
Original Article

Rethinking China's grand strategy: Beijing's evolving national interests and strategic ideas in the reform era

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Abstract The question of China's grand strategy is of great importance for understanding the international impact of China's rise. Both Western and Chinese scholars dispute whether China has developed a coherent grand strategy in the reform era. The main reason for the controversy seems to lie as much in theoretical and methodological assumptions about defining and analyzing grand strategy as in empirical validity. This article contributes to the debate by adopting a novel theoretical approach to analyzing grand strategy by seeing it as the conjunction of national interests and strategic ideas. It examines China's evolving national interests and strategic ideas in the reform period in order to clarify the exploratory, evolutionary and adaptive nature of policy change. China cannot be said to have developed a premeditated grand strategy during this period. Even though one may still be able to rationalize elements of China's foreign policies into a grand strategy, it comes at the cost of missing their changing nature.

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Introduction

The multiple effects of China's rise are a central topic in the study of international politics. Among various approaches to understanding these dynamics, an important question concerns whether the PRC (People's Republic of China) has developed a grand strategy in the past 30 years when the success of economic reform has catapulted it to the international spotlight. Among both Western and Chinese scholars, this is a disputed question. To Avery Goldstein's argument that China has settled on an accommodationist strategy since the mid-1990s, for example, Robert Sutter counters with Chinese leaders'



vulnerability and uncertainty embedded in contradictory and reactive foreign policies.¹ In addition, prominent Chinese assessments range from a grand strategy after the early 1980s in the earliest, an activist one since 2002 after China has gained sufficient international experience, to no clear strategy at all because of the contingent and adaptive nature of policy development.²

All these views can claim some empirical support. The main reason for the controversy seems to lie as much in theoretical and methodological assumptions about defining and analyzing grand strategy as in empirical validity. Many studies of grand strategy have a strong feel of *post hoc* scholarly rationalization. That is, although national governments often do not have any overarching grand strategic plan, and their strategies unfold in contingent and piecemeal steps, scholarly research has made it seem as if they had such a premeditated strategic design. Thus, a grand strategy can almost always be inferred if one tries hard enough to rationalize it. Despite its *post hoc* quality, this approach still has its value. Rationalized grand strategies enable us to see the strategic choices states have to make in the face of trade-offs between ends and means in national policymaking, and are thus useful for understanding long-term policy evolutions. In some cases, a series of improvised and incremental responses may build up into a more or less consistent grand strategic path (Solingen, 1998, pp. 9, 19; Dueck, 2006, p. 11).

Nevertheless, it is still important to ask, in a case such as China, whether the Chinese government has had a grand strategic plan in the reform era (1978-present) and whether it makes sense to speak of a Chinese grand strategy during this period. Methodologically, this article adopts a 'prospective' rather than 'retrospective' method in analyzing grand strategy formation. Theoretically, it employs a novel approach to analyzing grand strategy by seeing it as the conjunction of national interests and strategic ideas. Once China's evolving national interests and strategic ideas are clarified, the contingent, adaptive and evolutionary nature of foreign policies will become apparent. Even though one may still be able to rationalize these policies into a grand strategy, it comes at the cost of missing the changing nature of China's foreign policy in the reform era.

This article begins by providing an analytical framework for grand strategy formation, positing the key concepts of national interests and strategic ideas. The following four sections analyze the changing nature of China's foreign policy in the 1980s, 1990s, 1999–2008 and 2008–2011. The conclusion summarizes the main policy characteristics, explaining why a *post hoc* approach to rationalizing China's grand strategy may not be the best way to understand China's foreign policy in the reform period.

An Analytical Framework for Grand Strategy Formation

In this article, grand strategy is defined as the distinctive combination of political, economic, military, cultural and ideological means by which a state

seeks to ensure its national interests. A coherent grand strategy must contain identifiable elements of ends and means in a state's overall foreign policy. I define the end to be achieved in a state's grand strategy as a specific set of national interests as perceived by national leaders, and the means for achieving this end as the combination of all usable national resources.³

Because the goal of grand strategy is to fulfill perceived national interests, the process of strategy formation will depend on the specific nature and character of these interests. An implication is that when the international system sends no unambiguous signals as to what are the most vital interests, grand strategy will often require domestically generated ideas and principles to animate it. All grand strategies may have to be supported by such animating visions from the domestic level, but it is especially true in times of major international uncertainty. For example, American grand strategies in the past, according to John Ruggie (1997), have linked the pursuit of American interests to a transformative vision of world order that appealed to the American public. These organizing principles express general milieu preferences concerning the overall character of international relations. Such *world visions* should be distinguished from *strategic ideas* about policy means for realizing or protecting perceived national interests, because world visions refer to the highest-level national principles about the general shape of international relations and the country's role in it.⁴

Most International Relations (IR) theories tend to prioritize either international or domestic factors in analyzing grand strategy, given the juxtaposition of the opposing *realpolitik* and *innenpolitik* traditions in foreign policy analysis (Carlsnaes, 2002). But it seems that the best approach to grand strategy analysis is neither to prioritize international over domestic factors or vice versa, nor to categorically separate these two levels in order to theorize the effect of one or the other, but to take an interactive or synthetic approach by considering the interaction and mutual feedback between domestic interests and the international environment. Such an approach will require a conceptual bridge to connect the international–domestic interplay. I posit *strategic ideas* as the crucial linkage between systemic stimuli and domestic interests. Theoretically, this allows for the incorporation of constructivist insights into the analysis, but this analytical move is also based on the premise that grand strategy formation is a result of policy consensus on the definition of national interests and the appropriate means for realizing them.

National interest is defined as a consistent set of objectives designed and sought by central policymakers to enhance the material utility and ideational values of the country as a whole (Krasner, 2009, pp. 6, 28). Definition of the national interest is about the subjective assessment of a state's needs and objectives in a given situation. Clearly, the national interest can be both material (for example, security, wealth, power) and ideational (for example, values, status), originating from the intrinsic qualities and needs of the state itself, as

well as the role, identity and culture that the state inhabits (Hurd, 2007, p. 42). *Strategic ideas* refer to beliefs about effective policy means for achieving national interests. They describe the strategies for the attainment of goals in means–ends relationships. These beliefs may be held by individuals or groups, but when they become collective national ideas, they become ideational candidates to shape grand strategic choices (see Legro, 2005).

We can now posit a general formula for grand strategy formation: national interest + strategic ideas = grand strategy.⁵ Grand strategy is formed on the basis of a clear definition of the national interest, as well as clearly developed strategic ideas about how to effectively achieve it. In looking for a grand strategy in a given period, therefore, we should ask whether the country has defined a consistent set of its national interest and whether it has developed clear policy ideas to achieve it. A significant gap still exists between strategic ideas and policy implementation and hence international behavior, as the intermediary stage is subject to the influence of political bargaining, bureaucratic politics, resource mobilization and other domestic factors. But this basic formula provides a good first criterion, and perhaps also a generous one, for determining the existence of grand strategy.

As the conception of national interests and strategic ideas is subject to international and domestic constraints, grand strategy will emerge through the process of ideational debate and competition structured by the international–domestic strategic framework a state faces in a given situation. The process and outcome of these ideational debates may in turn be influenced by domestic factors such as the decision-making structure, political bargaining and public opinion. National interests may appear different to different domestic actors, who may propose different strategies to meet the perceived interests. This suggests that grand strategy formation is in general an inherently difficult process.

In the empirical analysis below, I aim to determine whether China has had a consistent grand strategy in the reform era by reviewing a series of policy debates about national interests and strategic ideas. Incidentally or not, these debates have taken place about once every 10 years:⁶ in 1978–1982, in 1989–1991, in 1999 and just emerging following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). The purpose is to assess whether China can be said to have possessed a coherent grand strategy defined as the conjunction of national interests and strategic ideas for achieving those interests, not to provide a causal analysis about the determinants of China's foreign policy.

The 1980s: Transforming the Strategic Framework

'National interest' is an apposite concept for analyzing China's foreign policy change in the reform period because, in contrast to the Maoist period

(1949–1976) when policy was often ideologically driven, Chinese thinking began to be framed explicitly in terms of national interests after the early 1980s. Such interest-based thinking was one of the defining characteristics of policy change during this period (Niu, 2010, p. 254). Developed between the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in December 1978 and the Twelfth Party Congress in September 1982, Deng Xiaoping's maturing conception of China's national interests was the guiding force behind this change.

With the Twelfth Party Congress in 1982, a comprehensive view of China's national interests and a new foreign policy line both came into being. Deng addressed the Congress by singling out economic development as the key objective. The General Secretary Hu Yaobang then explained that henceforth China would pursue an 'independent and self-reliant foreign policy of peace', and would follow the principle of non-alignment in the conduct of its relations with the United States and the Soviet Union in order to exercise independent diplomatic initiatives. Deng transformed the main foreign policy task to be the search for a peaceful environment for China's modernization. As a further justification for the new policy, he began to propose in the mid-1980s that 'peace and development', not war and revolution, had become the main themes of international politics of the era (see Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, 2008, pp. 259–261, 367–368).

Viewing economic development as the basis for solving domestic and international problems, Deng accorded economic interest the central place in policymaking and required the subordination of all other interests, including military modernization crucial for China's security, to this overriding interest. This change of policy priority was a major transformation because until then China had been preoccupied with its security interests related to state survival, autonomy and sovereignty (Yan, 1997a, pp. 262–263).

Realization of the new economic priority would demand a new set of strategic ideas and policy changes. Yet in the 1980s, few enduring strategic ideas came into being. What appeared was either overarching strategic judgment such as 'peace and development' or vague notions of opposing hegemonism and promoting a new international economic and political order. Strategic ideas in the sense of concrete proposals about effective means for achieving national interests were in short supply. Rather, policy evolved instrumentally in accordance with newfound economic needs. The economic priority impelled China to focus ever more strongly on closer economic relations with the United States, Japan, and other more developed Western and Asian countries well integrated into the Western-dominated international economic system, because it is these countries that possessed the markets, technology, managerial expertise and financial resources crucial for China's modernization (Sutter, 2008, p. 74). Indeed, the economic imperative necessitated a pragmatic foreign policy for



building cooperative relations with the developed world and keeping the external environment stable for domestic reform. Thus, China began in the early 1980s to interact with major developed countries, improve relations with its Asian neighbors and join international organizations.

In fact, China's neighborhood policy, great power diplomacy and regional multilateralism that are often identified as major policy initiatives of the 1990s all had their roots in the 1980s. For example, Beijing's experience in multilateral diplomacy began when it joined the consultative Track II Pacific Economic Cooperation Council in the early 1980s (Yahuda, 2005, p. 351). This experience facilitated its joining the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation organization (APEC) in 1990, and the 1990s further witnessed an important evolution in Chinese multilateralism. But all these policy changes were not the results of a master plan, a pre-designed grand strategy, but the evolutionary products of the instrumental steps taken on the way to economic modernization.

The 1990s: From Historical Passivity to Incipient Activism

Economic interests continued to dominate China's policy agenda in the 1990s, but the changing circumstances of the decade demanded the safeguarding of several immediate political and security interests in the service of the economic priority. Because China needed the outside world as an essential source for modernization, it had to strive for a favorable regional environment and cooperative relationships with major countries in the world. The task of the decade was to overcome the post-Tiananmen diplomatic isolation, defuse the 'China threat' theory in Asia and take initiatives in shaping a benign external environment for China's rise.

Overcoming International Isolation

Facing diplomatic isolation and sanction in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Incident of June 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet block at the end of the Cold War, Beijing was presented with several fundamental questions. Was the emerging post-Cold War international politics still characterized by peace and development? How could China deal with new challenges in a transformed geopolitical setting? For a time, the top leadership debated the changing nature of international politics. And given the US-led sanction against China, some even suggested a new Maoist line of creating an international anti-US united front (Wang and Sun, 2010, p. 288). However, with Deng taking the helm, the leadership assessed by the summer of 1991 that the

world was moving toward multipolarity, that peace and development were still the main themes despite international turbulence, and that it was possible to achieve a favorable external environment, thus concluding that the fundamental foreign policy principles established in the early 1980s should remain unaltered. These judgments made possible more policy pragmatism (Zhang, 2010, p. 38).

Between 1989 and 1992, the task was how to meet the immediate political interest of overcoming international isolation. It was at this juncture that Deng advanced a set of enduring strategic ideas. Among his famous ‘twenty-eight characters’ formula, the most significant were the ideas of *Tao Guang Yang Hui* (TGYH: conceal one’s capability from outward display) and *You Suo Zuo Wei* (YSZW: make some contributions).⁷ They were meant to navigate China out of diplomatic isolation by trying to establish good relationships with all countries while keeping a calm and low-profile approach. Importantly, Beijing realized that given the sanction was Western-imposed, the first diplomatic breakthrough was more likely to be made on its periphery. Thus, while trying to improve relations with the West, Beijing made neighborhood diplomacy the priority of the 1990s. By 1992, China had established or improved relations with most of its neighbors and resumed relations with major Western countries including the United States, thus successfully overcoming the adverse circumstances of the previous 3 years.

Strategic Reassurance and Incipient Activism

In the early 1990s, Beijing was preoccupied with overcoming isolation by expanding its diplomatic space. This determined a largely reactive approach focused on its narrow political interests. Although successful in normalizing China’s foreign relations, this self-interested approach was undermined by three events that were instrumental in shaping Chinese perceptions of its role in Asia and in giving rise to a ‘new diplomacy’ after the mid-1990s (Medeiros and Fravel, 2003): China’s seizure of Mischief Reef in the South China Sea in 1995, its missile tests in the Taiwan Strait in 1995–1996 and the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997–1998.

The first two events produced widespread unease about China’s rising power. Negative foreign reactions made Beijing realize that its assertiveness had alarmed its neighbors, giving substance to the ‘China threat’ argument and raising the prospect of a US and Asian strategy of containing China (Foot, 2006, p. 85). They had thus damaged China’s political and security interests, threatening to put its economic interests in jeopardy too. In order to allay regional concerns, Beijing responded with a three-pronged strategy in the forms of neighborhood diplomacy, great power diplomacy and regional



multilateralism. All of these initiatives had earlier roots, which were exploited and expanded to serve the new circumstances, leading to a more active and positive policy style in the latter half of the 1990s.

Before the 1980s, China did not have a 'regional' policy, having accustomed to universal rather than regional themes in international politics. Relations with neighbors were conducted on a strict bilateral basis, or as a function of strategic concerns with the two superpowers. In the 1980s, policy began to be 'regionalized', when China improved relations with almost all of its neighbors except Vietnam. But it was really during the early 1990s that China's foreign policy acquired a regional quality when Beijing tried to reach out to its neighbor to overcome the diplomatic isolation (Yahuda, 2005, p. 351). After the mid-1990s, this regional policy acquired yet another quality: its multilateral aspect. Most characteristically, Beijing sought to improve relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in various ASEAN-related multilateral initiatives and with Central Asia in the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Neighborhood diplomacy was an important part of the overall attempt to stabilize the regional environment for China's continued growth.

Great power diplomacy is a traditional staple of China's foreign policy. Its distinguishing feature after 1996 was the establishment of various levels of 'strategic partnerships' with important countries on China's periphery, as well as with other major world powers. One purpose of this approach was to forge long-term, cooperative relationships with key countries in the world so as to continue utilizing them as an essential source for modernization. It was also designed to strengthen the claimed trend toward multipolarity and check American unilateralism (Yahuda, 2003). By carefully creating a new approach in state-to-state relations, Beijing hoped to more proactively shape the international environment by strengthening linkages with other countries and by blunting American strategic pressure on China.

China's regional multilateralism was closely intertwined with its neighborhood policy. In the early phase, joining the APEC in 1991, improving relations with ASEAN countries and participating in ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meetings were useful in projecting an activist image that helped to overcome the post-Tiananmen isolation. Its joining the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 proved to be an important learning experience, and along with participating in other regional institutions, Beijing gained experience in multilateralism and felt sufficiently confident to develop a multilateral institution of its own – the SCO – after 1996 (Yahuda, 2005, p. 352).

The Asian Financial Crisis further pushed China's foreign policy toward a more proactive and confident style. It provided an immediate impetus for upgrading China's new multilateralism as Beijing helped to initiate the 'ASEAN + 3' process with Japan, South Korea and ASEAN states. It also

stimulated a ‘responsible great power’ discourse after 1997. For Beijing, the praise it received from the region for not devaluing its currency provided a greater sense of diplomatic confidence among its leaders and a justification for promoting China’s image as a responsible rising power. The year 1997 was a turning point in the evolution of Chinese views of regional multilateralism from earlier passivity and suspicion, to uncertainty, to supportiveness and proactive engagement by the end of the decade.⁸ Chinese analysts had clearly recognized by then that while multilateralism might be used by other countries to constrain China, China could also employ it to mitigate the suspicion of its neighbors, constrain America and increase Chinese influence in the region (Pang, 2001). Since the late 1990s, as a result of these consequential events as well as the strategic pressure arising from the strengthening of US-Japan alliance and US regional bilateral diplomacy in general, China had increasingly used multilateralism to hedge against US hegemony, counter perceived US-led encirclement and shape the regional environment in its favor (Medeiros, 2005/2006; Zhang and Tang, 2005, p. 50; Christensen, 2006, pp. 117–120).

Strategic Ideas

Although TGYH as a somewhat abstract guiding principle dominated strategic thinking, new strategic ideas with more direct policy content soon appeared. Two were the most important: multipolarization (*duo ji hua*) and the New Security Concept (NSC; *xin anquan guan*). They were indicative of the policy evolution from domestically oriented passivity to incipient regional activism.

Multipolarization

The idea of multipolarization emerged out of Chinese discussions about global power configuration after the Cold War. In the early 1990s, many Chinese emphasized a traditional understanding of multipolarity and expected the American unipolar moment to be of short duration. Later in the decade, faced with continued American preponderance, they began to accept unipolarity as a long-term phenomenon. Although still insisting that multipolarization continues, they admitted that it would be a drawn-out process. World power configuration was now characterized as ‘one superpower (the United States), many great powers (Europe, Japan, China, and Russia)’ (Deng, 2001, pp. 345–346; Foot, 2006, p. 80).

Clearly, underlying the multipolarization discourse was a concern with American primacy and China’s response to this overriding strategic pressure. Beijing saw one of the key contradictions in the 1990s as the trend toward



multipolarity and the US resistance to this trend. Convinced that the United States intended to thwart China's rise, Beijing viewed it as the single most important barrier to be overcome on the path to great power status (Godwin, 1998). But it is unclear whether by promoting multipolarization China intended to challenge American primacy. As a political discourse, multipolarization was used by a range of political actors to promote their policy agendas. The moderates, for example, employed it to head off hardliners who advocated balancing against the United States (Johnston, 2003, p. 33). Scholars also question the wisdom of promoting multipolarization as a policy principle, contending that it may not be good for China's national interest (Ye, 2005).

In the context of China's domestic debates, the top leadership seemed to have used multipolarization as a defensive rather than offensive concept in relation to American primacy. Alongside the emphasis on the role of other emerging poles such as Russia, Europe and Japan in checking American hegemony and the insistence on continued 'peace and development' in world politics, the idea intended to convey that under such circumstances China could focus on domestic development rather than actively balance the United States. It can thus be seen as a manifestation of the TGYH principle to support Deng's line of not taking a leading role in international affairs (Hughes, 2005, p. 125). Behaviorally, traditional balancing was virtually absent in an overall accommodationist approach toward the United States.

The NSC

If multipolarization was domestically oriented, the NSC, proposed after 1996 initially in an ASEAN setting, was more oriented toward improving China's regional security environment. The idea itself was not new, being basically a reworking of the old Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence dating back to the Bandung Conference of developing nations in 1955. It claimed that the best approach to peace and security was to conduct dialogue, promote mutual trust and consultation, and engage in negotiation on an equal footing. Directly countering the logic of security through military alliance, it was primarily a critique of the American alliance system in Asia. The innovation was the repackaging of the old ideas of building dialogue and trust in security relations with the new norm of cooperative security learned through regional multilateralism.

Compared with the defensive logic of TGYH and multipolarization, the NSC involved a more proactive approach that was ready to take initiatives for the first time in multilateral settings. It was responsive to several trends in regional politics after the mid-1990s. It was first of all designed to ally regional

concerns about Chinese power and was thus part of the reassurance strategy of the late 1990s (Yahuda, 2003). In part, it was intended to weaken America's strategic presence in Asia by implicitly dissuading Asian countries from close alliance ties with the United States, though this anti-American dimension was quietly dropped once Beijing recognized the more enduring nature of American primacy (Shambaugh, 2005, p. 27). Beijing also hoped that the spread of a new security norm from China would improve the regional security climate and enhance China's influence in the region. The NSC should be viewed alongside China's recognition of multipolarization as a long-term process with the intention to conduct new types of security cooperation in this process so as to shape a more benign and welcoming regional environment for China's economic development (Yan, 1997b).

1999–2008: Active Reassurance and Expanding Interests

Insofar as foreign policy is concerned, China entered the new millennium 1 year early in 1999, when a new policy debate erupted following the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo war. The same fundamental questions that roiled Beijing in 1989 were being renewed: Was the outside world (mostly the United States and regional states) generally friendly or hostile to China? Was 'peace and development' an accurate assessment of the main character of international politics or was it a Chinese fantasy predicated more on domestic needs than international realities?⁹

For a time, Deng Xiaoping's strategic idea of TGYH, the rationale for joining the World Trade Organization and even the reform agenda of the past two decades were thrown into doubts. After several months of intensive discussions, however, the leadership reaffirmed Deng's 'peace and development' thesis, insisted on the need for further reform, and emphasized the importance of stabilizing relations with the United States (Wang and Sun, 2010, p. 300). Importantly, the leadership also concluded that China needed to be more proactive in shaping the regional environment, rather than just sit by and idly absorb outside events as they took place (Shambaugh, 2005, p. 28; Tang, 2008, pp. 159–160). The 1999 'peace and development' debate thus served to not only reconfirm Deng's guiding judgment, but also set a more activist policy tone for the new decade.

China's foreign policy in 1999–2008 displayed three main features. The first, reflecting continuity with and building on the success of the late 1990s, was an even more proactive approach, indicating China's general acceptance of the US-dominated international order and its confidence in its ability to rise within this order. Strategic reassurance continued to be an objective, but it was more 'active reassurance' to shape foreign perceptions than passive response to



outside events. Thus, whereas in the past China was led by a vague belief that operating within the US-dominated system while emphasizing its narrow self-interests would be to its long-term advantage, now it was more consciously shaping and creating its own IR environment. However, a lingering defensive-reactive quality did not disappear, particularly when it came to issues concerning domestic affairs such as Tibet and Xinjiang. China tended to react with indignant outcry toward foreign criticisms over these issues and to be self-gratifying with foreign approbation. The overall quality of China's foreign policy during this period can thus be characterized as reactivity within an overall proactive framework. Second, China has also experienced and promoted the widening of foreign policy agenda from the traditional focus of state-to-state relations to functional issues such as energy and new policy areas such as public diplomacy (Wang, 2008).

The third important change, which is essential to our analysis, is the expansion and complication of China's national interests. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the centrality of economic interests were undisputed, even though at times circumstances dictated the safeguarding of more immediate political and security interests such as overcoming diplomatic isolation in the early 1990s and improving China's image as a responsible power in the late 1990s. Entering the 2000s, however, even though on a general official level economic interests continue to dominate, their relationship with other interests has become a subject of growing debate. The leadership has advanced new interest formulations, and among analysts the debate is becoming ever more intense.

Insofar as the Party Congress reports are concerned,¹⁰ until 2007, the leadership had no specific conception of China's national interests other than the emphasis on the economic priority. The 2007 report for the first time advanced the notion of 'safeguarding state sovereignty, security and development interests'. The same tripartite conception appeared 1 year earlier in Hu's speech to the CCP Central Committee foreign affairs meeting in August 2006 and was repeated again in his speech to the eleventh ambassadorial meeting in July 2009. It has recently been elaborated in a new and somewhat explanatory foreign policy document penned by the State Councilor Dai Bingguo (2010). The conception thus seems to be a stable one for the current leadership. But it is not clear among the three interests, which one takes priority. In their order of arrangement, sovereignty appears to be first, but the economy-centered development strategy suggests the priority of development. Moreover, the meaning of 'development' is also unclear. Does it primarily refer to economic development or other aspects such as social harmony that are increasingly absorbing the domestic political agenda? And, does 'security' refer to traditional military security or the more recent emphasis on comprehensive and nontraditional security?

Most likely, the leadership intends to emphasize the need to integrate and balance these three overarching interests, perhaps without knowing their precise relationships. Indeed, a notable emphasis in recent years, repeated in Hu's 2006 and 2009 speeches, is the interconnection between domestic politics and foreign policy, and the need to coordinate the 'two overall situations' of the domestic and the international. Clearly, recognizing the increasingly comprehensive, varied and multilayered nature of China's foreign relations, the leadership has felt the need to define China's changing interests, as well as new foreign policy tasks under new circumstances. But the official definition still leaves much room for ambiguity, and the task of how to conceptualize and manage the interrelationship between domestic and foreign policies in order to coordinate the 'two overall situations' is now a major preoccupation.

Chinese analysts have clearly realized the complication of China's national interests. The rapid expansion of overseas interests in economic, political and security fields, and the increasing interaction between local and overseas interests have been universally emphasized. Cultural interests are identified as a new dimension, reflected in recent policy emphasis on developing China's 'soft power' and national image. Debates now center on the changing ordering, content and nature of these diverse interests.¹¹ Neither among analysts nor in the leadership has a consensus on the relationship between key dimensions of China's expanding interests been reached.

Strategic Ideas

The most important strategic ideas during this period are 'multipolarization and economic globalization', 'peaceful rise/development' and 'harmonious world'. The concepts have become more original, their meanings also more sophisticated in moving along the spectrum between defensiveness and activism.

Multipolarization and economic globalization

Appearing in the fourteenth and fifteenth Party Congress reports of 1992 and 1997, 'multipolarization' remained in the sixteenth and seventeenth Party Congress reports of 2002 and 2007, but was put alongside the idea of 'economic globalization'. This was a notable change in official formulation, as throughout the 1990s multipolarization and economic globalization were treated as two separate issues. Their juxtaposition reflected the Chinese perception of their interconnectedness and of these dual trends as the most important strategic context for China's foreign policy in the new millennium.

The multipolarization discourse of the 1990s, as noted above, reflected the leadership's domestic orientation in interpreting it as a long-term trend, and



thus not something requiring China's active promotion by balancing US power. 'Multipolarization' in the 2000s continues to embody this central orientation, and needs to be viewed with the continuous emphasis on the 'diversity of the world' since the early 1990s and the new emphasis on the 'democratization of international relations' in the new millennium. While favoring multipolarity as an eventual outcome, Beijing's immediate preference, given the American primacy, is a more 'democratic' world order where US hegemonic power is restrained by various forces.

It is in this context that the juxtaposition of 'economic globalization' needs to be understood. While one important function of embracing globalization is to advance China's economic interests, Beijing has also come to view globalization and its primary constraining effect on national policy – economic interdependence – as a useful way to restrain the United States. In addition, it contains a more proactive dimension in trying to demonstrate the potential of globalization in changing the parameters of great-power politics from a traditional zero-sum game to win-win competition, so as to emphasize the benefits of China's rise under this condition (Deng and Moore, 2004). It is partially in this context that Beijing has begun to promote the 'opening-up strategy of mutual benefit and common win' since 2006. Globalization and multipolarization are thus seen as reinforcing each other in creating a favorable condition for China's development, restraining US power and promoting the positive effects of China's rise. They support a non-confrontational and integrationist approach toward the outside world.

Peaceful rise

The debate on the concept of 'peaceful rise' is one of the most interesting in recent Chinese foreign policy (Glaser and Medeiros, 2007). The idea rose in prominence when the influential scholar-official Zheng Bijian popularized it in a major state-sponsored research project and when both President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao employed it in their speeches after 2003. But it disappeared from official discourse within only a few months, replaced by the new locution of 'peaceful development' after 2005. What does this unusual process reveal about China's foreign policy?

First, the idea continued to embody a strategy of reassurance toward regional and other foreign audiences by claiming that China's development road will be peaceful and different from that of modern great powers. According to Zheng (2006, p. 4), the mastermind behind it, 'peace' in 'peaceful rise' was aimed to refute the 'China threat theory', and 'rise' the 'China collapse theory'. In this sense, 'peaceful rise' continued China's reassuring strategy since the mid-1990s, and contained an essential propaganda purpose.

For this reason, Chinese analysts questioned the project's academic value and regarded it as primarily a political project to promote a Chinese view of its international relations (Wang, 2004). It may have another political purpose: to provide a foreign policy theory or ideology for the new Hu–Wen administration. Its demise thus also reflected elite political struggle at the time.

Regarding the reassuring dimension of the concept, the noteworthy development this time was 'active reassurance' in the sense that, more acutely aware of the multiple security dilemmas China was facing, it had proposed a theory of China's rise in attempting to shape foreign understanding, in contrast to the largely reactive mood of the 1990s. 'Peaceful rise' thus signaled a more positive style of policy thinking. Indeed, cleared of its political dimension, the concept could have important policy implications. According to the Tsinghua University scholar Yan Xuetong (Yan *et al.*, 2005, pp. 5–8), who seems to have exaggerated its impact, the idea of 'rise' served to terminate the principle of TGYH in China's foreign policy in place since 1990.

'Peaceful rise' was changed into 'peaceful development' in official discourse after 2005, mainly because the latter was believed to be able to convey a softer image of China's ascent than the potential disruptiveness suggested by the term 'rise'. The construction of this concept seemed to have squared the circle in the evolution of Chinese policy thinking in the reform era as it had returned to and reinvented Deng Xiaoping's original strategic judgment of 'peace and development' into a dominant strategic idea. Disputes exist regarding the difference between 'peaceful rise' and 'peaceful development'. Some, who write from a sharper analytical perspective, see it as significant, as 'peaceful development' not only softens the language, but also changes the nature of China's international trajectory from the dynamics of 'rise', which suggests rapidity and activism, to a common state of development that hardly distinguishes China from other countries. Others, who tend to follow the official line, see the two concepts as essentially the same, with the only difference that 'peaceful rise' refers to the initial period of China's rapid development in its long process of 'peaceful development' (Zheng, 2006, p. 4). As strategic ideas, both contain a reassurance purpose, though 'peaceful rise' suggests more distinctiveness, transparency and activism. They are, as ever under the larger domestic policy orientation, geared toward maintaining a stable external environment for managing internal economic and social problems.

Harmonious world

The most original idea in recent Chinese foreign policy seems to be 'harmonious world', first appearing in the Sino-Russian Joint Statement of October 2004 and then formally promoted by President Hu in his speech to the United Nations



summit in September 2005.¹² It is widely seen within the Chinese policy community as a unique Chinese concept and theory of IR, a new Chinese paradigm for world order (Wang, 2007a). Yet the idea is a complex one that defies simplistic characterization.

First, it should not be seen as entirely new. Peace and harmony has been the stock reserve of China's policy pronouncements, and before 'harmonious world', Chinese leaders had already advocated the idea of *he er butong* (harmony with difference) in their speeches (Jiang, 2002). The 'harmonious world' discourse tries to explain the virtue of diversity and difference, emphasize the importance of dialogue and mutual learning, and promote common development and tolerance of different civilizations. Traces of these ideas can be found in various policy statements of the past. 'Harmonious world' is the present consummation of China's evolving policy ideas and a synthesis of various previous developments.

Second, because of its continuity with the past, the concept, however new in appearance, cannot obliterate its defensive quality and reassuring purpose. By continuing to tout the virtue of diversity, it can be seen as protective of China's own political and economic model in a rapidly changing world and conscious of the need to reduce pressure on China's compliance with Western norms. By promoting common development, it can be seen to continue reassuring others of the benefits of China's rise. But the locution itself is indeed new, and as various Chinese scholars are quick to point out, with it China has finally possessed a distinctive voice in international discourse (Li, 2006; Men, 2006; Wang, 2007b). They especially emphasize its traditional Chinese cultural underpinning in the concept of *he* (harmony), asserting that this uniquely Chinese value will change Western-dominated ideas about international politics. In this respect, the concept also embodies a strong Chinese desire to promote its own 'discourse power' (*huayu quan*) and proactively shape foreign understandings of China's international relations.

Importantly, the idea also reflects the increasingly close linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy, most obviously in the fact that 'harmonious world' is a direct extension of the domestic discourse of the 'harmonious society'. According to prominent Chinese analysts, concepts like 'peaceful rise/development', 'harmonious world' and 'mutual benefit and common win' all reflect the need for a better coordination between domestic and foreign policies under the increasingly complex domestic and foreign environment (Wang and Sun, 2010, p. 303).

With these multilayered meanings ranging from the defensive to the proactive, it is hard to characterize 'harmonious world' as embodying a single policy principle or strategy. The concept's complexity and ambiguity leave room for varied interpretations. Indeed, Chinese analysts themselves dispute its meaning and utility, and it is now seen as their job to develop it more fully in

theoretical and practical terms (Wu *et al.*, 2006; Zhang, 2008). One may well further argue that the idea has not had any measurable impact on actual policy, and that it may not be originally intended as a strategic idea with practical policy consequence, as it seems initially more of a propaganda slogan and an offshoot and afterthought of the domestic objective of 'harmonious development'. Its vagueness suggests that it was not originally developed as a practical international strategy, as it has proposed neither the strategic goals to be achieved nor the policy means for achieving them. So far it has played more the function of policy declaration and justification than policy guidance and implementation. It is better seen as an ideal Chinese world order with rather underdeveloped ideas about institutional design than an operationalizable international strategy (Wang, 2008).

2008–2011: A New Transition?

China's foreign policy since the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the GFC seems to have displayed very different dynamics from the previous three decades. A common observation is that China has become more assertive across a range of policy spectrum, including naval expansion, toughness at the Copenhagen climate change negotiations, a harder line toward the United States and assertiveness in territorial disputes on the Spratly and Diaoyu islands (see Swaine, 2010). These may lead one to conclude that China is devising or even implementing a new international strategy. Yet China's foreign policy in the past 3 years may also be seen as confused and puzzling or, more accurately, as in a new state of transition. In some areas such as those mentioned above, it has displayed a new assertiveness not seen in years and in the process alienated most of its neighbors. But in other areas, such as its policy toward North Korea, Beijing is still fundamentally conservative in applying minimal and measured pressure on Pyongyang. Indeed, some argue that China's North Korea policy betrays 'a power struggling to execute its strategy' (Schreer and Taylor, 2011). Moreover, in contrast to its earlier policies, China's regional multilateralism toward Southeast Asia has stalled after 2005, losing momentum in one of its brightest foreign policy spots created between 1997 and 2005. And in the case of its ideological invective against the new Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, China continues to display the kind of reactivity mentioned above.

Rather than being evidence for a new strategy, recent Chinese behavior suggests multiple and contradictory factors in policymaking and may be indicative of a new debate – not just among analysts but also in the high-level civilian and military leadership – and the gestation and testing of new ideas. David Shambaugh (2011) has recently analyzed China's competing



international identities by identifying a spectrum of Chinese identities and the domestic debates that underpin them. The diverse and contradictory policy strands also appear to be a product of China's increasingly complex foreign-policy-making process (Jakobson and Knox, 2010). The following briefly notes a new policy debate taking place among Chinese analysts, as well as some controversies on China's national interests and international strategy.

The current debate is almost exactly a decade after the previous one in 1999. Among Chinese analysts there is a general sense of China's much augmented and enhanced power and status thanks to the GFC, with more confidence and even assertiveness in some quarters. A good example is that while not too long ago many were still trying to prove the validity of China's modernization experience, now the 'Chinese experience' has been elevated to the 'China model' (Pan, 2009). But this is again a debate with diverse views on the effect of the crisis, the position of the United States, the structure of the international system and the new role for China. Whereas some see the GFC as an epic event catapulting China to the center of world politics, others see it as an intervening variable in international change with limited influence on power transition. Many aver that multipolarization has been strengthened, whereas others insist on the stability of American primacy. America is seen to be in relative decline, yet not substantially weakened. Most advocate the further expansion of Chinese influence, but many are also quick to point to the myriad domestic and international challenges (see Cui *et al*, 2009; Medeiros, 2009; Lo, 2010; Nye, 2010; Wu, 2010).

As it currently stands, the debate gives no indication of the emergence of a new strategy, for no viable new strategic ideas have emerged to suggest new policy means for meeting China's expanding national interests. In the top leadership, in 2009 during their annual summer retreat, China's leaders reportedly debated whether China should edge away from TGYH, but no new ideas seem to have emerged (*The Economist*, 2010). Among analysts, the obsession is still on the wisdom of TGYH as a general policy principle. With most discussions still on the question of the balance between TGYH and YSZW, the analytical straightjacket of TGYH is yet to be dismantled.¹³ But if TGYH is to be abandoned, what should replace it? The compromising suggestion that China should maintain TGYH on a strategic level in order to focus on domestic problems while adopting activist YSZW on a tactical level in order to safeguard expanding interests (Jin and Liu, 2010) looks like a grudging admission of the futility of the framework.

There are some notable new proposals, such as the one that China should assume some international leadership in multilateralism (Pang, 2010a). Such views are still few, and if international leadership is the future policy direction, we have only an inkling of the idea, not a mature conception or operationalizable strategy. There are also some assertive musings about applying coercive

diplomacy to achieve foreign policy goals. But these seem to be case dependent and have not developed into a general strategy. As for world vision, although analysts have put increasing emphasis on common human values such as equality, democracy and justice, as well as on developing China's moral appeal (Pang, 2010b), there is a long way to go between past exceptionalism (Zhang, 2011) and a more universalist discourse. Overall, the policy climate is that China needs to be more activist in assuming a greater international role, acquiring international rule-making ability, and enhancing moral attraction, eventually leading to some international leadership for China as a world power, but so far few have been quite able to say just how in concrete terms. Deng's idea of TGYH and the general line of not assuming leadership are still exercising a powerful grip on the Chinese mindset. Past strategic ideas can constrain policy if new ones fail to develop for new circumstances. And, if entrenched, they can not only shape how national interests are pursued, but also help define the interests subsequently pursued (Ruggie, 1997, p. 120; Legro, 2005, p. 20). The role of TGYH in Chinese policy thinking, assumed or real, seems to confirm this logic.

In the field of actual policy, an interesting mystery is the reported inclusion of the South China Sea into China's 'core interests' (Wong, 2010), a term traditionally reserved for Taiwan, suggesting that China might have redefined its national interests. Yet according to a Beijing insider, Chinese officials only suggested that the South China Sea involves China's core interests, which is different from saying that the South China Sea is China's core interest, and even such suggestion may not represent China's settled official position (Zhu, 2011). And Michael Swaine (2011a, p. 9), after carefully examining China's 'core interests' discourse in recent years, concludes that 'Beijing has not unambiguously identified the South China Sea issue as one of its core interests'. On the official level, the influential State Councilor Dai Bingguo (2010) has recently reiterated and elaborated the tripartite conception of national interests described in the preceding section. China's core interests are seen as the stability of the Chinese regime, China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, and basic guarantees for China's sustainable development. Thus, one can only say that China's national interests are being redefined and debated rather than settled.

It is premature to infer from changing policies in the past 3 years that China has devised a new strategy. From the perspective of this article, the absence of viable replacement ideas despite rising needs and the lingering of old ideas like TGYH because they have not been fundamentally delegitimized by events suggest the low probability of a new strategy in the near term.¹⁴ This indicates an ongoing 'ideational crisis' in China's foreign policy under transition and a serious problem for China's emerging role as a global power. As Kenneth Lieberthal (2010, p. 16) puts it, 'China is now being thrust into the



position of being a global power but without the mindset yet to necessarily handle that comfortably'.

Conclusion

If we employ the analytical criteria of viewing grand strategy as the conjunction of national interests and strategic ideas as set out in the first section, then China cannot be said to have developed a premeditated grand strategy in the reform period. During the three critical ideational debates in the early 1980s, 1989–1991 and 1999, the leadership, while insisting on the central economic interests and the consequent requirement of ensuring a favorable external environment, had only vague notions about corresponding policy means. This is particularly true with regard to the early 1980s and the early 1990s. One may still rationalize China's grand strategy into one of achieving modernization by ensuring a favorable external environment through a largely pragmatic strategy, and that is indeed the approach taken by many scholars. Although this may serve as a broad characterization, its generality is not illuminating on the changing nature of China's foreign policy, particularly with respect to strategic means. In fact, strategic ideas and policies appeared gradually, adjusting to changing circumstances and often contingent on external events. There has been no master idea, for China's strategic ideas have evolved from earlier passive and defensive notions of TGYH and 'multipolarization' to later more proactive and original ones of 'peace rise' and 'harmonious world'. Moreover, clearer conceptions of strategic means developed in later years, particularly in the late 1990s and 2000s, had built upon earlier experiences.

This is a process of 'learning by doing' (Ren, 2009), and only since the 2000s has China been able to construct its own international relations to some extent. Key ideas and practices, such as TGYH, 'peaceful rise' and accommodation with the United States, have been subjected to intense debates. Along the way, China has indeed developed important strategic responses, particularly its neighborhood diplomacy, great power diplomacy and regional multilateralism, constituting, along with the changing relationship with developing countries, a basic foreign policy structure since the 2000s. But all these had an evolutionary logic reaching back to the 1980s and the early 1990s, which were given further impetus as a result of changing circumstances, some developed in desultory and piecemeal fashion whereas others more in concert. They cannot be seen as coherent results of a grand strategy. It is essential to recognize their exploratory, evolutionary and adaptive nature.

Beyond structuring policy change according to ideational debates, one can also periodize it by differentiating the overall quality of China's foreign policy in the reform era. The dividing line can be roughly set in the year 2000.

In general, policy was passive and reactive before 2000, mainly focusing on expanding the diplomatic space and learning new ideas and practices. The late 1990s was a crucial period of ideational change from mere learning to some application. Since 2000, the qualitative change from the earlier passive-reactive mood to a more proactive-creative direction has been most clearly reflected in China's regional multilateralism and policy discourse (Zhang, 2009). However, this positive change was qualified by important remnants of the historical defensiveness-reactiveness, producing an overall proactive-reactive quality. Yet it is hard to characterize the evolution from the passive-reactive to the proactive-reactive as embodying a coherent grand strategy (see Table 1).

If a learning and rising China failed to develop a premeditated grand strategy, will a powerful and creative China be able to formulate one in the near future? It will help for thinking about the future by considering the failure of the past. An important factor was the lack of foreign policy autonomy in national decision making. Foreign policy was required to serve and was embedded in the true grand strategy of national development – the strategy of reform and opening. It was subordinate to domestic development. Indeed, domestic politics have defined and confined China's foreign relations at every stage of their development (Wang, 2010, p. 8). With autonomy thus limited, the challenge became how to serve the domestic economic priority by managing the external constraints and opportunities of changing international

Table 1: Changing dynamics of China's foreign policy in the reform era

<i>Analytical categories</i>	<i>Overall quality</i>			
	<i>Passive-reactive</i>		<i>Proactive-reactive</i>	<i>In transition</i>
	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>	<i>1999–2008</i>	<i>2008–2011</i>
National interests	Economic priority	Economic priority	Expanding and complicated	Being redefined
Strategic ideas	Nil	<i>Tao Guang</i> <i>Yang Hui</i> Multipolarization The NSC	Multipolarization and economic globalization Peaceful rise Harmonious world	Unclear
Policy approaches	General cooperative relationships with developed countries	Neighborhood diplomacy Great power diplomacy Regional multilateralism	Deepening of neighborhood diplomacy, great power diplomacy and regional multilateralism Widening of policy agenda	Unclear



and regional circumstances. These have been difficult enough under an overall US hegemony and the contradictory process of globalization, in varied strategic contexts including the end of the Cold War, regional concerns about Chinese power, instabilities in Sino-American relations, and China's expanding interests and widening policy agenda. They are made all the more difficult by the fact that China is a latecomer in the Western-dominated international system. For a late-developing but fast-rising country such as China, a grand strategy based on an overall theory of how it can best rise within the existing system would be difficult to contrive. Indeed, theory has almost always lagged behind practice (Qin, 2008, p. 9), and it is only recently that scholars have been calling for Chinese theories of IR to explain China's rise (Qin, 2006; Zhu, 2009). In practice, China has had to manage each twist and turn in its rising trajectory by evaluating changing circumstances, learning and adopting new ideas and practices, and exploring new ways to as yet unforeseeable directions.

Yet an equally important reason is China's lack of world visions in the sense defined in the first section. It cannot answer such fundamental questions as its ultimate purpose in the world and its distinctive preference for the character of international relations. If the United States prefers liberal institutions, democracy and human rights, in addition to strategic primacy, what does China prefer as its international ideals? Lacking a world vision leads to a utilitarian policy without an anchor in more fundamental values and purposes. Without an animating vision, policy tends to be expedient without an ideational foundation and a sense of direction, let alone ideological and moral appeal. In contrast to imperial China, which stood for the Confucian civilization, and Maoist China, which stood for world proletariat revolution, today's China is unclear about its international purpose and unable to clarify what it stands for. As an aside, part of the reason why today's China possesses less soft power than the Maoist period despite significantly greater hard power must be that Maoist China had a clear vision of international relations supporting socialist and anti-imperialist revolutions that had appeals in many parts of the world. The current 'harmonious world' discourse seems a start, but only a very inadequate one. The outside world is increasingly asking 'what China wants' (Legro, 2007; Leonard, 2008). Vagueness about its values and interests does not help to reassure the world of China's rise.

Will the task of developing a grand strategy become any easier in the 2010s? The complication of China's national interests and the growing international and domestic constraints seem to suggest otherwise. The expanding interests have blurred policy boundaries, with analysts increasingly debating the priority of economic interests and the relationship between sovereignty, security and development interests. While in the past development interests referred to economic development, now the leadership is also obsessed with

social development including social justice and equality, wealth distribution, environmental protection and ethnic relations. The domestic task has not been made easier by economic growth but has rather been much complicated. In addition, there is the need to protect overseas interests and to meet new needs such as cultural 'soft power'. Internationally, while in the past the primary task was to expand and stabilize the diplomatic space, now China is facing mounting pressure to play a greater role as it becomes the world's second largest economy. In accordance with realist and constructivist expectations, China's interests in international security and responsibility are expanding, so is its domestic agenda of balanced development, leading to the new question of the structural and logical relationships between the multilayered national interests. Both domestic and international constraints and pressures are complicating China's foreign policy and demanding new ideas, placing a great burden on the future of China's international strategy.

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Notes

- 1 Goldstein (2005) and Sutter (2008). See also Swaine and Tellis (2000) and Swaine (2011b).
- 2 For a recent statement, see Wang (2008).
- 3 For important works on grand strategy, see Posen (1984), Rosecrance and Stein (1993) and Kennedy (1991).

- 4 World vision as conceived here is similar to the conception of 'world views' in Goldstein and Keohane (1993).
- 5 This formula draws on the equation of intentional explanation 'desire + belief = action' posited by Wendt. Here, 'national interest' corresponds to the desire side of the intentional equation, whereas 'strategic ideas' correspond to the belief side. See Wendt (1999, pp. 231–232).
- 6 This is the observation of many Chinese scholars. See, for example, Wang and Sun (2010).
- 7 A recent discussion is Chen and Wang (2011).
- 8 Shambaugh (2005, p. 27). For a general analysis of the evolution of China's regional multilateralism in the 1990s, see Johnston and Evans (1999).
- 9 For a sample of the Chinese debates, see the special issue in *Shijie Zhishi* [World Affairs], 2000/15–16. For a general discussion, see Finkelstein (2000).
- 10 All the Party Congress reports analyzed in this article can be found in Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi (2008).
- 11 See, for example, Ye (2008), Yan (2007) and Wang (2007c).
- 12 The text can be found in Xinhua Yuebao (2006, pp. 1647–1650).
- 13 See the special issue in *Zhongguo yu Shijie Guancha* [China and World Affairs], 2010/01. Compare Shambaugh (2011, pp. 18–19).
- 14 The theoretical logic is in Legro (2005).

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