

Peaceful Rise: China's Modernisation Trajectory

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China intends to realise its national resurgence and modernisation through a peaceful path by integrating into or accepting and participating in the existing international system. With reform and opening up as its hallmark, China's growth model is in a sense a marriage between Oriental and Occidental civilisations in the age of globalisation. Openness and inclusiveness are the intrinsic attributes of this model. China's diplomacy since 1978 is essentially an extension of the national modernisation drive, its chief task, basic policies and behavioural patterns being the creation of an international environment conducive to this endeavour.

Keywords: China, peaceful rise, foreign policy, international role

The focus of global attention over the past twenty years or so, China's peaceful rise has, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, invited such familiar questions as how that kind of rise can be ensured, what implications it could have for world politics and whether China will abandon its peaceful path when it becomes rich and strong to contend global hegemony with the United States. Convincing answers are called for.

A process in pursuit of national modernisation

In essence, the peaceful rise represents a process in pursuit of national modernisation, the long-cherished dream of shared prosperity that fascinates China's 1.3 billion people. And the path to this grandiose national objective has been the 'reform and opening up' initiated by its architect, late senior leader Deng Xiaoping, and adhered to by the succeeding generations of Chinese leadership since then. This path can be captured in a nutshell as building a market economy through integration into the outside world in the process of globalisation.

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The term 'peaceful rise' emerged in response to the 'Chinese threat' theory rampant after the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union's disintegration, and China's rapid economic ascendancy turning it into a developing giant committed to a non-Western political system and therefore, in the eyes of some Westerners, a chief potential competitor. Thus the China threat was often mentioned as opposing the historical setting of Western-centric world politics in the past few centuries. To refute this fallacy, Zheng Bijian, a well known theoretician of the Chinese Communist Party, came up with the argument of 'China's peaceful rise' at the beginning of the new century, which he substantiated with ample diplomatic and domestic facts of China's footprint on the path of reform and openness. To avoid the negative association and interpretation of the term 'rise' and highlight the intention of peace, the Chinese government stressed 'peaceful development' instead. Nevertheless, in the Western-dominated international opinion, 'rise' has been singled out.

Yet China intends to realise its national resurgence and modernisation not through violence in a zero-sum game like Fascist Germany or Japan on the eve of and during the Second World War, but through a peaceful path born of a win-win strategy for common prosperity by integrating into or accepting and participating in the existing international system. In other words, China's peaceful integration into the process of globalisation, thus becoming an integral part of it, should be seen as a matter of creative significance in world politics where such a peaceful rise is unprecedented. The current positive interaction of a mutually beneficial win-win scenario between Beijing and the broader world provides eloquent testimony to this.

Sure enough, precisely through this peaceful journey over the past thirty-plus years, tremendous achievements have been won in China's modernisation drive, and universally acknowledged. Not only has China evolved into the world's most significant emerging economy by building up a market economy, but sustained high growth has catapulted it into the position of the world's second largest economy, providing its citizens with moderate prosperity.

With reform and opening up as its hallmark, China's growth model is in a sense the brainchild of a marriage between Oriental and Occidental civilisations in the age of globalisation. Openness and inclusiveness are the intrinsic attributes of this model and the coordinated economic, social and political modernisation serving as bedrock for China's soft power will have even greater international appeal down the road.

Needless to say, China's diplomacy since 1978 is essentially an extension of the national modernisation drive, its chief task, basic policies and behavioural patterns being the creation of an international environment conducive to this endeavour. Naturally, it complements and follows closely the unending evolution of the country's reform and opening up.

China's diplomacy and international role in the coming decade

Not surprisingly, Chinese diplomacy is deeply interlocked with its domestic developments and social transformations, hence the strong continuity of its basic objective, guidelines and policies not subject to changes in leadership, on the one hand, and the development of its concepts, ideas, theories and behaviour in keeping with the trajectory of modernisation, on the other. Based on the blueprint for China's rise in the coming five to ten years, the author would like to offer here the following personal observations on Chinese diplomacy and the country's international role.

First, in the foreseeable future, economic development will remain the linchpin of state strategy with the ongoing twelfth Five-year Plan (2011–15) focused on transforming the development model to create a sustainable industrial structure and related societal consensus. Mainstream economists at home and some well known experts abroad believe that conditions are still favourable for high growth in China despite the worrisome global economic landscape.¹ Its deepening integration with globalisation will serve as a crucial guarantee for China's continued commitment to peaceful development.

Second, domestically, long-term government work will focus on systemic social transformation with the coming five to ten years as the crucial period. In fact, the focus of reform has shifted to the establishment of an improved social security system and vigorous support for a secure means of livelihood. This will be the real testbed for realising the ideals of fairness, justice, prosperity and harmony in socialist China that justify the legitimacy of the long-term rule of the Chinese Communist Party. That explains the massive investments into social welfare and the remarkable progress in this arena in recent years.

Yet this constitutes a gigantic social project that requires a long-term Herculean effort on the part of government and society as a whole. Accordingly, economic and social progress will set the stage for urgent political reform. Since the October 2012 Eighteenth Party Congress will usher in a new generation of leadership, we are fully justified to expect that a new phase in the modernisation drive will start under their guidance and that the task of positioning China's international role in this new stage of its peaceful rise will figure high on their agenda.

Third, as a consequence, some diplomatic readjustments are also in the pipeline to respond to transformations both at home and abroad. The adjustments already begun will bring about a transition from supplementing and serving the demands of building a market economy and integrating into the world economy in the first stage of economic development through reform and opening up to fulfilling the demands for building a powerful modernised country able to meet the challenges

¹ Interview with economist I. Zhang, *People's Daily*, 14 Feb. 2012; interview with J. O'Neil, *Reference News*, 14 Feb. 2012.

confronting China's new international status. This will involve an overall redesign and management of external relations so as to display the international image of a surging great power that radiates its influence and guiding role in regional and global affairs.

Conceivably, the focus of these ongoing readjustments will be on China's surrounding areas and the Asia-Pacific region, a region increasingly evolving into a new geopolitical and geo-economic centre of the planet. Under these circumstances, a more substantive diplomatic project for the new stage of China's peaceful rise will mean vigorous efforts to open up new vistas for general prosperity and a win-win outcome together with all the parties concerned in a spirit of seeking common ground while preserving differences.

Fourth, as is well known, a nascent global political and economic configuration is taking shape that features multipolarity in its power balance and in state relations, and diversity in growth models. This configuration has resulted from a historic change in the post-World War II international system, which is shifting from world dominance by US-led Western developed countries to power-sharing with developing countries represented by the emerging economies. In light of the objective demand, a search is on for a stable and effective structure of the international system that fits reality.

Finally, a new type of big power relations is simultaneously in the making between Washington and Beijing, a relationship never seen in the annals of international relations. Here are the world's two largest economies with huge historical, cultural and political differences. Their extensive and deep-going economic interdependence co-exists with pervasive strong mutual mistrust and vigilance towards and checks against each other in the political/and security arenas – a complex landscape of cooperation intertwined with rivalry. Originating from the glaring gap in strength and inequality, such dichotomy promises to remain largely unchanged in the foreseeable future. Thus bilateral ties will probably navigate a rough sea ahead, synchronous progress in cooperation in various other fields notwithstanding. Therefore, a mechanism designed for dialogue, communication and management is all the more important for avoiding misjudgement and confrontation. Exploring a way to achieve peaceful co-existence between the two capitals is entirely within reach.

Looking ahead, along with China's continued peaceful rise, its economic/political development path will consolidate a sustainable and sound model. As global multipolarity advances, bilateral China–US ties will become more balanced. As a result, hopefully, the vision for trans-Pacific co-existence in favour of global peace and development will eventually become reality.