Foreign policy directions in the post-Deng era

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Foreign policy directions in the post-Deng era

Abstract
Extract:
Explaining international relations today from a Chinese philosophical perspective, one might use such characterisations as the contest between Wen and Wu policies, the rise of Asian values and Western criticism, porous borders and economic growth circles, internationalisation and localism, joint-ventures and money worship, East Asia and Pacific rim. Both the connections and the distinctions are obvious, giving rise to a certain 'fuzzy logic' in the Daoist rendition of international relations.

Keywords
post-Deng, western culture, Marxist-Leninist, Chinese, foreign policy, post-Mao
Thinking about the future directions of any nation’s foreign policy entails, first and foremost, an interpretation of global ‘reality’. Like Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’, whereby the West explained the East, the prevailing interpretation of global ‘reality’ is essentially a Western-tutored one. It may be represented as follows.

Hovering conceptually but not quite identifying the current era are terms like post-Cold War, globalisation, democratisation, human rights, economic regionalism, ethno-nationalism, and peacekeeping. True, some interpretations have been quite bold. Notable among them are pronouncements by American individuals of a ‘New World Order’, ‘The End of History’ and a ‘Clash of Civilisations’. None has been sufficiently convincing, however, to lift this age beyond its identification-by-default of ‘post-Cold War’. As with the root term ‘postwar’, confusion is to be expected. It is as if the world, hitherto bound by the strategic contest

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1 This article was presented as a conference paper to the Fourth Biennial Conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia, held at Macquarie University, Sydney, 5-7 July 1995. For a report on this conference, see ‘India Looks East and China Looks Everywhere’ in this Bulletin, pp63-65.


3 The ‘New World Order’ was declared by former US president George Bush to celebrate the end of the Cold War and the employment of collective security against international outlaw states like Iraq. It reinforced the liberal world order model. The other two terms derive from scholarly articles which became popularised in the mainstream press. They are Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History’ The National Interest, No. 16, Summer 1989, pp. 3-8; and Samuel P. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49. Fukuyama is a consultant for the American think-tank RAND. Huntington is an established academic specialising in strategic studies. There are numerous critiques of these articles, including Greg Sheridan, ‘Cultural Convergence, Human Rights and the Odd Man Out’, in Greg Sheridan (ed.), Living with Dragons: Australia Confronts Its Asian Destiny, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1995, pp. 131-146.

   It is worth observing that Harry Harding also notes the terms ‘new world order’, ‘the end of history’ and ‘clash of civilizations’ (to which he adds ‘the Pacific Century’) as ‘part of the trendiest vocabulary used in discussions of contemporary global affairs’. (Harry Harding, The Concept of ”Greater China”: Themes, Variations and Reservations, The China Quarterly, No. 136, December 1993, p. 660.)

4 According to one specialist dictionary, the term ‘postwar’, referring to the period following a war, is:
Post-Deng Foreign Policy

between the Soviet and American superpowers, unwinds in the 1990s to celebrate its newfound plurality but also, increasingly, to fear its 'fluidity'. How does it reconcile an outbreak of democracy as well as separatist violence, of greater choices in nations' foreign policies but also greater pressures to conform to regional groupings? The old questions of who is strong and who is weak, what is punishable and what is justified, are renewed in relation to contemporary events ranging from trade disputes to UN peacekeeping missions.

Amid this uncertainty, those who theorise on the meaning of contemporary international events readily divide into their traditional preferences of conflict versus cooperation, of pessimists pitted against optimists. More specifically, the cultural divergence message of 'Clash of Civilisations' has disputed the cultural convergence lesson in 'The End of History'. Western Realists, who constitute the dominant stream (or school), argue in terms of the continuation of self-interested struggle in a world attempting to re-establish a viable 'power balance' or, perhaps more to the point in this Hobbesian rendition of self-seeking behaviour, a preponderance of power. By comparison, those who have an affinity to the global interdependence argument see a greater harmony of interests. Cooperation is as much a behaviour conducive to survival as is competition; and competition can be made acceptable when positioned within mutually agreed rules (or institutions) in global life.

The above is not an unreasonable characterisation of how the prevailing world is depicted in essentially Western-informed commentaries. Whether the depictions are adequate is quite another matter. Here arises the second consideration of any nation's foreign policy directions: how reliable is the interpretation of global 'reality' as a guide for action?

... usually characterized by political uncertainty, even instability, in at least the losing country and often on both sides. This is caused by lack of clarity by what the outcome of the war actually is. As far more wars end in relative shifts in the balance of power than in total victory for one side (e.g., WWII), it takes time to figure out just what the degree of shift is. And those few wars that do end in absolute victory (e.g., WWI) also cause uncertainty, by rendering unclear the relative gains and losses of each member of the winning coalition and their new relationship toward one another.


5 An example of the latter is Australia, which is no longer obliged to be so closely identified in its foreign policy with its Cold War ally, the United States, but which now regards the regional organisation of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) as vital to its post-Cold War prosperity.

6 I use this term rather than 'political realists' or just 'realists', to distinguish it from Chinese realism which is based on idealism (i.e. idealism as realism), explained more fully in my paper Rosita Dellios, *Chinese Strategic Culture - Part 1: The Heritage from the Past*, Research Paper No. 1, Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies, Bond University, Gold Coast, April 1994. I am grateful to Dr Valerie M. Hudson, of Brigham Young University in the USA, for her advice on the use of terms like Western Realism in order to avoid confusion.

7 On the quest for preponderance, see Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, 'American Hegemony - Without an Enemy', *Foreign Policy*, No. 92, Fall 1993, pp. 5-23.
In China's case, this second consideration is crucial to informed speculation about its foreign policy directions. The Marxist-Leninist model with its interpretation of world affairs not in terms of international relations but interclass relations had, after all, some bearing on China's foreign policy in the Maoist era. The degree of influence may be disputed but it is clear that it did inform, for example, China's view of the nature of war (its inevitability because of the forces of imperialism/hegemonism) and how the country should prepare for it ('dig tunnels deep', as Mao said).

However, the Marxist-Leninist view cannot be regarded as a complete or far-reaching perspective in Chinese foreign policy. There were clear expressions of state rather than class interests, and of classical realist calculations in Chinese strategic culture. This may be seen in China's pursuit of an independent foreign policy that tilted on occasion towards supporting 'the enemy of my enemy'. The triangular relationship of the American, Soviet and Chinese governments during the Cold War appeared to demonstrate this. Border wars, such as with India in 1962 and with Vietnam in 1979, often resembled in tone the punitive expeditions of the classical period. The opportunistically timed takeover of the Paracel Islands in 1974, when the South Vietnamese regime was about to collapse, has much in common with the Daoist-endorsed notion that timing is crucial in strategic plans. These actions spoke more of China's sense of statehood than Communist commitment. The latter did, however, help the Chinese position themselves to address their domestic problems of self-strengthening and their external problems of dealing with nations who were, after all, China's predators in the not too distant past.

The post-Mao era saw a change in foreign policy towards more pragmatic lines. Beijing no longer gave moral or material support to communist parties - such as the Burmese and Malayan communist parties - which opposed the established governments in their respective countries. Beijing restored, or established for the first time, relations with a host of nations including Indonesia, India and South Korea - the enemy of its communist ally, North Korea. Economic considerations of strength became more important in foreign policy calculations than ideological rectitude. It may be presumed that this was because the former was seen to be more effective than the latter. Mao's injunction to 'dig tunnels deep' was replaced by Deng's reassurance that 'it does not matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice'. China would no longer shelter in its ideological isolation to survive but had to stride out into the global arena to capture trade, investment and technology in order to empower itself.

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Post-Deng Foreign Policy

The China Threat Thesis

What of post-Deng China? Would the mouse have been caught? Would China, in other words, have become strong again, on a par with other great powers? And if so, would that make it similar to any other great power? In Denny Roy's words: 'States with dominant power dominate, be they capitalist or socialist, democratic or authoritarian.'9 This view subscribes to the 'China threat' thesis10 which regards dominant power as antithetical to the balance-of-power ideal pursued by Western Realists. Balance-of-power is deemed necessary to prevent the assumed unceasing quest for power from endangering the system of independent states. According to George Modelski, it is no accident that the state system has survived as long as it has. Wars conducted in the cause of balance-of-power are credited with keeping empire-builders at bay.11 Thus states are seen as ends in themselves.12 Again, Denny Roy provides a standard argument in defence of this position:

All countries are self-interested, and the things they are most interested in are security and wealth. The key to increasing one's share of the limited security and wealth available in the world is to control one's external environment: the foreign policies of other countries and the rules of the international system governing diplomacy, trade and the use of force.13


12 A common observation of realism, articulated in, for example, Nolan, op. cit., p. 305; and Ralph Pettman, International Politics, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p. 69.
13 Roy, op. cit.
Post-Deng Foreign Policy

In contrast to the explicit China threat theorists are the implicit ones who speculate on the Greater China concept (dazhonghua) and who, in doing so, pay tribute to democracy's irresistibility as a teleological condition, but ultimately warn of China's cultural pervasiveness. The meaning of this warning in terms of interpreting international reality will be examined shortly. First, a brief survey of the Greater China visions are in order. It should be noted from the outset that not all commentators on Greater China employ the concept in threat perception mode; rather, it is such a topical term that it has fired the imagination of those who would see China as a threat. It is also unfortunate that Greater China should find itself in the company of another recent slogan, Greater Serbia, with its associated terms of 'ethnic cleansing' and expansionism.

Greater China

Most commentators have come to regard Greater China as comprising the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan at the very least. These are conceivable as a unified or loosely confederated political China. The addition of Singapore, however, emphasises Greater China as cultural China. The same idea of cultural China applies to the further extension of the term Greater China to embrace Chinese communities in non-Chinese governed states of Southeast Asia. While this Southeast Asian dimension stretches the concept further, it still keeps it within the confines of the old 'Chinese world'. This was the pre-19th century tributary - or 'tribute-trade' - system of international relations. China was the centre of this system and the leading power, just as the West is the dominant influence of the current international system and the United States is its leading power. Beyond Chinese Asia, Greater China also includes non-Chinese people who are engaged in Chinese scholarship. Tu Wei-ming's three symbolic universes of cultural China are of interest in this respect. The first symbolic universe includes Singapore in the grouping of mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Here reside 'the societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese'. The second symbolic universe is made up of the Chinese diaspora or huaqiao (overseas Chinese) found all over the world; and the third is the domain of Chinese intellectual enterprise performed by non-Han people in foreign countries. In this third symbolic universe reside the Westerners and Japanese who not only engage in scholarship, but also journalism, teaching and business, and who exert a disproportionate influence in the agenda-setting and discourse of cultural China.16

14 Cultural China is a relatively new term popularised by Tu Wei-ming in order to make a distinction from political China. See Tu Wei-ming, "Wenhua zhongguo" chutan', ('Probing "cultural China"'), The Nineties (Jiushi Niandai), 245, June 1990, pp. 60-61; and Tu Wei-ming, 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Centre', Daedalus, Vol. 120, No. 2, Spring 1991, pp. 1-32.
15 Tu Wei-ming, 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Centre', ibid., p. 12.
16 Ibid., p. 13.
Post-Deng Foreign Policy

Hence it is not surprising that even though the term 'Greater China' was initially employed in Taiwan and Hong Kong in 1979-1980 to explore the economic potential of linkages among the ethnically Chinese polities of PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and Singapore, it was mainly the outer third world of cultural China - the Western Sinologists - who elaborated the idea of Greater China. American scholar Harry Harding, for example, sees Greater China as: 'the rapidly increasing interaction among Chinese associations from around the world, after political and administrative barriers to their connexion fall'. David Shambaugh, another China specialist, spells out the implications of a Greater China as follows:

Greater China comprises various actors, dimensions and processes. Together they pose a potential challenge to the regional and international order. Some already speak of Greater China as the world's next superpower. If the political obstacles can be overcome and China reunified under a single sovereign authority, it is likely that superpower status will become a reality. Even if de jure unification does not come to pass and Taiwan remains outside the fold, the de facto strength and influence which comprise Greater China will only increase with time.

It is not unimaginable or unrealistic to assume that early in the 21st century the combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Greater China will surpass those of the European Community and United States; it will be the world's leading trader; it will be the world's largest consumer; it will garrison the world's largest military establishment; Greater China will also overtake Japan as the dominant regional power, with Shanghai and Hong Kong the financial nexus of East Asian economic dynamism.

Greater China, as Shambaugh points out, need not be the outcome of political unification. On the contrary, fragmentation of the PRC could conceivably facilitate Greater China by allowing looser and easier interaction of economic and cultural interests across the various Chinese successor states, assuming peace were to prevail. It could even become 'democratic', or at least 'soft authoritarian', as some analysts have speculated. Obviously, under such circumstances, the question of foreign policy directions in the post-Deng era requires a redefinition of what constitutes China. A cultural and economic Greater China whose states decide to 'pool' their sovereignty (as formulated in the European Union model), for example, would require the political will in addition to the superpower capability, as detailed by Shambaugh above.

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17 Detailed in Harry Harding, 'The Concept of "Greater China": Themes, Variations and Reservations', op cit., p. 663.
18 Ibid., p. 660.
21 The notion of 'the joint management of pooled sovereignty' is discussed in A. J. R. Groom, The European Community in Context, Australian Foreign Policy Publications Programme, ANU, Canberra, 1992, p. 21.
Post-Deng Foreign Policy

Cultural and economic ties, of themselves, do not lead to political will. If political will is not an issue then what kind of superpower might be expected to emerge? A politically passive one (by international standards) like latter 20th century Japan? This is unlikely because China is not harnessed to the American global security system, nor silenced by its militaristic mistakes in the past. But supposing Greater China proves to be a nation of traders rather than inspired warriors, despite having ‘the world’s largest military establishment’, might it not exert a more subtle superpower influence? This version of superpower is perhaps better expressed as metapower, referring to a pervasive, indirect, influence, in some ways similar to Chinese suzerainty of the past.\(^{22}\) This means that a civilisational value system would come into place, just as it had under the current European-based system. History has shown that economic power is the harbinger of cultural power. This was true as much of the 'Coca-Cola culture' of the USA as of 'tribute culture' in imperial China.

Greater China’s imputed risk of economic and cultural hegemony suggests that a politically reformed China, like democratic Japan, could still pose an economic ‘challenge’ to the global system by virtue of its (and Japan’s) un-American attitudes to trade and competition. Expressed another way, the dominant ethos in the current global system is ‘un-Chinese’.

Wen Politics Rather than Western Realism as a Guide to Chinese Foreign Policy

And here we arrive at a departure point for the interpretation of international relations. It is surely more sensible, and clearly more beneficial, to pursue a foreign policy which is based on an interpretation of international reality which advances one’s civilisation rather than one’s barbarity. Chinese recognition of the superiority of *wen* (civility) over *wu* (martiality), together with a strategic culture of never engaging the enemy on its own terms (hence guerilla warfare), suggests that the self-interested struggle for power is to be avoided at all costs. It accentuates barbarity and plays into the hands of those who are better equipped for the task.

Chinese foreign policy has a long tradition of being inclusive of others under the system of suzerainty. Foreign affairs were, ideally, internal affairs. The challenge was how to disarm the barbarians at the gates by encouraging them to partake of the Chinese world through tribute relations. While tribute meant a symbolic submission to civilisation (China) it also entailed attractive rewards, both in terms of trade opportunities and the conditions of peace in which they could be pursued. Essentially, the Chinese international project has been one of seeking order through unity. This was because ‘under Heaven, all are one’, and by Heaven was meant

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\(^{22}\) I discuss metapower in my research paper, *Chinese Strategic Culture - Part 2: Virtue and Power*, op. cit.
Post-Deng Foreign Policy

the moral universe. Unity was not to be achieved by force, though often it was in practice, and it certainly could not be sustained by force - as the demise of the first emperor testified. The preferred foreign policy mode was of the non-military variety, or Wen Politics. Thus:

In the Mencius we are told that King Hui of Liang asked: "How may the world be at peace?" To which Mencius replied: "When there is unity, there will be peace." "But who can unify the world?" asked the King. "He who does not delight in killing men can unify it," answered Mencius. (Ia, 6) This statement clearly expresses the aspiration of the time. 23

There is a common saying among the Chinese, one which goes back many centuries: 'Good men should never become soldiers as good iron should not be used to make nails.' China cannot be called a warrior culture. It is instructive that among the qualities fostered in China's soldiers are those that appear more relevant to setting an example for Chinese society than fighting in wars. This is illustrated by the popularisation of the soldier-hero Lei Feng, who was depicted as both an ardent Communist and a self-sacrificing citizen. The Lei Feng campaign has been continued, and made relevant with heroes from the present generation of young Chinese, in an effort to counter the social ills of selfishness and 'money worship'.24

China is also caught up in the spirit of Lei Feng internationally by losing no opportunity to attack the foreign policy of any country which interferes in the domestic affairs of others. Besides warding off criticism of its own domestic policies, the opportunities for this rhetoric to win friends in the Non-West cannot be underestimated, particularly when accompanied by the benefits of aid and trade. Burma is a striking example. Central Asia might be another in the not too distant future. And India, if it becomes politically complacent, could be outdistanced by China as the leader of what was routinely called the Third World and what is now emerging as the New World Order's nemesis. Not only might China try to compete regionally with India in terms of moral leadership, but also it might attempt to recapture the moral initiative from the West which proclaims its values of human and democratic rights to be universal. This could well be a major Wen Politics feature of China's foreign policy. Wu Politics (pertaining to military activity), by comparison, would be held in reserve.

In other words, a post-Communist ideology could be cosmopolitan in orientation if China is not 'humiliated' again by those with their own system's moral and material imperatives. History has shown China that humiliation can only be inflicted in time of weakness, whereas a strong China is a confident China. Hence, it is highly unlikely that a China which remains unified in the post-Deng era would cause instability. It is far more likely that it will revert to a less statist self-conception, by allowing a more decentralised system of governance including

Post-Deng Foreign Policy

high degrees of autonomy to its various regions. However, as in the past when China was strong, issues of sovereignty would never be compromised. The renewed 'unity of all under Heaven' would again resemble a tribute-trade system in which doing business with China would be a major attraction to foreigners who might otherwise become obsessed with preparing to deal with 'the China threat'. Tribute would be made materially and symbolically to civilisation, a civilisation which nourishes the environment in which such economic and cultural transactions can occur. Such a civilisation would now be called not China, but East Asia - a geographic and cultural expression spanning Northeast and Southeast Asia. Beijing would be only one of a number of capitals acting as the centres of the East-Asian tribute-trade system, with the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) a forerunner and facilitator. The West's position would be a complementary one, in true yin-yang fashion. Once the centre, it now becomes the periphery, but a periphery which is not exploited in the neo-Marxist sense. Rather, the periphery that the West represents is a sustaining one, allowing for the (mutual) pursuit of a middle path between polarities of the group and the individual, duties and responsibilities, the religious-magical universe and the secular-scientific one (or tradition and modernity), economics and politics, ambiguity and distinction.

It would be foolhardy not to concede that post-Deng China clearly risks not actualising the above scenario. If China fragments, so does foreign policy. Each region would have to be dealt with individually and according to its own priorities. More characteristic of China's tendencies, however, is avoidance of the chaos that is associated in the Chinese mind with fragmentation. By comparison, order is equated with unity. Unity is considered the best option for preserving world peace. So it is likely that China will continue to pursue Realism through Idealism. Chinese Idealism equates with li (proper conduct). From it issues good governance and harmonious relations. True, it is an ideal, but it is not one which East Asians are unable to pursue. Increasingly, their mutual relations exhibit Chinese Idealism (pursued through Wen Politics) rather than Western Realism. Proper conduct does not negate self-interest. It redefines it in relation to the greater good. This is why ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has proved so successful as an exercise in mutually supportive international relations.

Explaining international relations today from a Chinese philosophical perspective, one might use such characterisations as the contest between Wen and Wu policies, the rise of Asian values and Western criticism, porous borders and economic growth circles, internationalisation and localism, joint-ventures and money worship, East Asia and Pacific

26 An idea fundamental to the Taoist concept of change which is occasioned by the ceaseless interaction of yin and yang - often identified with feminine and masculine, respectively.
Post-Deng Foreign Policy

rim. Both the connections and the distinctions are obvious, giving rise to a certain 'fuzzy logic' in the Daoist rendition of international relations. Fuzzy logic provides, of course, a better fit for uncertain reality than the simplifications of power politics. Foreign policy directions in a post-Deng China are unlikely, therefore, to bring major surprises. Only gradual ones. As Deng said in 1990: 'We fear nobody, but we offend nobody.' Should the fate of the two areas most likely to cause offence - Taiwan and the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea - remain within the bounds of the Politics of ‘Wen, Deng’s successors can reasonably hope to speak in a similar vein.

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Post-Deng Foreign Policy


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11
Post-Deng Foreign Policy


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