

Binding China by Zhengxu Wang

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What kind of superpower will China turn out to be? Given China's growing economic and military power, this question is increasingly meaningful for many people.

Economic power defined by total GDP does not equate with superpower status. China's GDP is expected to surpass that of the United States around 2020. But for China to accurately be called a superpower – in military and political terms as well as economic – may well take until the middle of the century. And even then, it is highly unlikely China will “rule the world.” It will just command significant regional and global influence.

How will China adjust to this new role and what can the world expect when the long-established US domination is challenged? All indications are that China will be a very different superpower from the US; it is unlikely to act unilaterally in global affairs as the US has done.

These differences result from vastly different traditions and cultures. China shapes its foreign policy around four key characteristics: the traditional belief that human and international relations emphasize “harmony with differences,” the notion that the “four seas” of the world are brothers and family, the modern principles of non-intervention and peaceful co-existence, the rejection of Maoist revolutionary ideology, and the pursuit of a “peaceful development” strategy.

Many China watchers sum up this approach as “defensive realism.” “Realism” insofar as China believes security can only be guaranteed through military and economic power; “defensive” in that China recognizes there can be no winner in any confrontation with the US or the West and that preserving its social and economic development requires acceptance of the US and the international community rather than upsetting the international order. China realizes its rise must proceed with the cooperation of other states and the acceptance of international norms such as the World Trade Organization and the Association of South East Asian Nations.

Many in the Western world are fearful of China's ascension toward superpower status, regarding it as a destabilizing force. In reality though, China is, by its very nature, inward looking. Unlike the US, it does not aspire to be a superpower; it has no desire to hold up its political system as a model for the rest of the world to follow. In China, there is a feeling that the US has overextended itself. The fact is China could not be like the US even if it wanted to – the Communist Party faces too many internal challenges of its own, meaning that self-preservation and stability are its primary concerns.

China will use its position as superpower to protect its own interests, notably its access to the world's natural resources to fuel economic growth. To achieve this, it will continue to nurture its long-distance naval power – still very weak compared to that of the US – to protect its investments. However, it is unlikely to position its navy far away from its coastlines, which the US has done in all major oceans as part of its strategy to project its military might across the world.

China does have regional ambitions in East Asia. Greater economic and political power will make it easier to strengthen its influence in the region, militarily or otherwise. China does not necessarily have designs on controlling Asia but it does object to the weighty US military presence on its doorstep.

We can expect China to push for more influence within global institutions like the United Nations and the WTO. But perhaps China sees greater value in expanding its own neighborhood networks instead of globally. It has already done this and reaped the benefits through such efforts as the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which has greatly enhanced China's security and economic cooperation with Russia and four central Asian states.

Multilateral cooperation between China and ASEAN (10+1) is also highly rewarding. Inside China's policy circles these days there is talk of building more multilateral organizations in Asia to deal with security challenges and disputes, such as those relating to the South China Sea.

Some argue that China's pragmatic, self-centered approach to international relations is detrimental to the idea of an international community. At least the US, for all its flaws, performs the role of global citizen based on the principles of democracy and human rights. Yet US foreign policy has always been laced with hypocrisy – in practice its activities abroad have always revolved around its own interests, just like any other nation state.

But how China acts as the world's next superpower could largely depend on how the US reacts to this transition of power from West to East. At a recent forum, Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's former ambassador to the United Nations and now dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, suggested a “window of opportunity” remains open in which the US can prepare for the possibility of China becoming the world's most powerful country.

But the US must first face up to some painful psychological adjustments. No US president or senior politician has been able to openly recognize the possibility that the US will soon be surpassed by China as the world's largest economy. Without acknowledging this, the US will find itself unprepared when it does occur.

It is, however, in the interests of the US itself and the world, to design a set of binding rules in the next 10 to 20

years, while it still has the ability to do so. This way, when the time comes and the US has to concede a large portion of global influence to China, it can be assured that China will have to function within those rules.

The US, as the world's current superpower, has in effect set its own international rules, which it has routinely broken. The most intelligent thing the US could do now is adhere to these rules to put pressure on China to do the same.

Mahbubani predicts that if the US, when asserting its military presence in Asia, continues to disregard international norms, such as patrolling China's coastal lines in an act that is perceived as threatening by China, then very soon we will see Chinese navy ships patrolling US coastlines. That would not bode well for the rest of the world.

But if the US plays the game right, it will have a better chance of persuading China to follow suit when it eventually secures promotion to the super league.

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