

Will China's rise be peaceful?

During 2003 and 2004 the talk of the town in Beijing's political, media and diplomatic circles was the 'peaceful rise of China' to superpower status. China's leadership, led by president Hu Jintao, had presented a new vision: China's rise would be different from those of Germany and Japan, whose arrival on the world stage triggered two world wars.¹ Riding the wave of globalization, China would rise through long-term economic growth, trade and investment, regional cooperation and integration, all guided by deft and peaceful diplomacy.

Willem van Kemenade

Chinese analysts say this fundamental foreign policy shift shows China has learned to act like a 'great power', with responsibilities across the region, instead of playing the century-old role of victim bullied by Japan, Russia and the West. China's most troubled relationship with Japan has improved at least in the economic realm. After more than a decade of recession and deflation, Japan's economy showed growth again in 2004 thanks to the relocation of Japanese industries to China and the huge expansion of bilateral trade. Politically, however, the relationship plummeted towards a nadir - due primarily to the insensitive policies of the Koizumi government, highlighted by the prime minister's annual pilgrimage to Yasukuni Shrine where Japan's war-dead, including war-criminals, are honoured, and controversy over Japanese denials and euphemistic portrayals in school textbooks of its wartime past. Such actions helped trigger a wave of sometimes violent anti-Japan demonstrations in China.

China, Taiwan and the United States

The Bush presidency replaced Clinton's 'strategic partnership' with China with 'strategic competition', but thanks to Colin Powell's diplomacy and the 9-11 attacks, the sting was removed from the 'competition' as China became a partner in the war on terror. The separatist policies of Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian also caused tension between Beijing and Washington. President Bush began his first term with the most outspoken pro-Taiwan stance since Eisenhower, but by the end of 2003 he openly criticized the Taiwanese president in the presence of the Chinese premier. Taiwan had been derecognized as a state in 1979 but continued to receive limited quantities of American arms. This continued under Presidents Reagan and Clinton, but Presidents Bush I and II expanded the arms trade with Taiwan into multi-billion-dollar deals. In 1992, Bush I approved the sale of 150 F-16s in order to gain support for his re-election in Texas, home to the aircraft's maker, General Dynamics. Bush II approved the biggest arms deal ever with Taiwan, 18.3 billion USD, though the deal stagnates because Parliament, where President Chen Shui-bian's pro-independence government is in the minority, refuses to allocate the funds.

American attitudes toward China and Taiwan are inconsistent. The Department of State plays more or less by the rules, but hardliners in Congress and the Pentagon increasingly treat Taiwan as an independent state, with whom the US maintains an official military alliance. Many members of Congress, conservative Christians, rightwing think tanks and human rights organizations support keeping Taiwan under US influence, not merely to protect its democracy but as a military base for the future containment of China. Perhaps more importantly, Taiwan is among the largest customers of the US arms industry. Prominent hardliner John Tkacik of the rightwing Heritage Foundation writes:

- Taiwan is one of the top importers of US defence equipment.
- American defence industries benefit from a pay-as-you-go relationship with Taiwan, which has been America's second best customer (after Saudi Arabia) for defence equipment and services every year for the past ten years.
- Taiwan has become an important partner in financing US defense research and development.²

Two landmark events in Taiwan soured US-China relations. In July 1999, President Lee Teng-hui promulgated the so-called 'Two States Theory' which defines relations between China and Taiwan not as those between a region and its central government but as 'special relations between two sovereign states'. This bordered on declaring independence. China was furious but didn't react beyond saber-rattling and verbal threats. The second, more ominous event was the March 2000 presidential election victory of Chen Shui-bian with a mere 39 per cent of the vote. Chen had a history of militant independence activism. His views had mellowed, but his core supporters wouldn't let him go soft. China-Taiwan relations entered an era of chronic crisis.



Martial god of wealth (Guandi)
Details of woodblock-print from Yangjia-ban, Shandong



James A. Flath, www.ssc.uwo.ca/history/nianhua/home.html

When George W. Bush assumed power, the US decided to overhaul its East-Asia strategy by emphasizing its relations with Asian democracies, first and foremost, Japan. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had been working to transform Japan from a defeated, pacifist, economic superpower into a 'normal' country; i.e., a military power that would assist the US overseas military activism.

The re-elected Bush Administration has apparently concluded that it has performed so well in its global war on terror that it doesn't need China so badly anymore. During the first Bush term, China's economic power and diplomatic leverage had grown so astonishingly that by the end of 2004 the US was returning to its 2001 frame of mind. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reactivated the late 1990s idea of containing China by building a Cold War-style quasi-military alliance with Asian democracies. Rice traveled to India in March to convey that America's newest foreign policy goal was to 'help India become a major world power in the 21st century'. India, she meant, should open its market to the American arms industry and join the US as a 'democratic ally' to contain 'Communist China'. Determining its own interests, New Delhi recently agreed with Beijing to settle their half-century-old border dispute and to expand economic cooperation.

China, the EU and the United States

China has a strategy to counter American containment. Chinese diplomats observed the fissures in the trans-Atlantic alliance caused by the Iraq War. Trade, investment and cultural relations between China and the European Union were already substantial, but strategic ties were lacking. Prior to the China-EU Summit in Beijing in October 2003, China issued an 'EU Policy Paper' that addressed, for the first time, strategic cooperation: 'China and the EU will maintain high-level

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military-to-military exchanges, develop and improve, step by step, a strategic security consultation mechanism, exchange more missions of military experts, and expand exchanges in respect of military officers training and defence studies. The EU should lift its ban on arms sales to China at an early date so as to remove barriers to greater bilateral cooperation on defence industry and technologies.³

China's 230 million Euro participation in Galileo, the EU's rival to the Pentagon-controlled Global Positioning System, laid the foundation for closer defence co-operation between Beijing and Brussels - a prospect that alarmed the Pentagon. Since then, China has campaigned for lifting the arms embargo imposed after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. Ostensibly, China doesn't want to go on a shopping spree for European arms but to remove the stigma. China's basic argument is: 'We are strategic partners! How can there be an arms embargo on a strategic partner?' For many Europeans, lifting the arms embargo is tantamount to a declaration of independence from the US. A Europe that cannot say no to the US is meaningless. But there are increasing doubts whether this is the right issue and the right moment.

Brussels underestimated the vehemence of Washington's response. US senators have threatened retaliation against the European defence industry by cutting trans-Atlantic defence cooperation, and Europe could pay a high price for missing out on new American technologies. Americans are concerned that European weapons could one day kill Americans defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion. The US can prevent this by reining in Taiwan and its campaign for independence and thus not provoke an invasion. American policy is duplicitous: one day it incites Taiwan, the next it warns the island not to go too far.

Lifting the European arms embargo has now become more divisive within the EU. Ironically, China has exacerbated this

by adopting an 'Anti-Secession Law' that sanctions military action should Taiwan formally declare independence.⁴ The law contains nothing new and is moderate in tone, but China critics on both sides of the Atlantic have pointed to it as reason enough to maintain the embargo.

Thus China has unnecessarily overplayed its hand not only in Europe, but also in Taiwan and Japan. Pro-independence radicals in Taiwan's ruling DPP suffered a serious setback in the December 2004 legislative elections. Unable to push his independence agenda further without a majority in Parliament, Chen Shui-bian yielded to the opposition. Instead of profiting from this, Beijing passed the Anti-Secession Law, provoking a backlash abroad. However, the backlash has been largely annulled by the positive momentum created by the high profile visits of Taiwan's opposition leaders to China in April and May.

China and Japan

The United States and Japan inflamed Chinese passions over Taiwan by declaring at a meeting of foreign and defence ministers that a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question was 'a common strategic objective'.⁵ This lengthened China's list of grievances against Japan, which includes Japan's surreptitious support for Taiwanese independence and Japan's alignment with the United States. World War II issues also remain. The Chinese retaliated against Koizumi's transgressions by refusing top-level contact with him and by openly announcing its intention to block Japanese permanent membership on the UN Security Council. Chinese and Japanese media now whirl into a frenzy over any incident, whether an orgy by Japanese sex-tourists, a Chinese submarine intruding into waters between Taiwan and Japan, a World War II Japanese chemical shell exploding when unearthed, or Chinese abuse of visiting Japanese soccer fans. A dispute over East China Sea oil and gas exploration further fuels a potentially explosive situation.

Liberal Chinese intellectuals are deeply pessimistic about the future. Professor Shi Yinhong, a prominent advocate of 'new Chinese thinking' about Japan, feels that moderates have lost and hardliners are in control on both sides of the East China Sea. 'China is far from ready to accept Japan as a normal country and Japan is far from ready to accept China as an emerging superpower. The possibility of war becomes imaginable again. Only a major crisis can make both governments realize the necessity of accommodation.'⁶

Notes

1. The concept of China's 'Peaceful Rise' was first presented by President Hu's foreign policy adviser Zheng Bijian at the 'Bo-ao Forum' in Hainan, China's version of the World Economic Forum, in November 2003.
2. Tkacik, John. 6 May 2003. 'Taiwan's presidential countdown: what does it mean for the U.S.' (China brief.) The Jamestown Foundation. www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?search=1&volume_id=19&issue_id=674&article_id=4730 (4 May 2005)
3. China's 'EU Policy Paper'. 13 October 2003. Beijing. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2003-10/13/content_1120500.htm (4 May 2005)
4. 14 March 2005. Full text of the Anti-Secession Law: www.china-daily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/14/content_424643.htm The 'bellicose' clause, singled out for international criticism, is article eight.
5. 21 February 2005 Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee. <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/data/province/taiwan.html> Taiwan as one of their 'common strategic objectives'.
6. April 2005. Interview with the author in Beijing.

Willem van Kemenade is a long-time China-analyst, based in Beijing. His current research interests are strategic realignment and regional economic integration in East-Asia. He is an IIAS fellow and senior-research consultant at the European Institute of Asian Studies in Brussels.

www.willemvk.org
kemenade@public3.bta.net.cn