

China: The Post-Responsible Power

Something profound seems to have occurred in Chinese foreign policy since the global financial crisis starting in 2007–08. Many have noted an assertive and nationalist Chinese shift, as most dramatically demonstrated in its high-profile global diplomacy to promote its agenda and maritime disputes with its neighbors to defend its “core” interest. But how to characterize the change remains unclear. Even the “assertive” label, an innocuous term in international relations, is contested.¹ More common is the pessimism regarding China and East Asia, as expressed by strategist Robert Kaplan when he said, “The 21st century map of the Pacific Basin, clogged as it is with warships, is like a map of conflict-prone Europe from previous centuries.”² Does this signal the start of a wholesale Chinese reversal of a formerly placid, cooperative strategy? What does the recent turn of events mean for the Sino–U.S. relationship, the East Asian order, and global governance?

The story of China’s rise is long, consequential, and global. The maritime disputes in East Asia, while important, hardly tell the whole story of China’s international trajectory. While vague and contested, for much of the post-Cold War era the idea of “international responsibility” gave China a sense of direction for its domestic and international transitions. As an idea, it embodied the best practices as well as the international norms and institutions that had informed and inspired Chinese reformers. The idea of being a “responsible power” reined in nationalist impulse and realpolitik calculations, which helped contribute to its

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successful rise. Equally important, integrating the reforming socialist country into the international community set the terms of Western engagement with China.

But for the last decade or so, China has abandoned that global frame of reference. The fall of “responsible power” represents a remarkable break from the original spirit of Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening up” as well as China’s “peaceful rise.”³ Domestically, the new turn has galvanized a quest for a distinctive Chinese political model in order to reject Western-style democracy. Fueled by traditional security concerns, such as maritime territorial disputes, and emerging unconventional issues, including cybersecurity, heightened fear and uncertainty have crept into China’s foreign relations with the United States, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

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Without a self-identification that aligns China with the global status quo and an anchor for Western engagement, post-responsible China has become a lot more revisionist. *But* China is not isolationist; in fact, in the words of the former president of the International Studies Association, Etel Solingen, “its internalizing leaders have anchored their political survival to the global political economy.”⁴ Yet, China’s economic globalization could also blunt our sensitivity to the gravity of the rising power’s revisionist challenge. Lacking a shared sense of common responsibility with the major powers in the international system, mistrust fuels competitive dynamics—even in areas where compelling logic would seem to dictate a partnership between China and the United States. And therein lies the challenge: if engaged in the global system but not as a “responsible power,” on what terms will China now seek to reengage the international community and redistribute global power and authority?

The Rise of “Responsible Power”

The idea of “responsible power” began to take hold in Chinese thinking roughly in the mid-1990s, and Chinese scholars seem to agree that it became China’s national self-identification in 1997.⁵ While the birth of this refrain has a rough date, no individual leader is credited for its origin. Jiang Zemin, being the leader at the time, would seem to serve as a natural source for the concept, but he was not. In a comprehensive review of the diplomatic record under Jiang, published in 2002, then China’s Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan listed Jiang’s twelve “far-sighted international strategic thoughts and policies,” but they did not include China as a “responsible great power.”⁶

Instead, the concept has a more unusual origin, in that it likely came from the United States but well before then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert

Zoellick's famous "responsible stakeholder" speech in 2005. President Bill Clinton, presumably at a meeting on the sidelines of the 1995 UN gathering marking the organization's 50th anniversary, allegedly reassured President Jiang that the United States "welcome[s] China to the great power table. But great powers also have great responsibilities."⁷ The U.S. stand, reiterated elsewhere by administration officials, represented the logic of its engagement policy to transform the beleaguered post-Tiananmen China into a "responsible great power."⁸ Responding to the positive message from the United States, Chinese media and official commentary openly adopted the idea. While other concepts had come from Chinese leaders, "responsible power" resulted from Chinese "appropriating the language of the Clinton administration."⁹ Such idea diffusion was extraordinary, particularly in the context of the Sino-U.S. relationship.

Scholars have emphasized that certain ideas acquire their appeal because of their utility as "road maps" in guiding policy.¹⁰ But sometimes ambiguity explains their attractiveness as well. In the case of "responsible power," its meaning was never officially spelled out. U.S. politicians never clarified specific yardsticks on specific issues, although this did not prevent academics from trying to make explicit the U.S. conditions on its China policy.¹¹ In fact, demand on Chinese responsibility marked a retreat from Clinton's earlier linkage policy, explicitly listing concrete Chinese concessions for renewal of its most-favored nation (MFN) status. Apart from academic exercises in clarifying what China had to do, the United States never specified a set of a priori obligations expected of China.

Its ambiguity notwithstanding, expectations, both domestic and international, for self-change in Chinese foreign policy in line with international standards were loud and clear. For instance, domestic institutional reforms were a requirement for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Reformist leaders led by Premier Zhu Rongji had to restructure China's state-owned enterprises, many functions of the state, and the domestic legal framework in order to both comply with the international trade regime and compete in the global marketplace. Improving China's image as a trusted regional player in Asia and as an international citizen was imperative if China was to shed some of the fear and suspicion gathering toward it from the outside world. To credibly project a peaceful and constructive image, as Harvard professor Iain Johnston argues, China needed to show it cared about its international standing and played by the rules. Thus, "the 'responsible major power' identity discourse has had a distinctively multilateralist and status quo content to it."¹² Indeed, the most visible manifestation lay in China's attitude toward multilateralism—the swift turnabout from anti- to pro-multilateralism in the late 1990s was one of the few radical shifts in contemporary Chinese foreign policy.

The 1997–98 Asian financial crisis became a seminal event. It crystallized for the Chinese leadership what responsibility meant in terms of expectations and benefits. Amidst extreme volatility in currency values in East Asia, the right thing for Beijing to do was to *not* devalue the Renminbi (RMB), even if this meant acting against its own immediate interest in keeping its export sectors competitive. And it did exactly that—did not devalue the RMB—thereby helping stabilize the regional economy. Moreover, unprecedentedly, China offered its share of financial support for struggling neighboring countries in tandem with international rescue efforts. Because the crisis concerned neighboring economies, the idea of responsibility became more real and pertinent to China than other seemingly remote global concerns. The fact that Chinese acts were a response to its distressed neighbors also internationalized “responsibility” beyond a call from the United States. In this case, responsibility ultimately served China’s interest, earned it praise, and enhanced its regional influence. As a result, the idea spawned a whole spate of concepts and refrains reflecting not only a fresh spirit of multilateralism but also a new worldview befitting its deepening globalization.¹³

So, the Chinese did not just passively accept a role assigned by the reigning Western powers. Instead, China took “responsible power” as a calling to act as an active participant in world affairs, challenging the long-standing self-portrayal as a victim of the strong. The idea also suggested that the threats to China transcended nation-states, and so did solutions to them. This effectively eroded its traditional notion of rigid sovereignty. Reflecting the tremendous inroads the idea had made into China’s worldview, the liberal scholar Wang Yizhou openly advocated that China’s national interest should include attentiveness to international responsibilities, in addition to domestic self-strengthening reforms and defense of territorial integrity.¹⁴

Around the mid-1990s, China officially identified itself as a “responsible power” because of U.S. power and pressure. When Europe, Japan, and the rest of Asia immediately joined the call in their engagement policies toward China, it effectively turned the U.S. objective into a collectivized international demand. The Asian financial crisis and the requirements for China’s impending WTO membership, which it eventually obtained in 2001, crystallized for the Chinese leadership that China’s domestic fate was deeply tied to the world.

China’s self-identification as a “responsible power” was, ironically, simultaneously clear and ambiguous. It was clear in the sense that China had to make changes in order to clean up its tarnished international image after the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, and reforms in line with international expectations represented the best opportunity to do that. Domestically, people like Premier Zhu Rongji leveraged China’s bid for WTO membership in order to push for painful economic restructuring and

institutional reforms. But the “responsibility” moniker also left much room for the Chinese leadership to interpret the concept to suit its own agenda, thus the ambiguity.

In dealing with the outside world, leaders separated “responsibility” from domestic politics. Acting as a “responsible power” gave no license for international interferences on China’s human rights practice, nor did it suggest the Chinese government’s tolerance with the slightest inkling of a color revolution in the country. It contained no risk of jeopardizing the legitimacy of the Communist Party-state. Rather, international responsibility could potentially compensate for political differences with the West, differences that historically were a major source of strategic fissure between great powers.¹⁵ To the extent that responsibility involved China’s restraint and compliance within the international status quo, it became both a credible signal and a new launch pad for China’s “peaceful rise.”

All in all, during the first phase from about 1989–1998, Chinese conception of national interest turned open and porous enough to seamlessly incorporate “international responsibility” as its new identity. Responsibility facilitated China’s ascent in status. It suited the reformist leadership’s agenda of reforms and economic globalization. Striving to become a “responsible power” helped deepen China’s globalization, reduce fear of Chinese power, and steer active participation in the existing world order as the overriding objective in Chinese foreign policy. “International responsibility” might have started out as a foreign import. The terms of “responsibility” were never spelled out by established powers or the Chinese. As Yongjin Zhang and Greg Austin point out, “Great Power responsibility is politically as well as morally postulated implicitly rather than explicitly.”¹⁶ Through political acumen and internalization, reformist Chinese leaders were able to adapt the “international responsibility” idea to serve Chinese needs and help navigate the significant confusion and uncertainty it faced in both domestic and international politics during this tumultuous time.

As such, it became self-identification and a choice rather than surrendering to foreign demands. But, to the extent that the idea put a premium on compliance with international norms, embracing it did represent arguably the most “liberal” moment in Chinese foreign policy. Chinese officials took for granted that prevailing global institutions and norms were a critical part of the frame of reference, if not the guide, for Chinese domestic reform and its ongoing transition. Chinese leaders and analysts, conversely, often openly resented and resisted the unfairness of the Western-dominated international hierarchy.

From about 1989–1998, China incorporated “international responsibility” as its new identity.

But they also believed a “multipolar world” could only slowly evolve from the existing order. And for the foreseeable future at the turn of the century, being a better citizen of the international society served its agenda at home and abroad.

The Fall of “Responsible Power”

After 2005, “international responsibility” became problematic in China’s international identity.

Up to around 2005, “international responsibility” was embraced with some enthusiasm, but afterward it became problematic in China’s international identity. The change coincided with then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick’s famous September 2005 speech calling on China to become a “responsible stakeholder.”¹⁷ Amidst uncertainties in the George W. Bush administration’s strategy toward China and fear of containment, Zoellick’s speech—much like Clinton’s “responsible major power” statement—had a reassuring message. But there were significantly different objectives between the Clinton and Bush policy eras. Made on the heels of official Chinese proclamation of “peaceful rise,”¹⁸ Zoellick’s message was a targeted response after the September 11 attacks designed for a sustained pattern of interaction with China.

Demand on Chinese responsibility in the aftermath of Tiananmen during the Clinton era stemmed from reformist Chinese leaders using external stimuli for their domestic agenda, on one hand (while still guarding against excessive interference in China’s internal affairs), and genuine pressure from the United States and its allies for China to reform, on the other. Identifying with international responsibility both served the Chinese elite’s domestic interest and pointed to overall liberalization in Chinese politics.

A decade later, however, the U.S. initiative to encourage responsibility was no longer about China itself or Chinese reforms. For the United States, enlisting China to play the role of “responsible stakeholder” was mainly about strategic interaction in the post-9/11 era in combating common global security challenges. Chinese analysts indeed interpreted Zoellick’s speech as signaling the U.S. abandonment of containment for the sake of securing China’s contribution in order to manage an increasingly interdependent world.¹⁹ More importantly, as influential Shanghai-based scholar Shen Dingli noted, this marked the first official U.S. recognition that “China has stakes and privileges to share and can expand its stakes through taking up more responsibilities.”²⁰ But in this formula, Chinese analysts complained, the onus of international contribution still lay solely with China. The United States was not held

accountable for its part, nor was there equitable reciprocity in benefit sharing and status recognition.

The “responsible stakeholder” term came amidst important events transforming the international system. The Iraq war started to drag down U.S. power and image. Meanwhile, China and other emerging economies continued robust growth and began to carry increasing weight in global affairs, having been christened in 2001 as part of the emerging powers of the BRIC economies.²¹ Good economic fortunes conferred confidence in the Chinese leadership about its own path of domestic political economy. The stigmatized post-Tiananmen regime began to receive international admiration from the West, as demonstrated in the rise of the “Beijing Consensus” or the idea that an authoritarian political system with a market economy might be better suited than democracies to the quick decisions required by an integrated, globalized economic system in the Information Age.²² The Six-Party Talks, which Beijing hosted beginning in 2003, earned China significant credit, but they also began to underscore the limits of its responsibility—China attaches supreme value to North Korea as a political and strategic buffer, and was only willing to go so far to induce it to change.

Consequently, suspicion and cynicism heightened in Chinese reactions to Western calls for greater international contribution on these issues and others such as climate change. As such, Beijing’s sense of responsibility fell behind its growing global profile. While China was quickly emerging as the largest contributor to the greenhouse gas emissions, it rejected a leading role in addressing climate change lest doing so would compromise its sovereignty and growth while exonerating the earlier industrial polluters of the Western economies. China turned into a vocal critic, questioning whether Western countries took to heart their own advice for others or whether some policies by the United States and its allies were appropriate in the first place in addressing issues such as global economic imbalance, humanitarian interventionism, and weapons proliferations.

“Responsible China” had provided a useful perspective to counter the fear of China’s rise, but now some Chinese commentators saw it as a continuation of the “China collapse” and “China threat theory” that had been viewed as ways to belittle and contain China. The fear was that owning the “responsibility” label risked admitting guilt in manipulating the RMB exchange rate and, even worse, in causing the global economic imbalance, which some believe was the root cause of the financial crisis and U.S. economic woes in general.²³ Chinese fear was not fully unfounded, as the country’s “easy money” from the vast trade surpluses that its undervalued currency had helped create could easily be blamed as a culprit for the financial crisis. In this milieu, mainstream Chinese commentators were suspicious of any Western attempt to “trap” China into

overburdening itself with unfairly imposed international responsibilities. Chinese discourse indicated satisfaction that the new limelight reflected China's achievements, but—toeing the official line—Chinese analysts all insisted on their nation's “developing country” status, which by definition made the country unsuitable for managing too many troubles beyond its border.²⁴

Chinese officials also began to turn the tables and justify their national objectives in the name of global responsibilities. In economics and finance, for instance, they defended some practices of neo-mercantilism by saying that not only should China rightfully be attentive to its own interests, but that stable growth at home ultimately was in itself a contribution to the world. In the military realm, Chinese officials and scholars argued that their country's fast-growing defense capacities are necessary to combat piracy and other threats at the high seas, as well as to contribute to UN peacekeeping operations.²⁵

Finally, the period also has marked an open and assertive Chinese disagreement with the United States and the West over the definition of “responsibility.” As the Beijing-based think tank analyst Yuan Peng declares, “China, for its part, does not base its notion of international responsibility on U.S. expectations.”²⁶ He and many of his colleagues question the fairness and authority of international demands. China also has turned the table on the West, criticizing the latter's international failings. For instance, Chinese commentators cast blame on U.S. financial mismanagement for causing the global financial crisis. They hail what China has done in supporting developing countries, while criticizing Western countries for not doing their part in meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals.²⁷

During the Libya crisis and “Arab Spring” in 2011, Chinese commentators had harsh words for NATO's military intervention. Besides the usual argument about intervention as a breach of sovereignty, some now attacked Western humanitarian interventionism for using the name of UN-sanctioned “international responsibility” to impose their views on other countries.²⁸ China stiffened its resistance to the emerging humanitarian norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) during the subsequent Syrian crisis beginning in 2011, as it allied with Russia to block any UN resolution to sanction the Syrian regime's brutal crackdown on its own people.²⁹ Under no circumstances would China condone such interventionism, as doing so, according to a Shanghai-based scholar, would backfire on China's interests and surrender “China's moral commanding height in the international community.”³⁰

In the past decade or so, we have witnessed a steady decline of the Chinese self-identification as a responsible power. What was once embraced as an antidote to the negative image of China is now suspected as the latest incarnation of a malicious attempt to harm China. China is now less willing to obey, but more willing to demand globally. The Chinese government sees

greater opportunities to challenge the *modus operandi* in its post-Cold War foreign relations. De-Westernization in the quest for distinctive Chinese politics has stepped up at home as well, further dissipating synergy in domestic reforms and upward mobility in international status. China uses national “core interests” as a way to counter U.S. calls for international responsibilities. Gone are the days of emphasizing inclusiveness of responsibilities in the national interest.

While realism and nationalism were key drivers of Chinese foreign policy after the Cold War, so was the broad notion of international compliance to achieve its international aspirations. But in the past decade or so, Chinese discourse on national interest has shown a steady decline of openness to self-restraint and liberalization. Now, Chinese analysts and officials concede no shortcomings and often claim superiority in their nation’s role as a responsible power. They spare no effort exposing the double standards in Western practices. If in the past, international responsibility helped propel China’s great-power ascent, now it has become a central front of China’s struggle over power, authority, and representation in global politics.

China as a Post-Responsible Power

Recent Chinese diplomacy has given us a glimpse into emerging Chinese revisionism. Domestically, Chinese politics has turned away from what the ruling elites call Western-style multiparty democratic values. The Communist Party-state is now even more adamant than before that it does not tolerate any organized opposition, much less a political party vying for its power. Instead, China today is best characterized as a post-responsible power. Since taking over the Chinese leadership in 2012, President Xi Jinping has purposely charted a new diplomatic course designed to move away from the earlier overall pro-status quo orientation. The new strategy places a premium on interests and interest-binding, is globally oriented but focused on Asia, and features a robust geopolitical posture.

Xi Jinping has purposely charted a new course away from the pro-status quo orientation.

At a time when China has taken the center stage in world politics, the nation has hardly shown a commensurate enthusiasm for global governance. In the post-responsibility era, the United States has countered China’s rising power with robust military deterrence, security alliances, and a strategic shift to Asia. Either out of neglect, greater willingness to free ride, or as payback for the U.S. pivot, Chinese diplomacy has shown less interest in cooperation on transnational issues such as humanitarianism, cybersecurity, and proliferation. There is a much less hospitable milieu for the two powers to even think about

cooperating on these issues. Out of frustration, President Obama called China an outright “free rider” in an interview with a U.S. journalist in August 2014; Beijing of course rejected such criticism.³¹ But Chinese leaders do protest the unfairness of the global status quo and demand implicitly or explicitly “reform” to it. They tend to see international responsibility as really U.S. responsibility, and often equate calls for greater contributions as a self-serving Western scheme.

With the fall of the “responsible power” idea, China has resorted to measures of national interest and power, trying to leverage economic globalization to reshape its international environment, rather than the other way around. In the new diplomacy, interests are viewed as both an end and a means. The former concerns China’s “core interests”; the latter has to do with China’s use of interest-binding to build its own brand of security community.

Seeking to gain initiative in its foreign relations, the Chinese have enunciated “core national interests.” These include the security of the Communist Party-state, the state’s political and territorial integrity, and sustained economic growth.³² The emphasis on regime security signals the ruling elite’s determination to conduct domestic politics on their own terms with minimal Western interference. On the social-economic front, the Chinese government essentially gives itself a recharged role in orchestrating the challenging phase of transition within an uncertain global economy.

While the political and economic changes are consequential, they focus on either domestic politics or the marketplace. Core interests that involve territorial disputes are the ones that have raised the most concerns. People generally understand that the Chinese leadership sees Taiwan and Tibet as existential interests, but what about other territorial disputes? In March 2010, Chinese officials reportedly told their U.S. counterparts in a closed-door meeting that they now considered the South China Sea as China’s core interest. Even though the Chinese officials did not actually use the exact wording,³³ their tone and subsequent behaviors showed greater assertiveness and urgency than before in enforcing its claims on maritime disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

While its interests are an end in themselves, they are also means to transform China’s international environment. Zheng Bijian, the architect of the “peaceful rise” strategy, first introduced in 2004 the concept of “interest community,” designed to leverage access to Chinese economic benefits in order to cultivate pro-China groupings of countries. Since then, China has shown a more deliberate effort to link its own economic globalization with strategic purposes.³⁴ In this way, economic interdependence has a geopolitical string attached. Under Xi Jinping, China has gone further—it proposes to build various “destiny communities” [*Mingyun Gongtongti*] explicitly designed to turn

intertwined interests into impetus toward security and political communities.³⁵ Capitalizing on its seemingly unstoppable economic expansion, China seeks to create zones of friendly countries beholden to China for its economic largesse.

While China's new diplomacy is globally oriented, it also contains a decisive return to Asia specifically. Solicitous more about global interests than global revisionism,³⁶ perhaps the only notable international institutional initiative China undertook (together with India, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa) is the creation in July 2014 of the \$100 billion BRICS Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai. But it is the Silk Road program involving Central Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian countries that showcases China's emerging diplomatic ambitions.

The Silk Road program showcases China's emerging diplomatic ambitions.

In October 2013, President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang personally chaired the first and only multi-agency meeting on China's regional diplomacy with all Communist Party Standing Committee members present. Around this time, the new Xi–Li leadership rolled out the “Silk Road” strategy, which entails building a Euro–Asian “Silk Road economic belt” to the west and a “Maritime Silk Road” to Southeast and South Asia. Written into the Decisions of the Third Plenum of the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress,³⁷ the Silk Road strategy is based on open networks in Euro–Asia and maritime Asia strung together through Chinese-financed infrastructure and transportation projects, as well as trade and financial ties.

The strategy is a natural outgrowth of the central government's efforts to develop China's western regions, while giving Chinese cooperation with Southeast Asia renewed purpose and momentum. In 2014, China took the lead to create the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, starting with 21 member states and a capital of \$50 billion. The program received a significant boost when China unveiled a separate Silk Road Fund of \$40 billion during the November 2014 annual APEC meeting. These initiatives are hardly the kind of revisionism that led to hegemonic war of the past. But they enhance China's influence and put pressures on such established institutions as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

The Silk Road program is designed to infuse regional economic expansion with greater strategic purpose. Promoted in tandem with policy concepts such as “Asian security” and the “Asia–Pacific dream,” which Xi expounded on at the 2014 APEC meeting in Beijing, the concept refers to economic prosperity and a tightening of Asian relations.³⁸ The Silk Road clearly reflects China's ambitions to create a China-centric, albeit still open, Asian order.

Ultimately, China is a post-responsible power, but it also remains a globalized power.

China as a post-responsible power has also shown a more robust geopolitical posture, departing from its earlier low-profile approach to become more of a mover and shaker in East Asia. As analysts Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis argue, for much of the post-Cold War era China was more a “consumer” and not fully a “producer” of national security, dictating a strategy wherein reassurance of others about its peaceful intent must outweigh coercion in order to harness for its own sake the international forces of “peace and development.”³⁹ However, with its growing power and the U.S. pivot toward Asia, China’s security strategy has become more proactive in trying to shape the emerging security dynamics in Asia. And in particular, China has shown a new aggression in dealing with its regional rival, Japan, and territorial disputants in South China Sea, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

The new turn has also featured speedy Chinese military modernization with a focus on combat readiness along its periphery regions. At the outset of the Xi administration, China announced its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, increased its 2014 military expenditures by 12.2 percent, and created the National Security Commission chaired by Xi himself. Xi Jinping is clearly much more willing than his predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, to wield coercive power, military and economic, in regional diplomacy. While in the past, China eschewed prolonged crisis lest it fuel foreign fear, now it is dogged in its territorial claims and crisis control.

Chinese leaders and strategists see all of its major foreign policy troubles as fomented by the United States. As such, maritime disputes take on strategic significance. They feed into the logic of military modernization. Diplomatically, China imposes punitive costs on regional states siding with the United States while rewarding friendly states with economic benefits. Economic globalization provides China with many tools of nonconventional statecraft. China’s advantage in infrastructure building, capital, trade, and even its energy need allows for interest-binding that could also advance its strategic objectives.

China’s transition to the post-responsible phase has destabilized the modus operandi with the United States, unsettled the East Asian order, and further chipped away the global structure. The country’s military postures and territorial disputes do raise the specter of war associated with historical power transitions. But the emerging Chinese revisionism also shows significant differences from grievances that drove past rising powers to militarized conflict. Ultimately, China will remain a globalized power. Its attempt to cultivate anew its “interest” and “destiny” community through the Silk Road projects entails further

embracing, rather than abandoning, the international marketplace. In that sense, China and the world are the real “destiny community.”

Crisis in Great Power Politics

The dispute over responsibility reveals how much the world has shifted from the 1990s and how much Chinese discontent with the international status quo has grown. China’s troubles with “responsibility” act as a symptom of crisis in great-power relations and global governance in general. A world with an enervated sense of responsibility is one with diminished pressures for emerging powers to comply, and reduced authority for established powers to lead. With no one willing to concede any political or moral ground, the ensuing blame game only undermines global authority structures.

Ultimately, responsibility is about “the rules of the game,” where states allow for self-restraint, mutual obligations, managing interdependence, and contributing to global public goods. It is the antidote to myopic self-interests and unmitigated power politics. Without it, fear and uncertainty reign. Great power behavior risks succumbing to what Arnold Wolfers called the “philosophy of necessity,” which “tends to lead to resignation, irresponsibility or even the glorification of amorality.”⁴⁰ Indeed in the past several years, whereas China’s maritime claims and aggressiveness have expanded, Beijing blames the United States and the U.S. pivot of being the spoiler of regional stability. While China’s economic expansion in Euro-Asia and beyond could stimulate the global economy and regional economic development in poorer countries, without some shared sense of international responsibility it risks becoming a threat rather than a boon to global order. Similarly, issues of new domains, such as cybersecurity and outer space management, could become a new battleground for great-power rivalries. The turn of events defies China’s peaceful rise, stable Sino-U.S. relations, sustained regional order in East Asia, and global governance.

With the loss of responsibility, U.S.–China relations have lost their way. As a result, instead of moving the relationship toward a “new model of major power relations” as proposed by Xi Jinping,⁴¹ the bilateral relationship seems at times to be dictated by the logic of necessity about which Wolfers warned. China and the United States need a resurrected framework of shared responsibility. That would require each nation to confront the deeper crisis in rules and authority—beyond simply a power shift in world politics—and to reset the new terms of great-power relations.

China may say no to Western calls for it being a “responsible power,” but it has done more, not less, than in the past on certain international duties through the United Nations. In contrast to the earlier compliance phase, today China admits no moral deficit and insists on following its own standards of proper behavior and

moral compass.⁴² Yet as China strikes out on its own, its leaders must realize that the solution to the global responsibility crisis is not simply to impose its own interests and preferences on the rest of the world. After the 2009 Copenhagen debacle on climate change, the United States and China finally reached an agreement with parallel plans to curb carbon emissions during the Beijing APEC meeting in November 2014. What this shows is that the two can be persuaded to join a partnership when their interests dictate such joint leadership.

Ultimately, China is both a post-responsible power and a globalized power. Then the question is: How can China evolve into a pillar of global governance with a refurbished and reenergized sense of international responsibility? The answer may very well determine whether China will become a “new power” in the 21st century, befitting a “new model of major power relations” with the United States.

Notes

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