

China's Security Thinking

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ABSTRACT

'Security' is viewed in China in very realist, military terms. While concepts of human security have penetrated Chinese thinking, they remain secondary and far less important than traditional ideas of territorial and state security. A gulf thus exists between mainstream Chinese and European conceptions of security, so that ideas about 'strategic partnership', 'multilateral cooperation' and cooperation take on a much more military dimension in China than in Europe. European scholars and policy makers need to recognise that Chinese views on 'security' exist in a different context and paradigm from what is considered 'normal' in Europe. This paper suggests that the range of possible European responses to Chinese concerns about military security is limited, first, by different ideational starting points; but also by material constraints, chiefly (for the EU) alliance commitments to the United States; and (for China) increasing rivalry with the US in the Pacific.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'security' underwent a profound transformation in the Western world with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communism in the tumultuous period 1989-91. While George Bush Sr proclaimed a 'new world order', Germany was reunified and the European Union was established by the Treaty for European Union in 1991. Many Western scholars were confident that the post-Cold War world would consign traditional security threats to history, that liberal democracy had proven itself as the best governing system for humanity, and that economic interdependence rather than military power was the way forward (Fukuyama 1989; Maull 1990). 'Human security' or non-traditional security, came into focus, as states sought to combat non-state sources of insecurity, such as organized crime, illegal migration, identity politics, money laundering, terrorism, climate change and economic inequality (Buzan 1991; Wæver *et al.* 1993).

Through these paradigmatic shifts on security, it is noteworthy that perspectives on military security in China remained largely unchanged. In fact, the collapse of communist regimes across central and eastern Europe in the summer of 1989, China's own Tiananmen incident in June 1989, and Western-led military interventions in Yugoslavia and the Third World in the 1990s reinforced paranoia about the intentions of Western states to encroach on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity (You 1991; Shambaugh 1992). Far from declining in importance, military security and the need for modernizing China's military forces and technology were seen as first-order concerns in Beijing (Friedberg 2000). Exponential increases in China's military budget took place throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. Tensions were heightened in the Taiwan Straits over Chinese military exercises, the US Seventh Fleet responses in 1995, the crash of a US spy plane on Hainan in 2001, and quarrels over potential European and Israeli arms sales to China in 2004-5 and 2007. Most recently, China-US security disagreements have centred on the US' role as treaty ally with claimants contesting China's sovereignty over islands in the East and South China Seas, and the US' 'pivot' to Asia (Clinton 2011; Len 2012; Wong and Tay 2014).

MILITARY VS. HUMAN SECURITY

Scholars in the mainstream realist tradition, such as Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt, hold that traditional security centres on the “threat, use and control of military force” by the state, and should exclude non-direct threats (Walt 1991: 212). State security is about the state’s ability to maintain and guard its territorial boundaries, to deter and defeat external attacks. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia established inviolable territorial sovereignty as a key principle of statehood after the bloody religious and dynastic conflicts of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). In the Westphalian paradigm, security was created by contracts between sovereign states. The citizens of each state submitted to their governments in exchange for security in a Hobbesian trade-off and hence state security cascaded down to individual security.

But the end of the Cold War concluded the bipolar, militaristic approach to security. Many post-Cold War conflicts took place *within* rather than *between* states, and were fought with low technology and high civilian casualties. The traditional Hobbesian paradigm breaks down when the state itself fails to protect its own citizens due to mismanagement or corruption, or worse, is guilty of killing its own citizens. In 1991, Ken Booth first wrote about the concept of critical security studies, suggesting that states can endanger their own citizens (Booth 1991). In this early post-Cold War milieu of decreasing inter-state and rising intra-state tensions, the European Union and the United Nations were among the international organizations most active in advocating a vision of world order organized along liberal lines and concerns about ‘soft security’ issues rather than the ‘hard security’ of military jets, tanks and troops (Paris 2001; King and Murray 2001).² This liberal triumphalism was dashed on 11 September 2001 when well-organised terrorists attacked the mainland United States and crashed passenger planes into civilian and federal government targets in New York, Washington DC and Pittsburgh.

China’s 2003 EU Policy Paper (the first time the Chinese Foreign Ministry had publicly released a policy paper on a foreign political entity) made reference to shared human security interests between the EU and China. These shared interests included fighting against international terrorism, promoting sustainable development, eliminating poverty, and protecting the environment:

There is no fundamental conflict of interest between China and the EU and neither side poses a threat to the other. However, given their differences in historical background, cultural heritage, political system and economic development level, it is natural that the two sides have different views or even disagree on some issues. Nevertheless China-EU relations of mutual trust and mutual benefit cannot and will not be affected if the two sides address their disagreements in a spirit of equality and mutual respect.

The common ground between China and the EU far outweighs their disagreements. Both China and the EU stand for democracy in international relations and an enhanced role of the UN. Both are committed to *combating international terrorism* and *promoting sustainable development* through *poverty elimination* and *environmental protection* endeavours. China and the EU are highly complementary economically thanks to their respective advantages. The EU has a developed economy, advanced technologies and strong financial resources while China boasts steady economic growth, a huge market and abundant labour force. There is a broad prospect for bilateral trade and economic and technological cooperation. Both China and the EU member states have a long history and splendid culture each and stand for more cultural exchanges and mutual emulation. The political, economic and cultural common understanding and interaction between China and the EU offer a solid foundation for the continued growth of China-EU relations. (Chinese Foreign Ministry 2003, italics added.)

Another interesting point about China’s view of the European Union is that, unlike its relations with the US, the absence of any potential military conflict with the EU is seen in a positive light (“no fundamental conflict of interest between China and the EU and neither side poses a threat to the

other”). In contrast, the *European Security Strategy* policy document, adopted by the European Council in December the same year after the US-led invasion of Iraq, expressed the view that no EU member state was likely to be militarily threatened. It listed terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), regional conflicts, state failure and organised crime as five key threats (European Council 2003).

Some human security interests are considered urgent enough for China to devote a considerable amount of political energy and economic resources into ensuring continued access and/or national sufficiency. These include resources such as food and energy, now considered strategic and which will be covered by other authors in this project. But traditional military security – the control of territorial borders, the ability to project power and to protect or stake a claim on Chinese sovereignty over ‘lost’ or disputed territories – have been and remain among the highest order concerns of the Chinese state since 1949. Unlike the European Union³ which has steadily expanded its ‘zone of peace’ since 1952, China has been engaged in a number of wars or border conflicts since the end of World War II: a civil war (1947-49); proxy wars with the United States (Korea, 1950-53; Vietnam 1965-75); direct ‘hot wars’ or border skirmishes with India, the Soviet Union, Vietnam; and sabre-rattling with Taiwan, the Philippines and Japan.

CHINA’S SECURITY THINKING

Debates over whether China is a revisionist or status-quo power are confused because of the frequent mixed messaging coming from Beijing, with its political leaders calling for calm negotiations and its military leaders often taking hardline positions and publicly identifying the United States and Japan as the chief security threats to China (Liu 2012; You 1991;). Since Hu Jintao’s administration, China had called for a form of ‘Peaceful Development’ (*heping fazhan*) where it sought to reconstruct its identity as an emerging superpower that is pacifist and does not challenge the American ‘neoliberal world order’ (Cox 1987). The Chinese vision of a “harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity order” was first linked to the UN Charter and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence by President Hu Jintao in his speech to the UN in September 2005. If we understand Andrew Hurrell’s perspective that ‘politics is the arena for struggles among social and political ideals (Hurrell 2007:30), this articulation of the social ideal of a harmonious world can be understood as China’s contestation of liberal and anti-pluralist attempts to construct (or maintain) a Western-dominated exclusivist international society. In that speech, Hu contended that :

The world’s civilisations may differ in age, but none is better or more superior than others. Differences in history, culture, social system and mode of development should not become barriers to exchange between countries, let alone excuses for confrontation. (Hu 2005)

The Chinese white paper of 2011 stipulated China as a global actor that aims to ‘contribute to world peace through its own development’ (Chinese Government 2011). Liberals would thus view China as having prioritized domestic economic growth while setting aside areas of contention with other countries that could potentially harm its economic relations and amicable identity. China has thus framed its development as a win-win situation beneficial to both itself and the world, as other countries stand to gain from its increasing economic interdependence.

Some scholars view Peaceful Development as the primary determinant of modern Chinese foreign policies, drastically shaping even China’s management of cross-straits relations. China’s new thinking has witnessed a shift in its Taiwanese policy to one espousing ‘no independence, no war’ (*budu buwu*) and the maintenance of the status quo. This is in contrast to Jiang Zemin’s ‘hasty unification’ (*ji tong*) approach (Guo 2012). In 2005, China welcomed Ma Ying-jeou’s call for the signing of a peace agreement between Taiwan and China, as proclaimed in Ma’s presidential election speech. Since Ma’s presidency, cross-straits relations have blossomed, marked with increasing liberalization of the ‘three links’ (shipping, postal, and air transportation) between China and Taiwan, and

burgeoning economic relations marked by the 2010 Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement and the follow-up Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement that has been signed in 2013 but yet to be ratified by the Taiwanese legislature.

China's efforts to be a part of a US-led international order are evident from its diplomatic measures to enhance good regional relations by participating and cooperating in multilateral cooperative projects with ASEAN, US, and other Asian countries, often in response to US or ASEAN-led initiatives (Johnston 2008). But in recent years, China has gone beyond this to initiate China-centred multilateral projects such as the new 'Silk Road' through Central Asia, and the controversial Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) launched in Beijing in October 2014 (Kuik 2015)

While China's peaceful development accepts its position as a rising actor that respects the rules and norms set and dominated by Western actors, China does not always play by the rules systematically, nor is it a compliant actor. In fact, China is caught within the contradictory identities of being a developing country, the world's second largest economy, and a civilization-state with a keen sense of history and superiority. Hence, while it aims to reconstruct its identity as a cooperative global economic partner to achieve development, China is inflexible on issues tied to its national pride and sovereignty. On these issues, China upholds an unswerving militarist position. In managing Taiwan for example, while China remains pacifist and gradual in its approach to unification, it is insistent in advocating a 'One-China' policy premised on the 1992 Consensus. Hence, any working diplomatic relations with China necessitates a concomitant agreement by the other party to respect its foundational 'One-China' principle, as with the US and EU. In China's Policy Paper on the EU (Chinese Foreign Ministry 2014), it is stipulated explicitly that "The one-China principle is an important political foundation of China-EU relations", and that the EU ought to respect the PRC's approach to not just the Taiwan question, but also with its Special Administrative Regions such as Hong Kong, Macao, and Tibet.

In fact, China's realist approach to cross-straits security can be evinced in the continual military build-up against Taiwan despite political proclamations of peaceful development. According to Taipei's Ministry of National Defense, the number of Chinese ballistic missiles aimed at Taiwan has grown from 1,400 in 2011 to 1,600 in 2012, a militarization which contributes to a regional security dilemma (Cole 2012). In the management of South China Sea disputes, China has also reacted through hardcore militarist strategies. In 2012 when Vietnam passed legislations to include the Paracel and Spratley Islands within its sovereign territory, China reacted in a tit-for-tat manner by establishing the city of Sansha under Hainan province to govern the islands.

There are also contradictions in China's strategic/security thinking. Indications of thinking about military security within Chinese policy and academic circles, suggest that views about military security are less about aggrandizement or revisionism than about guarding its borders and defensively maintaining the status quo. Much of this thinking is drawn from the trajectory of millennia of Chinese empires, and its perspectives on security issues and international relations. But whatever Chinese scholars and policy makers may say or think about China's security posture, they are painfully aware of the United States' position as the effective hegemon in Asia-Pacific security. With the existence of the United States' comprehensive network of formal and informal bilateral alliances with countries in the Asia-Pacific, China is hemmed in by what Peter Katzenstein calls an American *imperium* in the Pacific (Katzenstein 2005). Yuen Foong Khong has characterized the US-led order of alliances as a 'tributary system' – after the China-centered international relations of ancient times – in which the United States offers its Asian allies military protection as well as economic access to its markets. The United States is seen by some as the *sine qua non* hub around which Asian countries are grouped, and as a provider of markets, security and stability. The 'tributary system' of the United States is far more effective than China's ever was, because of its overwhelming power (Khong 2013; Wong and Tay 2014).

“Offensive realists” like Aaron Friedberg and John Mearsheimer hold that human nature is innately unreliable and insecure, and that states should prepare for the worst-case scenario and arm themselves in case their neighbours/rivals attack them. Mearsheimer and Friedberg have even projected this logic into Chinese thinking, suggesting that in Beijing’s shoes, they would prepare for the possibility of armed conflict with the United States. This way of interpreting China’s behaviour is intuitive as it assumes that the logic which applies to established great powers like the United States, also applies to rising great powers such as China (Friedberg 1993; Mearsheimer 2001, 2010).

Applying Friedberg’s or Mearsheimer’s lenses to Chinese foreign policy behaviour can be alarming (Acharya 2003: 156). If one considers China’s use of Westphalian language to stake its claims to territory and sovereignty in the South China Sea, or actions such as China’s declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in November 2013, then the prospects for continued peace and stability in Asia as China’s military power rises, do not seem very promising.

Nevertheless, there have been accounts of China acting as a potential ‘game changer’ (Economy 2010) that aims to intensify its ‘tributary system’. While China claimed a peaceful development that does not challenge the current US-led international order, it is no doubt that China does not unquestioningly conform to American standards. The Beijing Consensus is a case in point; it serves as an alternative economic developmental model to the Washington Consensus, especially for developing countries. Since the 1990s, Jiang Zemin’s ‘going out’ policies has witnessed Chinese State Owned Enterprises (SOE) increasing investments in the West and in developing countries, as in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. China’s total outgoing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has increased from USD 18 billion to USD 132 billion in 2013 (The Heritage Foundation, undated). Furthermore, China has sought increase in voting powers in international economic institutions such as the World Bank. In 2010, China overtook large European nations in a shift in voting power in the World Bank (Chan 2012,). China’s share of votes is second only to the US and Japan, while being above Germany, Britain and France, reflecting a shift in the distribution of global economic power. In furthering its influence in international institutions such as the IMF, China has stepped up on its contributed funds.

Hence, one explanation of China’s seemingly contradictory position with regard to its neoliberal proclamation of peaceful development on one hand and its realist military approach to territorial and security issues, is in its strategic position as an emerging economy and, at the same time, a nation with the potential to be a hegemon. To reconcile this contradiction, it is tempting to view China’s accumulation of economic wealth as a necessary stage to claiming international political power and security. By projecting its soft power influence in the Asia-Pacific and in international institutions, enhancing its global economic position, and militarizing itself, China has adopted a realist strategy of maximizing its Comprehensive National Power (CNP).

On the other hand, constructivist accounts of China’s strategic thinking today are often set against the backdrop of its ‘victim mentality’ at the hands of rapacious western colonial powers and Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Qin 2010; Li and Xu 2006). They tend to demonstrate a deep-seated paranoia of being perceived as weak or backing down over territorial disputes (Li 2007; Wong 2013).

So while Yan Xuetong is often cited as the chief spokesman for an aggressive Chinese foreign policy, even Yan argues that morality and ideological leadership are as important as economic and military power (Yan 2010, 2011). For Yan, Chinese foreign policy would be rudderless without an ideological basis. He finds the Spring and Autumn period in Chinese history, just before the foundation of a unified imperial China under the Qin, instructive.

To shape a friendly international environment for its rise, Beijing needs to develop more high-quality diplomatic and military relationships than Washington. No leading power is able to have friendly relations with every country in the world, thus the core of competition between China and the United States will be to see who has more high-quality friends. And in order to achieve that goal, China has to provide higher-quality moral leadership than the United States ... It is the battle for people's hearts and minds that will determine who eventually prevails. And, as China's ancient philosophers predicted, the country that displays more humane authority will win.

In other words, the Chinese state needs to find ideological justification for leadership, both domestically and internationally in order to compete with the United States. The puzzle is whether this dissonance in Chinese strategic thinking is the result of ideological contradictions/ideological untidiness, competition between the military and the political (and party) leadership, or whether modern China is constrained by historical, ideational and material factors arising from the post-World War II structures put in place by the US and its allies.

HOBBS VS KANT: SECURITY CONTEXTS IN EAST ASIA AND EUROPE

The post-war reconciliation between France and Germany has been much heralded, while rivalry/animosity between China, Japan and South Korea has not only been unresolved after World War II, but has in fact intensified in recent years. One analogy used by some scholars to explain increasing and competitive nationalisms in Asia, is the idea that 'Europe's past is Asia's future' (Friedberg 1993, 2000; Acharya 2003) – the idea that international relations is subject to cycles of interstate rivalry, arms races and war before transitioning to periods of peace and prosperity. Such a context can explain much of the security thinking in Northeast Asia (hard security, realism) when compared to Europe (human security, liberalism).

Nonetheless some differences can be noted in current day Northeast Asia compared to Europe on eve of the First and Second World Wars. For example, high level business exchanges between China and Japan continued unabated at the height of tensions in late 2013, perhaps a recognition on both sides that the politics should not be allowed to affect their trade ties (Katz 2013). In contrast, economic and military rivalries between the European powers in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries precipitated two world wars.

The closest that the two sides came to reconciling very different conceptions of security may have been in 2004-5, when the EU was close to lifting its arms embargo (imposed in 1989) on China. But the EU found itself under a lot of pressure from the US when French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder prematurely announced that the EU arms embargo on China would be lifted. When the response from Washington circles (Congress, State and Defense Departments) landed shrill and hard with threats of reprisals and reviewing of defence development agreements, the resulting dissensions within the EU scuttled the lifting of the embargo, and instead intensified US-EU joint consultations and intelligence sharing on China (Wong 2008; Casarini 2007).

CONCLUSION

Traditional ideas of territorial and state security dominate in China. While concepts of human security have penetrated Chinese thinking, they remain secondary, are less developed, and are given far less weight than in European thinking. Double-digit military budget growth is an expression of China's concerns about strategic encirclement by the United States and its allies to China's east, south and southwest.

Differing regional and recent historical contexts in China and Europe, explain the difference in their conception of security (reconciliation between France and Germany; compared with continued interstate rivalry between China and Japan, with the United States underwriting security for its Asian allies).

One way to explain the gulf between China's security thinking and that in the EU is that significant geopolitical shifts in power, strong nationalisms and rapid economic development are taking place in Asia. These conditions, which were patent in nineteenth century Europe, do not hold today (although Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea may turn out to be a defining event that revives realist ideas about military security in Europe). Also, the EU is more tied to the United States in defence and other strategic agreements (NATO, weapons industries, trade and investments) than it realises. These ties make it extremely difficult for the EU to forge a real strategic partnership with China, as the 2004-5 débâcle over the arms embargo demonstrated.

RW 17.5.15

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Endnotes

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² The two catastrophic world wars Europe experienced in the twentieth century have often been cited as the catalyst for the unprecedented moves towards the European project of regional integration, and its corollary in human security thinking.

³ Including its predecessors the European Communities (1957) and European Coal and Steel Community (1952). The European Union was established by the Treaty of the European Union in 1991.