



Chinese Perspectives on a “Fair and Rational” International Order

Dr. Jian Yang

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Studies, University of Auckland

Speech to the Young Leaders Network Forum, 21 November 2008

The rise of China has been one of the most important events in international politics of the post-Cold War period. A key issue posed by the rise of China is to what extent Beijing accepts the existing international order. Chinese leaders are not shy in calling for a fairer international order. In his address at the United Nations Summit on 15 September 2005, President Hu Jintao declared that China would “actively participate in international affairs and fulfill its international obligations, and work with other countries in building ... a new international order that is fair and rational.”

What is the “fair and rational” international order that China envisions? How will China help to build it? What are Beijing’s motives? Will China challenge the existing international order by force? I will try to answer these questions and will be happy to answer some questions afterwards.

What is the “fair and rational” international order that China envisions?

Before elaborating Chinese version of international order, I would like to briefly define the concepts of international order, world order and global order. Theoretically speaking, international order refers to the order among states. World order is a broader concept and includes not only international order, but also domestic order. While international order consists of states, world order emphasizes the importance of other actors, particularly individuals. Global order is an even broader concept. It covers both international order and world order and addresses global issues like global warming. It pays special attention to global governance. In practice, international order and world order are often interchangeable. This is certainly the case for Chinese analysts and policy-makers. The order among states is what they are concerned about.

International order itself has many aspects, reflecting the functions of the state. We can divide international order into international political order, international economic order, international security order, international legal order, international cultural order, etc. Chinese leaders and analysts have defined all these aspects in the context of a fair and rational international order.

With regards to the international economic order, each country should have the freedom of choosing a social system and economic development model based on its

own experience; every country should be able to participate in international economic activities as an equal member of international society; more efforts should be made to facilitate the North (developed countries)-South (developing countries) and South-South dialogues and cooperation.

In terms of the international political order, all countries should respect each others national sovereignty; no country should seek hegemony, manipulate international affairs and play power politics; all countries, small or big, are equal members of international society; great powers should not dominate international affairs; no country should impose its ideology, values or development model upon other countries.

Chinese leaders and analysts often combine the international political order with the international economic order, hence the international political economic order. They believe that the international economic order and international political order are inseparable. The economic order is the basis and precondition of the political order while the political order is a key to protecting the economic order.

As for the international security order, the key principles are: all countries should respect other countries' territorial integrity; international disputes should be resolved peacefully; a new security concept based on mutual trust, mutual benefit and equality and cooperation should replace the cold war rivalry, distrust and mutual destruction.

The Chinese also emphasize the importance of the international legal order. They argue that to strengthen the global governance based on international laws and the international system centered on the United Nations is a most important way of maintaining the stability of international society.

Finally, with regards to the international cultural order, different cultures should co-exist peacefully and should learn from each other; dialogue between cultures should replace clash of civilizations; cultural democracy and self-determination should replace cultural hegemony and colonization.

Chinese leaders and analysts have consistently emphasized that democratization of international relations is both the precondition and the core of building a fair and rational international order. What is Chinese understanding of democratization of international relations then? A key principle is that all sovereign states, regardless of size, wealth, and strength, should be equal. Chinese analysts acknowledge that due to the differences in their sizes and strengths, it is unrealistic to expect all countries to be absolutely equal. However, it is possible to enhance the status of smaller and poorer countries by restraining the privileges of great powers in international decision-making process. It is crucial that countries find commonalities and accept differences.

What are Beijing's motives in promoting a fair and rational international order?

All great powers aspire to shape the international order to their own benefit. After the defeat of Germany and Japan in the Second World War, US president Franklin D. Roosevelt envisioned a new world order of great power collaboration through a new United Nations. George Bush's "New World Order" after the end of the Cold War reflected Roosevelt's vision. For both Roosevelt and Bush, the United States must be the leader of the new world order.

To realists, the Chinese version of international order is like a utopia. Realists argue that we live in an anarchical world where states have to fight for their survival. Harmony can be achieved in international relations only with power. Harmony is not rooted in states' respect for other states' interests and will but in states' acceptance of the rules of the game which are determined by great powers.

Chinese policy makers and analysts are no strangers to realism. It is not difficult to identify realist motives in Chinese promotion of the idealistic fair and rational international order.

First, democratization of international relations will facilitate China's cause of promoting multipolarity in international relations. And multipolarity implies the increase of Chinese influence.

Second, China's call for respecting each country's political system and development model represents its effort to counter the West's pressure on issues like human rights, political liberalization, and trade disputes.

Third, China's anti-hegemonic stance is an effort to counter US dominance. It is also an attempt to address other countries' concerns over China's rise. It implies that China has no intention to be a hegemony.

Finally, to propose a fair and rational international order demonstrates that China is a responsible great power.

Chinese promotion of a fair and rational international order is not necessarily purely based on realist considerations. It does reflect Beijing's genuine belief that the existing international order is unfair, irrational and should be improved. We should bear in mind that Chinese perceptions of the world are still strongly influenced by their experience of the Century of Humiliation from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century when the Chinese suffered at the hands of a number of colonial powers. The Chinese often perceive themselves as representing just forces and to help establish a fair and rational international order is their moral responsibility.

How will China help to build a fair and rational international order?

China has taken actions to position itself for the evolution of the international order.

First of all, China has been focusing on enhancing its comprehensive national power by developing its economy rapidly. The Chinese are keenly aware that national power is the basis for China to play a meaningful role in building a new international order.

Second, China has strengthened its role in establishing an East Asian regional order, which the Chinese hope will provide a base for them to help build a new international order. China's deepened economic relations with Southeast Asian nations should be understood in this context. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is another example. The organization is the first multilateral regional cooperation organization in which China plays a leadership role.

Third, Beijing has been working with other great powers in its effort to promote multipolarity. For example, on 23 April 1997, China and Russia signed *Joint Declaration on World Multipolarization and New International Order*. The two countries reiterated their position in July 2005.

Fourth, as an effort to democratize international relations, China has been supportive of the United Nations and international regimes. In the 29 years from 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established to 1977 when China was about to open up, China was a party to a total of 31 international treaties. In the 27 years from 1978 when China opened up to the end of 2004, China signed 236 international treaties.¹

Fifth, China has been trying to improve its image and to establish itself as an active, responsible, constructive and predictable partner in building a new international order. While publicly resisting Western pressure on issues like human rights and political liberalization, Beijing has made efforts to address Western concerns on such issues.

Will China challenge the existing international order by force?

International order evolves with the rise and fall of great powers. As Daniel W. Drezner points out, global institutions cease to be appropriate when the allocation of decision-making authority within them no longer corresponds to the distribution of power. A good example is the G-7. The G-7 was moderately successful in managing global macroeconomic imbalances during the 1980s, when they accounted for half of the world's economic activity. Today, with the participation of Russia, G-7 has become G-8. Even so, these economic giants cannot be effective without including

economic heavyweight China in their deliberations.² China's importance is highlighted in the current global credit crisis. China was "the most sought-after country" at the G-20 meeting held in Washington on 16 November 2008.³

Drezner argues that despite the widely shared perception of US unilateralism, the George W. Bush administration has actually made a consistent effort to incorporate emerging powers. For instance, the United States has encouraged China to participate periodically in the G-8 meetings of finance ministers and central-bank governors. Also with a view to giving greater influence to China, the Bush administration has pushed hard to change the voting quotas within the International Monetary Fund.⁴

The US effort to incorporate rising powers like China is a part of the US strategy to protect its national interests and consolidate its domination of the existing international order. To invite China to G-8 meetings is a US attempt to change some of China's economic policies, such as its exchange-rate policies. By allocating more power in international institutions to China, Washington is hoping that China will not create new international institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. From a US perspective, it would be preferable for China to advance its interests within U.S.-led global governance structures rather than outside of them.⁵

But will China do what Washington is hoping for? If not, will China challenge the existing order by force? The key question is to what extent is the existing international order an obstacle to China's rise. Rosemary Foot, an Oxford professor, has observed that Chinese "mainstream strategy analysts" have "overall perceived a consistent and malign U.S. strategy of global domination," and consider U.S. hegemony to be "predatory in nature".

However, this does not necessarily mean that China will challenge the existing international order by force in the foreseeable future. The fact is that China has actually changed from a victim to a beneficiary of international order. In the Century of Humiliation, China no doubt was a victim of the international order. Although dominated by the United States, today's international order has provided China with a stable international environment, open markets, and trade liberalization. There are no compelling reasons for China to challenge the existing international order by force.

Despite its calling for a new international order, China is actually making an earnest effort to participate in the existing international order. This is determined by China's external strategy which changed fundamentally in the past three decades. Chinese foreign policy is no longer determined by ideology. Beijing was suspicious of and resistant to international mechanisms and multilateralism. Now it is an active advocate and participant. While insisting on Chinese uniqueness by advocating socialism with Chinese characteristics, Beijing recognizes the commonalities of

human life and is ready to compromise on various issues. After all, capitalism has flourished in China.

A good relationship with the United States is the international cornerstone of China's rise. Shi Yinong, a leading international relations scholar in China argues that China must cooperate with the "first-rate great power and the international regimes supported by it" before "transcending" this accommodation by contributing to the peaceful transformation of international society from one dominated or controlled by Western great powers to one in which the West, and especially the United States, accepts the need to coexist in an equal and reasonable manner with newly rising non-Western states.⁶ The official *Beijing Review* also notes that "the peaceful and steady development of Sino-U.S. strategic relationship" is a key factor for China's peaceful rise.⁷

Chinese publications and propaganda may not convince "China threat" advocates. After all, it is widely believed that rising powers are trouble makers. Great powers dominate, then decline and finally are challenged by new great powers. The showdown is inevitably in the battlefield as the international system lacks the mechanisms for peaceful change.

A peaceful and orderly power transition is possible if an emerging power will assume the role of a cooperative hegemony. A cooperative hegemony is usually a big state lacking the resources to act as a global power on its own, thus deciding eventually to merge with regional neighbors so as to find its place in the global pecking order.⁸

Renato Cruz de Castro argues that China is a typical cooperative hegemony. First, China's military, especially Chinese navy, is too weak to operate as a military hegemony, especially in the maritime territory of the Asia-Pacific region. Second, the Chinese government has to focus on economic growth which is the basis for China's comprehensive national power and a key to internal social stability. With a population of 1.3 billion, China is preoccupied with domestic issues. Finally, China has an exposed geopolitical location, and a history of conflictive relations with its neighboring states.⁹

Faced with a more powerful hegemony with more resources and a powerful military, a cooperative hegemony will not form a counter-hegemonic coalition. Instead, it will set up a cooperative mechanism in a region to neutralize the more powerful traditional hegemony. As a cooperative hegemony, China has improved relations with all countries including the United States. It declined a Russian suggestion that Russia, China and India forge an alliance which could be anti-American. It is supportive of the East Asian Summit, of which all US allies in the region are members, including Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and even Australia. New Zealand is also a member.

Conclusion

The Chinese vision of a fair and rational international order centers on democratization and multipolarization of international relations. It is a mixture of China's realist calculation of maximizing Chinese national interests and Beijing's moral support for international equality which is derived from its past experience as a victim of the old international order. China has been in the process of strengthening its position to help build a new international order. The key strategy has been to enhance China's comprehensive national power by rapidly developing its economy. The economic success has enabled China to increase its influence in East Asia and in international organizations. It also helped to strengthen China's relations with other great powers. Both are important steps towards establishing a new international order. While determined to "improve" the existing international order, China is unlikely to challenge it by force in the foreseeable future. It is in no position to challenge the dominant power the United States by force. And after all, China still is benefiting from the existing international order. In a longer term, there are also reasons for optimism. If the international society is able to accommodate the rise of China and turn China into a genuine stakeholder of the existing international order, we will have a good chance to see China's peaceful rise.

Notes

¹ Rao Geping, "Guoji falu zhixu yu Zhongguo de heping fazhan" (The international legal order and China's peaceful development), *Waijiao Pinglun (Foreign Affairs Review)*, no. 6 (December 2005), p. 51.

² Daniel W. Drezner, "the New World Order", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, Iss. 2 (Mar/Apr 2007), p. 39.

³ Mark Landler, "Nations to Talk Finance, as Pillars of Power Shift", *New York Times*, November 14, 2008.

⁴ Drezner, p. 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶ Rosemary Foot, "Chinese Strategies in a US-hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging," *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (2006), p. 91.

⁷ "Objectives of China's Rise: Rise for Peace," *Beijing Review*, Vol. 47, No. 24, June 17, 2004).

⁸ Renato Cruz de Castro, "Exploring the prospect of China's peaceful emergence in East Asia", *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 88-92.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Views expressed in this paper are personal to the author and are not to be taken as representing the Asia New Zealand Foundation