Unstable Outlooks

LOWELL DITTMER

China’s quest for a coherent foreign policy

Despite international opprobrium in the immediate aftermath of the crackdown on the democracy protests in June 1989, Beijing could well view its domestic and international status since that tragedy as close to ideal. As in Hungary after Kadar initiated socialist reform on the ashes of the 1956 uprising he had helped crush, the minds of most post-Tiananmen Chinese turned from politics to economics, and within a few years the growth rate not only recovered, but was, in fact, leaping forward with unprecedented dynamism. The collapse of first the “democratic republics” in Eastern Europe and then the Soviet Union itself—none of whose leaders had been able to demonstrate the same combination of tactical surprise and ruthless brutality required to bring their own populations to heel—not only left China ideologically alone in the world, but also left it relieved of major national security threats for the first time since the Opium War. Unable to resist such an economic opportunity for long, the world’s leading industrial powers,ironically beginning with Taiwan and South Korea, soon including Japan and Southeast Asia, and then, finally, Europe and the US, rescinded their sanctions and plunged into the Chinese market: beginning in 1991, foreign direct investment surged, more than doubling in both 1992 and 1993, and climbing to almost US$34 billion in 1994. The retrocession of Hong Kong on June 30, 1997, which proceeded without incident and with seemingly excellent economic prospects, was just the icing on the cake.

Yet, a vague sense of unease has persisted. The disintegration of the USSR deprived China of triangular leverage and left a regional strategic vacuum; filling it was particularly problematic for Beijing, which has forsworn any interest in “hegemony,” but is hence all the more sensitive to the prospect that any other power (particularly Japan or the US, the only qualified candidates) should assert it. The worldwide collapse of communism, amid a wave of publicity about its unexpectedly meager economic achievements, compounded the sense of unease about the legitimacy of the CCP that has haunted the regime since the mid-1980s, reaching a temporary crescendo at Tiananmen. Despite having all but monopolized China's national representation in international affairs, democratization in Taiwan stimulated local nationalism while Beijing’s 1989 eclipse gave Taipei an opportunity to launch its own quest for international recognition, with considerable nuisance value. The Asia Pacific region as a whole enjoyed an impressive boom: its members’ GNPs accounted for 25% of the gross world product in 1992, and are projected to reach 33% by 2001, helping to spur an equally impressive surge of high-tech weapons acquisitions. The region’s international structure remained in flux despite the rise of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the consolidation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). All of these developments re-open the issue of China’s national identity.

Notwithstanding its brilliant economic record, China’s loss of ideological direction has had a profound impact on its ability to play a leadership role in world affairs. China is no longer the self-styled leader of an international crusade mobilizing the young, the poor, the colored, the new, and the less-developed against their oppressors. Once the cheerleader of “national liberation wars,” once proud exemplar of the “Chinese model” of socialist development, Beijing has forsworn not only the export of revolution and class struggle, but has also forsworn any claim to influence the internal affairs of other states. This development, certainly welcomed by Washington, is of course in part a mere corollary of China’s obsessive concern with preventing outside interference in its own sovereign affairs (e.g. in the case of human rights), but it also betokens recognition that the Chinese model no longer travels very well. “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” is still current, but the term is now used in a defensive rather than an offensive context to justify apparent deviations from universal socialist norms. The lack of a clearly delineated theoretical detonation has been occasionally acknowledged: throughout the 1980s, there were attempts to go beyond the pragmatic “groping from stone to stone to cross the river” (moche shitou guo he) toward a more semantically grounded relationship with Marxist theory, but these experiments often culminated in controversy and it proved impossible to generate a consensus.

Gone too, is a clear picture of the new world order. Of course, China is hardly unique in its difficulty conceptualizing the emergent international structure since the Cold War, but it can nevertheless be argued that the sense of confusion and uncertainty is greater in China than elsewhere. China is entering into a new world without a communist bloc, without Mao Zedong, without Deng Xiaoping, without even clear criteria for the

MULTILATERAL RELATIONS

Lowell Dittmer is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley and the Director of the University of California's Education Abroad Program in the PRC.
"socialist road," and though such psycho-cultural generalizations are always risky, the Chinese seem less tolerant of structural ambiguity, more averse to "chaos" than, say, Californians. In the past, China's conception of its own national identity always fitted into an explicit categorical schema of international order: two camps, three worlds, and so forth. The current conceptualization of world order is, in contrast, quite hazy and can be coined in the term "multipolarity." This is a definition in terms of what it excludes, i.e., "unipolarity," with Washington at the center, which would be China's nightmare scenario. What multipolarity actually includes is in fact vague, without a sense of developmental direction, without even a clear consensus as to where the "poles" might be (though we may assume that China is one).

Implicit in Chinese foreign policy since the Cold War are three distinguishable conceptions of the world and China's place in it. The first is Chinese nationalism, the second is the United Front, and the third is one of great power "partnership." However, these models have not been formally articulated and there are still some inconsistencies or contradictions among them.

The rise of a fierce sense of nationalism since the Cold War is not only the result of the regime's propaganda effort, but also a natural consequence of the nation's impressive economic achievements. Nationalism per se was repressed in China throughout the Maoist era in favor of the universal categories of Marxism-Leninism, such as the international Communist movement, class struggle, and proletarian revolution. Even in the early 1980s, the emerging national essence was examined critically rather than proudly, such as in the "search for roots" (xun gen) movement or the famed "River Elegy" television documentary. Thus, its revival in a sense represents an "invasion of the repressed." In any event, this aspect of Chinese foreign policy certainly has popular roots, visible for example in the avid interest in Chinese performance at international athletic events, providing the same sort of "linkage" to the broad masses previously seen in mass campaigns against alleged American germ warfare in Korean or Soviet revisionism. In terms of content, Chinese nationalism is now imbued with a slightly different tone than in the past when it in part expressed a sense of mass inadequacy or inferiority, arousing a sense of indignation for the humiliations being inflicted on the nation-state by outside powers. This is not a unique propaganda device—in some sense it is reminiscent of the "Dolchstosslegende" (stab-in-the-back legend) used to arouse German nationalism after World War I—but it is fairly unusual and was manipulated with great frequency and apparent efficacy. Today's nationalism is related but slightly different, because it is no longer premised on the assumption that, "We are nothing, how can you do this to us?" but increasingly partaking of the notion that, "We are somebody, how can you do this to us?" Quite understandably, national pride has entered the picture: China deserves more. But, as we shall see, this national assertiveness is still fragile and insecure.

The upsurge of nationalism provides a firm mass base for foreign policies that enhance China's "national interest." Thus, it meshes well with the mercantilist international economic policies and the foreign policies under the framework of reallpolitiik favored by the post-Mao leadership. There are, however, two inconsistencies in a nationalist-based Chinese foreign policy. First, there is the problem of the excluded middle, namely China itself. The world is indeed a treacherous jungle, but China is not just another predatory beast within it—China is different, China is good, China has principles. This is rarely stated in as many words, so that even quite sophisticated Chinese foreign-policy analysts sometimes miss the inconsistency. But it manifests itself
The point is not that China’s policies have been right or wrong, but simply that they have been based on an unnoticed blind spot in international perception.

in the frequent Chinese surprise that its own behavior could appear threatening to others. Here the old Chinese sense of inferiority, “We are nothing, how could anyone be afraid of us?” re-enters the picture. This tone ignores nearly two decades of very rapid economic growth and one decade of fairly rapid annual increases in military budgets. Let us take just two examples: Japan and Taiwan. Chinese analyses of Japanese foreign policy are certainly premised on realist assumptions, but implicitly go well beyond realism to assume an atavistic tendency in Japan to revert to militarism and expansionism—a tendency not visible to most Western analysts. The blind spot in the analysis is the inability to perceive that Japan’s enhanced security measures could be stimulated by Chinese arms spending. The notion that Japan is the former rapacious predator of Nanjing precludes once and for all any possibility that China could conceivably threaten Japan. Thus, any increase in the Japanese arms budget, any increase of its responsibility under the US-Japan security treaty, is perceived not as part of a dialectical process, but simply as a conflictual tendency. The contrast is even more striking with regard to Taiwan, a tiny island whose security the PRC has threatened repeatedly without any notion of how such threats might be perceived by others; for example, the CCP leadership has been repeatedly surprised by US interventions on behalf of Taiwan. The point is not that China’s policies have been right or wrong, but simply that they have been based on an unnoticed blind spot in international perception.

The second contradiction in a nationalist-based foreign policy is one that has also frustrated previous cases of hyper-nationalism whose appeal is exclusive, based on a clear distinction between “us” and “them” (nei wai you bian). Although there is some elasticity in the PRC’s definition of “Chineseness” that often includes the populations of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia or the United States, it cannot easily transcend this racially defined reference group. The diplomatic implications are dangerous, particularly when nationalism manifests itself in assertive or defiant forms. They include the prospect of not only alarming small and isolated Taiwan, but upsetting a great many Southeast Asian and Northeast Asian countries who, when the PLA unilaterally seized some small atoll in the South China Sea, became worried about their access to the sea lanes.

A second conceptual organizing device for Chinese foreign policy that might conceivably help to solve the national-identity conundrum is the United Front model. This model, which dates all the way back to the revolutionary era, was revived in the 1980s to facilitate the retrocession of Taiwan and Hong Kong. The basic idea is to facilitate revolution by co-opting potentially sympathetic capitalist elites. In the course of its revival, it underwent considerable refinement, which led to the “three link,” the administrative innovation of a Special Administrative Region with a “high degree of autonomy,” and finally the “one country, two systems” model. This formula proved highly effective in gaining acceptance from the “national bourgeoisie” in Hong Kong, who in turn put pressure on the British, and hence contributed to the successful negotiations leading to the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, the formulation of the Basic Law, and the final arrangements (interrupted by intense conflict regarding Chris Patten’s reforms) for retrocession in June 1997. The same model seems to have been successful in crafting strong ties of material interest with business elites in Taiwan, who have become the second highest investors in the PRC economy after Hong Kong, and are conducting a thriving indirect trade with the Mainland. The political situation in Taiwan differs from the one in Hong Kong due to the recent advent of democracy, which has unleashed a powerful domestic “sub-ethnic” constituency that has had little connection with the Mainland for several generations and is inclined to favor autonomy, if not independence. Thus, powerful economic interests and political allegiance cannot necessarily be assumed. Nevertheless, the United Front model has already made more substantial progress reconciling the two sides than any other innovation in the turbulent post-war history of trans-Straits relations.

As a basis for Chinese national identity, the renaissance United Front model has at least two serious drawbacks. First, empirical evidence so far indicates that its efficacy is limited to intra-national relations, where it can appeal to shared patriotism. Indeed, there is no instance in the annals of Chinese foreign policy in which it has been effectively used to facilitate relations with another state. Moreover, its use has been limited to the infiltrating and transforming of alien entities such as the KMT, Ti-
bet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, rather than in maintaining and cultivating an extant relationship. As such, the United Front is perhaps a special-case tactic that is not easily generalizable. Second, as a model of national identity, the United Front would be deeply subversive to socialist values. This is no "Paris Commune," nor even a proletarian dictatorship; it has greater similarity to a corporate board of directors: "China, Inc." write large. For this and other reasons, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is likely to remain "special," no matter how economically successful.

The third conceptual organizing device is a relatively new one: the "partnership" (huiwan guanxi). Its use seems to be reserved for great-power relationships: it has been proposed and accepted as a new basis for Sino-Russian relations, resulting in the "strategic and cooperative partnership" (zhongnan xiezuo huiwan guanxi) first heralded during Boris Yeltsin's visit from April 24-26, 1996, and it has also been tentatively raised in pre-summit discussions as a possible basis for Sino-American relations. A "partnership" is meant to be less than a formal alliance but somehow also more than an ordinary diplomatic relationship. As such, its carefully conceived to reflect the post-Cold War Chinese world-view in which a set of carefully cultivated bilateral relationships were preferred to "blocks," entangling alliances, and multilateral involvement in general. If we take the new Sino-Russian relationship as the prime example of partnerships thus far, we may infer that it is in part based on economic complementarity. China needed an infusion of high-tech weaponry in the wake of the US arms boycott and, by the end of 1996, the Chinese had bought perhaps US$6 billion worth of Russian arms. China can use Russian hydroelectric and nuclear-power generators, as well as industrial machinery that is compatible with Chinese plant machinery dating back to the Sino-Soviet alliance. Furthermore, Russia offers a vast market for Chinese textiles and light industrial commodities. Yet this is hardly a necessary condition: Russia was China's seventh-largest trade partner in 1996, just behind Singapore. In part, the "partnership" is based on shared strategic objectives—in this case, opposition to "hegemony" and the promotion of multipolarity—but the fact that it explicitly disavows being directed against any third country presumably limits strategic coordination to the defensive, bilateral mode. The relationship has been scrupulously cultivated via a diplomacy of incremental bridge-building, beginning with the resumption of biannual normalization talks in 1982, which has resulted in a thick network of bilateral forums at various levels. This has fostered a climate of trust, which contributed not only to a reasonably amicable border settlement in 1991, with border demarcation now almost complete, but also to a host of bilateral strategic and economic projects.

The advent of the "strategic partnership" is too recent to determine whether it will be limited to great-power relations or more broadly applied. If the former is the case, it suggests a two-tiered foreign policy, with summitry and other high ceremony reserved for the "partners," and somewhat lesser attention to lower status countries. As such, it might be subject to some of the same objections as the United Front model. If used indiscriminately, it becomes little more than high-flown diplomatic language, part of the ritualization of Chinese politics.

Though there are inconsistencies in each of these conceptual organizing devices, together they constitute the most frequent patterns by which China has recently preferred to relate to the rest of the world, and some combination of them may eventually be stitched together to form a coherent conception of Chinese national identity. For the present, it must still be said that Chinese national identity is protean and in flux: China is proudly considered on the threshold of great-power status, but there is still an underlying sense of inferiority.

For the present, it must still be said that Chinese national identity is protean and in flux: China is proudly considered on the threshold of great-power status, but there is still an underlying sense of inferiority.