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Chinese Diplomacy Goes Global: Motives, Methods, and Mechanisms¹

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As China's 2006 Defense White Paper observed, "Never before has China been so closely bound up with the rest of the world as it is today." As a result, in the first decade of the 21st Century, "thinking locally demands acting globally" can be said to have become the unofficial mantra guiding the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the post-Cold War era, Beijing realized that internal stability is increasingly vulnerable to international events, and China's domestic affairs and foreign policies were greatly impacted by the actions of other countries, notably the United States. Moreover, growing numbers of Chinese people were being exposed to and obsessed with the global scene, including the way China was treated by other countries and its standing in the world. Globalization has therefore altered the way China's leaders think about foreign policy. What this required, Beijing's leaders concluded, was a more proactive and global foreign policy.

In the late 1990s, a series of events brought home to Beijing the impact of globalization on China. China's leaders realized how they could be directly and dramatically affected by events that occurred far beyond the borders of the PRC and well out of their control. These events included the Asian Financial Crisis (1997-1998), China's failure to win Clinton administration approval for its admission to the World Trade Organization, the mass peaceful Falungong demonstration in central Beijing outside the walls of Zhongnanhai, the accidental NATO bombing of the PRC Embassy in Belgrade, and the "state-to-state" rhetoric of Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui (all four events occurred within a four month period in mid-1999).

What are the main motives driving China's diplomacy? What methods and mechanisms is Beijing employing in its diplomacy? Below I address these questions.

Motives:

The three most important motives driving Beijing's diplomacy are: ensuring domestic stability, maintaining good relations with Washington, and promoting China's international standing. Beijing's foremost priority is preserving domestic stability.

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While a number of scholars opine that the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have entered a new era of greater confidence and maturity, this is only part of the story.² What analysts often lose sight of is the high degree of insecurity Beijing continues to possess in the first decade of the 21st Century. This insecurity is not directed toward any grave external threat; rather, the alarm is over the potential for instability and unrest at home.³ Domestic stability does not just presume continued firm political control (aka repression), but also sustained economic growth. Both of these dimensions are viewed as being closely intertwined with the international environment. Above all, internal stability assumes peace in China's immediate neighborhood—especially on the country's periphery--the Korean Peninsula, Russia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. But ensuring continued economic growth also demands that Beijing operate further afield to secure natural resources and develop markets. Beijing is particularly concerned with energy security, especially petroleum. Believing the best way to secure oil is to purchase the oil fields or at least control them, Beijing has embarked on a major initiative to acquire them wherever they are available.

China's second top priority is managing its relationship with the United States. Beijing views Washington as both an opportunity and a threat. Maintaining good relations with the sole superpower is seen as the key to continued CCP political rule, economic prosperity, and overall national security. Geopolitically, economically, and militarily, the United States looms large. Therefore it is not surprising that the most important overseas posting for the PRC diplomatic corps is Washington, DC. Moreover, in recent years, the Chinese ambassador to the United States has been promoted to PRC Foreign Minister at the conclusion of his tour. However, keeping on good terms with Washington does not mean that Beijing always seeks to accommodate, agree, or acquiesce to U.S. policy desires. On the contrary, China works to counter or at least to contain US influence in Asia and around the world. Simultaneously China works to expand its own influence, especially in its Asian neighborhood. Nevertheless, China attempts to conduct these efforts in a manner that does not unnecessarily antagonize the United States.

China's third most important foreign policy priority is enhancing its own international standing and status. A positive, high profile for China on the global stage is extremely desirable for Beijing's leaders.⁴ It is important to be seen as a major global player in and of itself. Beijing is very status conscious and this motive should not be underestimated because it is related to the critical dimension of the legitimacy of the communist regime. The Chinese people are more than ever acutely conscious of and sensitive to their country's treatment and status in the world. To the extent that Beijing is seen as being able to raise China's status, the legitimacy of the CCP in the eyes of Chinese people increases; to the extent that Beijing is seen as being unable to deliver on this, it contributes to the frustration and resentment that Chinese people feel toward their own

² See, for example, R. Taylor Fravel and Evan Medeiros, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 82:6 (November/December 2003):22-35.

³ For a recent articulation on this point, see Susan Shirk, *China: The Fragile Superpower* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

⁴ Yong Deng, *China's Struggle for Status* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

government. In short, China must look stronger and more respected abroad for its communist leaders to feel more secure at home.

Taiwan figures prominently in each of these three priorities and beyond.⁵ The island figures in domestic stability because Beijing believes that appearing soft on Taiwan will arouse the ire of the Chinese people. Moreover, if Taiwan takes the path toward independence and the communist regime is not seen to be doing an adequate job of thwarting the move, the CCP will endure the full wrath of the masses—widespread unrest or worse. Taiwan also figures prominently in China’s relationship with the United States because Beijing believes that Washington is engaged in sabotaging Chinese efforts at cross-strait unification, or at least manipulating the situation to its advantage. Hence, without cooperation or assistance from Washington, resolving the Taiwan issue is much more difficult if not impossible. Lastly, Taiwan figures in the enhancement of China’s stature internationally because the island is considered a constant thorn in its side. In Beijing’s thinking, by competing with China for the diplomatic recognition of small states in the Third World and pressing for entry into organizations from the United Nations to the World Health Organization, Taiwan subjects China to constant embarrassment if not humiliation. In short, the issue of Taiwan is central to the motives driving Chinese foreign policy.

Diplomatic Methods and Mechanisms: Flexing Soft Power Muscles

“Soft power” is one of the hot new buzz words in Beijing. But what is meant by the term? Many who use the term, including, Joseph Nye, the scholar widely credited with creating the concept, are rather fuzzy on what soft power actually means.⁶ In this regard, Chinese are not so different. Nevertheless, most Chinese seem to consider that diplomacy is certainly a key dimension of soft power. Beijing has concluded that in order to achieve its priorities, China must vigorously engage in diplomacy around the world. This has meant continued attention to tried and tested methods as well as blazing new trails. China’s efforts can be divided into four areas. First, Beijing continues to emphasize great power diplomacy but has also launched a major new initiative in public diplomacy. Second, Beijing continues to welcome distinguished foreign guests to China but has also launched a vigorous new offensive to dispatch senior leaders around the globe. Third, Beijing continues to devote careful attention to cultivating bilateral relationships but has also initiated a bold new effort to make greater use of multilateral venues. Fourth, China continues to focus its efforts in Asia but at the same time is active like never before on projecting its soft power globally.

Great Power Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy.

First, China has continued to stress great power diplomacy but has also branched out into public diplomacy. One of the most notable initiatives of this decade is the effort to create a global network of Chinese cultural entities. Of course I am referring to Confucius Institutes. The first one was established in Seoul, South Korea in 2004. The initiative is

⁵ Alan Wachman, *Why Taiwan?: Geopolitical Rationales for China’s Territorial Integrity* (Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁶ This is also true of Joshua Kurlantzick, *China’s Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Yale University Press, 2007).

directed by the Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in the Ministry of Education (known for short as the ‘*Hanban*’). Not surprisingly, the primary focus is on Chinese language instruction. By October 2007, the Xinhua News Agency reported that there were 190 Confucius Institutes in 60 countries all over the world, including more than two dozen in the United States.⁷ In each case, the *Hanban* partners with a local organization. For example, in October 2007, China’s Ministry of Education and Texas A&M University signed an agreement to establish a Confucius Institute in College Station.

Soft Power “In-Reach” and “Out-Reach.”

Second, China has continued to engage in what I have called soft power “in-reach” while at the same time launching soft power “out-reach.”⁸ The former is something that the PRC has practiced for decades and China has engaged in for centuries. Foreign dignitaries are invited to the Middle Kingdom where they are given royal treatment irrespective of the size or significance of the country from which they hail. Three decades ago, President George H. W. Bush was stationed in Beijing as the senior U.S diplomat and he kept a diary. In his entry of June 29, 1975, he commented:

China’s attention to...Third World countries is amazing. In how many big countries do they give such a great stylish welcome to chiefs of state from tiny African countries for example. The airport is bedecked, downtown is colored [with] banners all over and big signs of welcome in French or English or whatever the language might be. Children, soldiers marching around, dancing enthusiastically, welcoming; all make an impression on the visitor.⁹

In addition to continuing to provide “great stylish welcomes” to foreign guests from individual countries, China has branched out into sizeable multilateral extravaganzas. Such events included the Beijing summit for more than 1,700 official delegates from 48 African countries held in November 2006. All this is excellent preparation for the grandest global event Beijing has ever hosted: the Beijing Olympics scheduled for August 2008.

At the same time that China is practicing “in-reach” diplomacy, it is engaged in out-reach on a scale far exceeding anything witnessed before. Whereas in the era of Mao Zedong, senior Chinese leaders rarely ventured beyond the borders of their own country, and in the era of Deng Xiaoping, top leaders made limited forays abroad, today’s principal leaders are literally globe trotting emissaries who regularly visit countries in every corner of the world. In 2006, for example, the Chinese president, premier, and foreign minister made trips to Africa. In all, they visited 16 countries. According to a China specialist in South Africa, this activity was “unprecedented.” He continued: “I can’t think of any

⁷ “Confucius Institute to be Established in Indonesia,” *Xinhua* October 3, 2007. This author’s research suggests the number is closer to 160 institutes. In any event, the expansion has been rapid and impressive.

⁸ Andrew Scobell, “China’s Soft Sell: Is the World Buying?” *China Brief* VII:2 (January 24, 2007), pp. 7-10.

⁹ George H. W. Bush and Jeffrey Engel, *The China Diary of George H. W. Bush: The Making of a Global President* (Princeton University Press, 2008, forthcoming), p. 341.

other head of state, including [South African President] Thabo Mbeki, who has visited as many African countries as that.”¹⁰

Bilateralism plus Multilateralism.

Third, China has continued to work hard at forging and maintaining bilateral relationships while at the same time embracing multilateralism in a major way. Traditionally, the PRC has seemed most comfortable conceiving of China’s diplomacy as a bilateral business. Beijing was uncomfortable with and suspicious of multilateral fora. But since the mid-1990s, PRC thinking on multilateralism has altered dramatically.

Mechanisms for forging bilateral relationships include proclamations of “partnerships.” with major powers. Since 1993, these countries have included Brazil, Russia, the United States, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, and the European Union.¹¹ In addition, Beijing has shown greater activism in multilateral venues. China is increasingly active in a host of international organizations, including the United Nations (UN). In the UN, for example, whereas years ago it routinely abstained or cast ‘no’ votes, China now regularly votes ‘yes’ and even in recent years votes in favor of resolutions condemning friends. Beijing, for example, supported the UN Security Council resolution that condemned North Korea for detonating a nuclear device in October 2006. China is also actively interacting with regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Indeed, Southeast Asia is where we have witnessed a dramatic transformation of Chinese diplomacy from bilateralism to multilateralism. Whereas Beijing focused almost exclusively on state-to-state relations with the countries of ASEAN, since the early 1990s China has been increasingly involved in ASEAN and actively participated in the ASEAN + 3 forum. Chinese diplomats have devoted painstaking efforts in improving Beijing’s image in the region through a variety of initiatives. Perhaps none has been as significant as the effort since 2000, to create an ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA). In moving towards this goal, Beijing has worked to lower tariffs on exports to China from ASEAN countries, especially agricultural goods through the so-called “Early Harvest” program starting in 2004. The result is a burgeoning trade with substantial surpluses by ASEAN countries with China. China has also reached agreement on a “Declaration on Conduct in the South China Sea” in November 2002. These efforts have altered the way Southeast Asians view China. ASEAN thinking has evolved from viewing China with skepticism or as a threat to perceiving China as an opportunity. Through these activities Beijing is shaping the rules of the game in what for China is a key multilateral forum.¹²

¹⁰ Quoted in Robyn Dixon, “Africa holds attractions for China leaders; Beijing’s hunger for raw materials and political recognition has its top officials crisscrossing the continent like no one else to cement ties,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 2007.

¹¹ On China’s ‘partnerships,’ see Bates Gill, *Rising Star: China’s New Security Diplomacy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2007), pp. 58-63.

¹² Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Multilateralism in China’s ASEAN Policy: Its Evolution, Characteristics and Aspiration,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27:1 (April 2005):102-122; Jing Men, “The Construction of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area: A Study of China’s Active Involvement,” *Global Security* 21:2 (April 2007):249-268.

An Asian Focus but Globally Active.

Fourth, while Beijing continues to focus the majority of its efforts within its own Asian neighborhood, China's diplomacy has beyond a shadow of a doubt 'gone global.' China has created its own regional organizations in Asia. Notable are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which was formally established in 2001 although its genesis can be traced back to the early 1990s. Also noteworthy are the Six Party Talks on North Korea that China initiated in 2003. These organizations are perhaps best viewed as management mechanisms—means by which China is able to exert control over the environment in its immediate neighborhood.¹³ This control includes limiting, restricting, or even excluding U.S. participation.

Not only is China very active in Asia but it is also increasingly involved further afield including in Africa and Latin America. Foreign travel by Chinese leaders has increased significantly in the past 10-15 years. For example, in 2004, the PRC president and premier travelled abroad more than four times as many days than they did in 1993 (about 80 days versus less than 20 days). Moreover, in 2004 the foreign minister was abroad about twenty percent more than his predecessor was in 1993 (more than 120 days versus about 100 days).¹⁴

Conclusion

Beijing's diplomatic efforts are extremely ambitious, global in scope, and unprecedented in China's history. The methods and mechanisms China is employing, a blend of old and new, have been driven by three central motives: to ensure stability at home, to maintain cordial relations with the United States, and to raise China's stature in the world.

¹³ On the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Six Party Talks, see Gill, *Rising Star*, pp. 29-47, 53-58.

¹⁴ Phillip C. Saunders, *China's Global Activism: Strategy, Drivers, and Tools* (National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies, October 2006), p. 19.