

Thinking about China's Future

David Shambaugh

China's modernisation mission is enduring but there continues to be a large mismatch in China's view of the world and how the world views China. This rejoinder questions China's commitment to political reform, discusses the economic challenges facing China and wonders whether there is a distinct and unique China growth model. Assessing China's impact as a rising power on the international system, it critiques China's global diplomacy and the future of US–China relations. The rejoinder is more circumspect on these issues than Cui's original article.

Keywords: modernisation, political reform, multipolar

Cui Liru has contributed the thoughtful essay “Peaceful Rise: China's Modernisation Trajectory”, on which I am honoured to be invited to comment. As a respected colleague, one of China's leading experts on world affairs and President of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (the nation's leading think tank in the field), Cui's perspectives are an important indicator of current thinking in China concerning China's future domestic developmental path and international orientation.

Cui's interesting essay ranges widely over a number of important topics: how the world views China and how China views the world; China's approach to the international system and assessments of how the system is evolving; the history and purpose of China's drive for modernisation; the content of China's growth model and challenges in the future; the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and future of political reform; the purpose and emphasis of Chinese diplomacy; and prospects for US–China relations.

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Language Matters

Cui's broad-gauged essay ranges across all of these important topics. Along the way, he also uses a lot of terminology (*tifa*) commonplace in the Chinese discourse on international affairs. Cui provides a brief explanation of how the term "peaceful rise" was replaced by "peaceful development", and he sprinkles other official boilerplate terminology throughout his essay, for example, "mutually beneficial win-win scenarios", "new vistas for common prosperity", "seeking common ground, while reserving differences", "reform and opening-up", "China threat", "hegemony", "multipolarisation in power balance", and so on. While language is indicative of culture and offers important insights into how Chinese speak in official parlance, China's future relations with the world will rest far more on what it does than what it says. Indeed, one of the greatest impediments to effective Chinese public diplomacy is the propagandistic language used. Some of the international "scepticism" Cui notes concerning China's future may have something to do with the repetitive rhetoric Beijing offers to the world. While China's domestic political culture involves the extensive use of such terminology, these phrases fall on deaf ears abroad. The Chinese government would do well to abandon 'slogan diplomacy' (*kouhao waijiao*) and replace it with sophisticated analysis and specific, concrete foreign policies.

In the remainder of this rejoinder, I wish to address a number of themes in Cui's article and offer some personal perspectives and pose some questions for consideration.

China's enduring mission

Cui opens his discussion by noting that "national modernisation" is a "long-cherished dream" of the Chinese people. All observers would do well to remember this key point. While China has known and experienced continual changes and wrenching upheavals over the past 150 years, this continual drive for modernity has tied generations of Chinese together and has been *the* core common strategy in China's approach to the world. From the late Qing reformers during the 'Self-Strengthening Movement' (1861–95) through the republican era (1911–49) and the People's Republic of China (1949–), the search for 'wealth and power' (*fuqiang*) has been the common pursuit. What differed during these periods were the *means* used, not the *ends* pursued. The national mission remained the same. Moreover, modernisation was assumed to be the key to restoring Chinese national sovereignty, integrity and dignity in the eyes of the world.

Later in the essay, Cui offers two other important observations that flow from this national mission of modernity.

First, he says, "China's diplomacy since 1978 is essentially an extension of the national modernization drive." All observers should also grasp this simple but vital

point: China's diplomacy is geared totally towards China's own development. It is a 'China first' foreign policy – relations with other nations are developed foremost for what they can contribute to China's own development. This is not to say that China does not hold normative principles in world affairs, as it takes the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' very seriously. But China is a classic realist state that seeks to strengthen itself above all. Only with such strength, many Chinese believe, can their nation defend itself and navigate safely in a dangerous and predatory world.

Second, Cui importantly notes that the key to China's modernisation drive has been its "openness and inclusiveness". He then astutely observes that "China's growth model is . . . the brainchild of a marriage between Oriental and Occidental civilisations in the age of globalisation". I could not agree more with him. If there is a 'China model' (and I am generally dubious of the concept), it lies precisely in the *eclecticism and adaptability* of China's approach to modernisation. Ever since the inauguration of the Self-Strengthening Movement 150 years ago, China's consistent approach – across imperial, republican and communist governments – has been that of a 'borrowing and adaptive culture'. China has constantly scoured the globe in search of 'best practices' that could be brought home and grafted together with indigenous methods of doing things. The resulting 'hybrid' of development in *all* fields – economy, society, polity, education, science, technology, culture, etc. – is precisely what makes China's development experience unique, remarkable and admirable. There are other key components of China's development that are notable – state corporatism, state planning, public entrepreneurship, the nuclear family and extended lineages, *guanxi* and corruption, education, and foreign investment, size and population – but, to the extent there is a China model, it is firmly rooted in this hybridisation, eclecticism and adaptability.

The domestic scene

I was also intrigued with Cui's discussion of China's domestic development over the next decade. He makes a strong case that the government will focus on "systemic social transformation" during this "crucial period". Premier Wen Jiabao's Work Report to the Fifth Session of the Eleventh National People's Congress on 5 March 2012 fleshes out some of the details to which Cui alludes.¹ But I took particular note of two statements he made.

The first was that "fairness, justice, prosperity, and harmony [. . .] justify the legitimacy of the long-term rule of the Chinese Communist Party". So it seems from Cui's statement and Premier Wen's report, that there is now a recognition in China that the Party's longevity will be based increasingly on effectively addressing

¹ http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/2012NPC_GovtWorkReport_English.pdf.

issues of social equality and justice. This means there has been an important shift in the Party's thinking away from a "growth above all" strategy to a more normative agenda focusing on quality of life. One wonders though: is it too little, too late?

Secondly, Cui's brief but important sentence that "economic and social progress will set the stage for *urgent political reform*" is particularly noteworthy. Yet it begs the question: what *kind* of political reform? Will it be more reform from above that strengthens the administrative party-state or will it be reform from below that empowers civil society, citizen's rights, and offers effective checks and balances on the party-state? Unfortunately, no specifics are offered in Cui's essay as, no doubt, he and everyone in the system are awaiting the new Party leadership to be 'elected' at the 18th Party Congress in October 2012 and to see what (if any) political initiatives they may take. Yet, there now seems to be an increasing awareness of the need for systemic political reform in order to spur further economic growth and address the many social and environmental maladies afflicting Chinese society.

The global arena

Also noteworthy in Cui's essay is his discussion of future Chinese foreign relations. Given his important position in the foreign affairs system (*waishi qingbao xitong*), his views are likely to be indicative of what he describes as "some diplomatic readjustments" that are "in the pipeline". He offers three main indications of what we may look for in China's future diplomacy.

First, Cui reflects the growing realist consensus in China concerning the need for China to act with greater heft and influence in world affairs. Many realists in China argue that Deng Xiaoping's vaunted advice to "hide capabilities, adopt a modest demeanour, and bide time" (*taoguang yanghui*) is no longer applicable as a guide or grand strategy for today's China. Reflecting the growing consensus in Chinese international relations circles, Cui speaks of "building a powerful modernised country". This statement is at variance with the official goal of becoming a "moderately well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui*) by mid-century.

Cui then argues that, in its external relations, China should "display the international image of a *surging great power* that radiates its influence and guiding role in regional and global affairs". This argument is also at variance with Deng Xiaoping's low-profile strategy but, again, reflects a growing consensus among international affairs experts and military officers that China should be acting with greater purpose and profile abroad. The world had better prepare itself for a more assertive China in the years ahead. This would be a big change from the generally risk-averse foreign policy of previous years. But the question for Cui and others who advocate this is: how can China reconcile itself as a "surging great power that radiates its influence" while not alarming its neighbours and the world? It will take much more than platitudes about peaceful intent, "win-win scenarios", "seeking common

ground” and the like to persuade many in Asia and around the world of China’s benign future.

Cui’s second observation concerns China’s long-held conviction/prediction about the inevitability of a multipolar world. After four decades in which this prediction did not materialise, it now seems to hold greater efficacy as many observers see a pluralisation of the international order.

Yet Chinese (and other) analysts would be well advised not to confuse wishful thinking with hard-headed analysis. The United States is not about to become just another power among many on the global landscape. Chinese (and other) analysts have repeatedly overstated America’s decline and undersold America’s resilience. Rather than assume America’s inexorable decline, Chinese analysts would do well to examine the other dimension of their multipolar prediction. That is, what other poles are there? What are the prospects for the European Union to get its act together and exert global influence? What is the likelihood of middle powers like Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey to begin to exert *real influence* on world affairs? And what about China itself?

In my view we are not living in – or moving towards – a multipolar world of diffused power among roughly equivalent poles. The global system is more hierarchical, with at least four tiers of states with very different power capacities. Moreover, poles are like magnets – they *attract* others to them by virtue of their strength (hard power) and intrinsic appeal (soft power). In this sense, only the United States can be considered a ‘pole’ (*ji*), as it attracts other nations for deterrence and security, for its political system (notwithstanding the partisan political gridlock of recent years), for its soft power, for its technological innovation and for its economic weight. By these criteria, China and the EU are not even ‘candidate poles’, although by other criteria they are ‘powers’. No other country or collectivity can be accurately described as a pole in today’s world (including Russia and Japan). Thus the whole Chinese dream of a multipolar world may be just that: a dream.

Finally, Cui’s essay discusses the future relationship between the United States and China. He argues that a “new-type of big power relations is [...] in the making”. He describes this new-type relationship as one that mixes “deep-going interdependence coexist[ing] with pervasive strong mutual distrust and vigilance towards and checks against each other in the political/security arena – a complex landscape of cooperation intertwined with rivalry”.

I could not agree more with Cui, as this is a very accurate description of the present and likely road ahead in relations between Washington and Beijing. I also completely agree with him when he predicts “rough seas ahead” and says there is a pressing need for “a mechanism designed for dialogue, communication, and management . . . all the more important for avoiding misjudgement and confrontation”.

While I also agree that “peaceful coexistence between the two capitals” is “entirely within reach”, I am a bit more sanguine about the prospects. Competition is rising in US–China relations, while cooperation is limited. But, at the end of the day, relations will be defined by a combination of cooperation and competition. What both sides need to do is work to expand the sphere of cooperation and manage the competition. But both sides would be deluding themselves to think that US–China relations can somehow move on to a lasting ‘harmonious’ track. Relations will remain complicated and often difficult in the years ahead (for both objective and subjective reasons).

Food for thought

Cui Liru’s essay and this rejoinder hopefully provide a good basis for further consideration and discussion of China’s future. Questions certainly outstrip the supply of answers. But that is what makes ‘China watching’ so challenging. The Chinese are among the most uncertain about their future.

The most interesting and enduring question concerns whether China, as a rising power, will buck the trend of history and pursue a peaceful path (as Cui and others predict) – or whether its development will inevitably bring it into conflict not only with foreigners, but possibly also with those people living within its borders? Thus far, the Chinese response is that peace and harmony will prevail internally and externally, but many observers are sceptical about these absolutist assertions. It may well be the Chinese intent, but even the best of intents can be derailed by the complexities of domestic and international forces.