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China's Grand Strategy is not Absent, Just Contradictory

BY DENNY ROY

Denny Roy, Senior Fellow at the East-West Center, explains that “Most Chinese do not now aspire to superpower status, not wishing for themselves the difficulties they see beset an America that tries to be the world’s fire brigade and police force.”

Many observers, both Chinese and non-Chinese, say China’s foreign relations indicate that Beijing has no grand strategy. The term grand strategy means a national government’s plan for fulfilling its national interests. Officially, Beijing’s announced grand strategy is “peaceful development,” but this does not tell us much about what really matters. Everyone wants peace and development. The interesting parts are what a government sees as the real threats and opportunities, what tradeoffs the national leaders will make in employing limited resources, and which courses of action are chosen and which rejected.

Governments are never completely open about these calculations because deception is an unavoidable aspect of politics, and especially of diplomacy. But we outsiders can try to fill in the missing information through observation and analysis.

I argue that Beijing does have a grand strategy, but that it has some elements that contradict each other. The result is that a specific Chinese foreign policy might support one objective but at the same time work against another objective.

The term “grand strategy” is often misunderstood and misused, as commentators confuse goals with policies. Properly understood, grand strategy includes three distinct elements: goals, assumptions and actions. Fundamentally, the government of every country has the same basic objectives: security, prosperity, and prestige. But since each country’s circumstances are unique, the practical goals vary. In the case of today’s China we can identify seven basic goals: preservation of the Chinese Communist Party’s position and legitimacy; economic development; internal political stability; leadership of and a sphere of influence in the region; getting other governments to accept China’s territorial claims; avoiding encirclement by a coalition of adversaries; and increased influence in global affairs.

Chinese leaders also hold to several assumptions about international politics that help them decide what actions will best fulfill their goals and protect China from threats. These assumptions can change during different periods of history. For example, Mao Zedong feared that China would be endangered by participating in the international capitalist economy, but Deng Xiaoping embraced it. Other assumptions are as follows: seeking peaceful and constructive relations with other countries and avoiding conflicts where possible will facilitate China’s economic growth; China requires relatively strong military forces; China must display resolve in defense of “core interests” such as territorial claims; building a reputation as a country that supports globally popular principles and norms will increase China’s international prestige; and finally, the “rise” of China will naturally generate anxiety that could lead to military encirclement.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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These objectives and assumption have led to at least eight policies consistently followed over past two decades. The first is rapid modernization and buildup of China’s armed forces. The second is steady insistence on Chinese sovereignty over disputed territories. Third are low-level efforts to promote Chinese regional and global leadership while undercutting the United States and discouraging security cooperation that appears aimed at China. Part of this policy is forming political partnerships with governments that oppose aspects of the US global agenda. Fourth, China opposes Japanese rearmament. These are hard-edged security policies. A softer security policy, fifth on this list, is sustained diplomacy to assure other countries that a stronger China is not a threat. Sixth, China pursues the objective of economic development through full participation in the global economy. Seventh, Beijing is now highly active in international institutions, seeing this as an opportunity to shape the rules of international affairs more to China’s liking. Finally, Beijing seeks international prestige through its repeated commitments to honor international norms accepted by the broader international community (beyond the narrower group of the USA and its allies).

As this analysis shows, there is potential for contradiction even among the most basic goals and policies. Even if China sees them as “defensive,” policies designed to build and demonstrate China’s strength work against China’s desire to avoid frightening other countries into security cooperation against China. The attempt to gain prestige by adhering to morally-upright “principles” is also problematic. Sometimes the national interest requires putting moral principle aside. An example is when a foreign partner government behaves badly, but the relationship is too valuable to risk damaging it by publicly embarrassing the partner government.

The potential for contradiction grows larger the more powerful and influential a country becomes. As a recognized superpower for seven decades, the United States is accustomed to constant accusations of hypocrisy in its foreign policy. This is largely a consequence of the huge and diverse set of interests managed by a great power, plus America’s self-identity as a moral country with a self-appointed mission to spread liberal values.

Similarly, China sees itself as a uniquely “principled” great power that claims to always pursue a morally correct foreign policy. The turn of the century, however, saw China change from a regional medium power with “short arms and slow legs” to a great power with increasing military reach and global interests. China now has more to protect and enhanced ability to protect it. When a country develops new capabilities, domestic pressure will build to use those capabilities in pursuit of national objectives. If China’s rapid economic growth continues, the inevitable result is that China’s standard for what degree of control over the external is necessary for China to feel secure will rise. Equally inevitably, Chinese behavior will not only impinge on the autonomy of China’s neighbors (and on the viability of important aspects of the US-sponsored regional order), but will also force the Chinese to rethink some of their cherished principles such as non-intervention and no foreign military bases.

Most Chinese do not now aspire to superpower status, not wishing for themselves the difficulties they see beset an America that tries to be the world’s fire brigade and police force. Yet a rising China that seeks regional leadership will face similar difficulties, even if in a smaller degree. Chinese should expect that foreign policy-making will in a sense become more difficult: although their means of influencing the outside environment is greater, the complexity and risk of unintended consequences are also greater. Increasingly, Chinese leaders may be forced to choose the least-bad from among an array of bad choices. With increased power, the Chinese will likely discover that the contradictions in their grand strategy are magnified, even if the basic goals are clear.

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APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Alex Forster

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