upon Iran, they are providing some pushback – thus far not effectively so, but should U.S. pressure escalate, that could change. Certainly in the past China’s relations with Iran have been altered in response to U.S. pressure.

- Korea. The America hands understand that one of China’s trump cards in proving the value of China to Americans is its ability to affect North Korean behavior. Thus, America hands were deeply involved in the launching of the Six-Party Talks, and they tend to take a more skeptical view of North Korean behavior than their counterparts elsewhere in the Foreign Ministry.

Many observers of China’s foreign policy tend to look for ideological factions, or schools of thought that advocate different foreign policies, or for institutional positions, indeed much in the manner they would analyze the American foreign policymaking process. I am not convinced that this is the best way to look at China’s foreign policy debates today. It is not that I accept the line that one often hears from Chinese officials and think tank scholars, that there are not significant differences and that everyone shares the same perspective. Rather, I believe there are some distinct characteristics of China’s foreign policymaking apparatus that tend to mute, or at least obscure, differences.

First, the Foreign Ministry has a predominant role in foreign policy that is not duplicated by the role of the State Department in the United States. There is no entity comparable to the American National Security Council to coordinate, to draw together views, or to mediate. There is a Foreign Affairs Leading Group, but its meetings are too episodic and its bureaucratic underpinnings too shallow to think of it as an NSC

counterpart. The PLA does have a voice on international security issues, to be sure, expressed through the Central Military Commission. Its views on the Taiwan issue seem to be consequential. But on other issues, it does not have the clout of the MFA.

Second, there is no incentive for individuals or groups within the bureaucracy to maintain or develop a distinct perspective, or global outlook, on foreign policy issues. The leadership lays down an overall line, reflecting its view of China's strategic requirements. The role of ministries and individuals is to implement that line, not to challenge it or throw up alternatives. Issues tend to be joined, and differences argued out, case-by-case based on the particular facts, not by factions offering differing world views. This is the framework that I believe generally operates at the present, at a time when the Party leadership is relatively unified. Should differences develop among the leadership, however, we could see the emergence of clearer factions within the foreign policymaking apparatus, reflecting the views of rival leaders.