

CHINA IS REACHING OUT TO THE NEW WORLD

Introduction to the Special Issue

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In the last few years, China's foreign policy has both become much more active and reached out to parts of the world where its presence was marginal in the past. The last quarter of 2006 is probably one of the best illustrations of this activism and this ambition.

In September, after several years of feuding and non-communication, President Hu Jintao decided to take advantage of the nomination of a new Japanese prime minister to resume summit meetings with Tokyo. He invited Abe Shinzo to Beijing to initiate a new era in the relations between the two countries, as if the Yasukuni Shrine rift had been solved, never existed, or was shelved for good. In October, Hu attended the APEC meeting in Hanoi, conversed with his U.S. counterpart, George W. Bush, and other top leaders of the Pacific Rim and then embarked on a highly publicized journey to South Asia, demonstrating China's mastery of balancing diplomacy between India and Pakistan. Whereas Beijing has continued to deepen and normalize its relationship with New Delhi, it has not neglected Islamabad, maintaining close economic and military cooperation with an old ally. Less than a month later, in early November, Hu welcomed the president or top leader of some forty-eight African countries, generously invited to the third Sino-African summit in Beijing. On

this occasion, Hu announced a substantial increase of Chinese aid, interest-free loans, and investments in the black continent.

Against the background of this diplomatic activism, China had to manage a new crisis with North Korea after Pyongyang, ignoring the repeated advice or pressure exerted on it, decided in early October to test a nuclear weapon. For the first time in the history of Sino-North Korean relations, China joined the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and imposed sanctions on Kim Jong Il's regime. But what is even more striking is that less than three weeks later, Beijing was able to convince Pyongyang to go back to the negotiating table and resume the Six-Party Talks (Moscow, Seoul, and Tokyo are also involved), initiated by China in 2003 as a way to allow direct discussions between North Korea and Washington.

The only disappointment China had to encounter was the postponement until January 2007 of the second East Asian Summit, initially due to take place in Cebu in December 2006. But this decision had nothing to do with Chinese diplomacy; it was the direct consequence of the deadly typhoon that had hit the Philippines just two weeks before and the coming of another hurricane at the time of the summit. Already, the leaders of the region had anticipated this meeting as an opportune occasion to pursue bilateral negotiations with some of their neighbors, as if they did not feel any summit fatigue already.

Some observers are tempted to attribute China's diplomatic activism to Hu Jintao himself. It is true that since 2003, the new Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership has promoted an international discourse aimed at reaching out to its neighbors and the entire world, as if China had no more enemies. Although Zheng Bijian, Hu's close adviser, has been allowed to continue to propagate his ideas about China's "peaceful rise," the government prefers to stick to a softer and more reassuring motto of "peaceful development."¹ And since 2005-2006, domestic and international "harmony" has become the key concept underlining the Chinese government's political strategy. In other words, China is no longer a destructive source of criticism and division;

it has become a constructive force of consensus and compromise.

Actually, China's new diplomacy goes back to the last years of the Jiang Zemin era and the first years of the new millennium. Many well-known factors have contributed to this evolution. George W. Bush's election in 2000 and the promotion by the U.S. government of a unilateralist (or "coalition of the willing"-based) diplomacy gave Beijing a rather unexpected window of opportunity to demonstrate more than before its readiness to espouse multilateral mechanisms, at least when it serves its interests. But the Chinese leadership had also drawn some lessons from the negative impact of the 1999 anti-U.S. demonstrations after the accidental bombing by NATO planes of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The failure of Beijing's aggressive strategy vis-à-vis Taiwan with the election of Chen Shui-bian in March 2000 also explains the policy change. Nationalism was becoming a foreign policy constraint that had to be better managed and preempted with diplomatic discourse, style, and actions that could demonstrate that cooperation, avoidance of conflicts, and neutralization of antagonisms would be more productive than confrontation.²

There are of course deeper reasons to Chinese foreign policy's evolution: the globalization and growing outside dependence of the Chinese economy. Spurred by China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001, this unprecedented internationalization of China—not only its modes of production but also its society—have forced the CCP leadership to adjust and introduce rapid changes in its diplomacy. Interestingly, this internationalization has had a visible impact on the discourse: Today, multilateralism rather than multipolarity (or multipolarization—*duojihua*) is emphasized while partnerships with key nations (*daguo huoban guanxi*) is now complemented with good-neighborly relations (*mulin youhao*) and productive periphery diplomacy (*zhoubian waijiao*).

But more importantly, the Chinese economy's internationalization has obliged Beijing to integrate new variables into its security calculus. In particular, its growing need for oil, gas, raw materials, timber, and agricultural products from outside has directly influenced the priorities and targets of its diplomacy.

1. Zheng Bijian, *Lun Zhongguo heping jueqi fazhan xin daolu. Peaceful Rise—China's New Road to Development* (Beijing: Central Party School Publishing House, December 2005, bilingual edition).

2. Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, No. 6 (November-December, 2003), p. 35.

The Middle East, Africa, and Latin America have seen their place in China's foreign policy rapidly enhanced. Simultaneously, Chinese state companies (and not only in the oil or gas business) have been encouraged to invest overseas and acquire chunks of industries contributing, in Beijing's eyes, to secure the regular supply of goods to their country's economy.

This last feature of China's diplomacy actually tends to demonstrate the CCP leadership's lingering sense of insecurity and leads us, if not to dismiss, then at least to nuance the foreign policy changes introduced in the early 2000s. China's security policy remains aimed at Taiwan, and the modernization of its military at winning a war in the Strait and deterring the United States from interfering in an armed conflict through the implementation of an asymmetrical strategy. Relations with Japan are far from being stabilized, and rivalry will continue as long as both powers do not recognize and agree upon each other's security responsibilities in East Asia. Similarly, the new relationship with India remains a wary one, since their growing economic cooperation cannot totally hide the long-term political and strategic competition between the two Asian giants and nuclear powers. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, set up at Beijing's initiative in 2001, is less a new illustration of China's multilateralism than an interesting case of instrumentalization of regional organizations for the sake of increasing its influence in Central Asia to the detriment of Russia's.

These examples underscore the ambiguities of China's quest for multipolarity: Beijing is a keen supporter of this trend but seems to accept it much better far away from home than in its own regional environment, an environment that it tends naturally to consider as its backyard. More importantly, multipolarity remains aimed at weakening the U.S. unipolar domination, a game that China has tried without the success expected in spite of the support given by countries such as France. In other words, China is still trying to pull itself up and rally others into a bipolar competition with the United States, as if China were a "big power" (*daguo*) more equal than others.³ True, this competition

has become softer or, to be more accurate, less direct. Nevertheless, debating endlessly about its destiny—more than its responsibilities—as a great power, China has embarked on an ambitious plan aimed at demonstrating to the world that it constitutes the most powerful, if not the only, alternative to western-style democracy and developmental strategy. Also aimed at legitimizing the CCP's political domination and strengthening domestic stability, this grand strategy may have far-reaching consequences, in particular in parts of the world that are situated far away from China.

This is the reason why this special issue of *Asian Perspective* concentrates on regions of the world that usually do not belong to China's foreign policy priorities. To be sure, these priorities have not changed: the dense but difficult relationship with the United States, Japan, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, Russia, Central Asia, and India. But these features of Chinese diplomacy have been, if not sometimes over-researched, much more often analyzed and presented to the English-speaking public. This special issue, in contrast, focuses on China's relations with Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. And in a final contribution, it offers a (counter-) point of comparison with neighboring Southeast Asia.

In the first article, I have tried to revisit with a fresh eye Sino-European relations. For a long time dominated by economic and trade links, this relationship has become richer but also more complex due both to the European Union's new international ambitions and China's own foreign policy objectives. The EU-China "strategic partnership" appears today closer than ever; however, because of growing trade disputes and also because Europe and China pursue different political objectives, their relations have probably entered more bumpy waters.

Then Yitzhak Shichor, one of the foremost experts on the relations between China and the Middle East, gives an insightful analysis of Beijing's new diplomacy in a region that still supplies the Chinese economy with half of its oil imports. But as Shichor shows, energy products are just one feature of a very rich relationship that includes arms sales, bilateral trade, economic assistance, and close and balanced political contacts with all the countries of the region, including Israel.

3. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "The Chinese Factor: China between Multipolarity and Bipolarity," in Gilles Boquerat and Frederic Grare, eds., *India, China, Russia: Intricacies of an Asian Triangle* (New Delhi: India Research Press,

2004), pp. 119-59.

China-Africa relations has become a hot topic in (every) town, and Michal Meidan is particularly well-placed to look at them with a detached and critical eye. Having studied extensively China's international energy strategy, in particular in countries such as Angola and Nigeria, she looks at Sino-African relations in their diversity, complexity, and flux.

The following contribution is no less important. The author, Gonzalo Paz, based in the United States but whose home is Argentina, has approached the Sino-Latin American relationship from an angle that was under-researched before: the South Americans' various and sometimes conflicting viewpoints. Underlining the growing importance and richness of this set of relations, in particular with partners such as Brazil and Venezuela, Paz also shows that they do not limit themselves to trade but encompass a political dimension that is of growing importance for the United States and the rest of the world.

Finally, Samuel C. Y. Ku provides a comprehensive overview of the development of China's relations with Southeast Asia in the last decade. He emphasizes the impact of three Chinese policies or strategies on relations with the ASEAN states: the open door policy, the good-neighbor diplomacy, and the go-global strategy. His article also helps us to compare China's regional diplomacy with the diplomacy it carries out farther away from its borders. Though differences persist, it seems that China's good-neighbor diplomacy in particular has become a model for reaching out to more distant partners, with the clear ambition to bridge the gap of oceans and cultural diversity in order to secure more stable relations with the whole planet.

All in all, this special issue of *Asian Perspective* confirms the two main features of Chinese foreign policy today. On the one hand, it is without a doubt more active and more sophisticated than in the past, and on the other hand, it remains at the service of the domestic economic and political objectives of the communist party.

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