

Conclusion

What are we to make of this short and eclectic enquiry into China's current resurgence? We are, in my view, past the point at which it makes sense to focus on assessing whether China will succeed in 'standing up' and resuming its place among the world's most consequential states. China's development into a mature contemporary state has a long way to run, but it has arguably completed its (re)-emergence, and it has the balance and robustness to sustain a strong, positive trajectory into the indefinite future. If everyone in East Asia is already very much aware of a compelling new force on the regional scene, one can only try to imagine how it will feel in the decades to come.

The striking feature of China's story over the past three decades is the degree to which the process has been engineered. Despite its immense size, China's transformation has been patiently, methodically and very deliberately constructed by a leadership group that has equally carefully protected its monopoly on power. Deng Xiaoping stands like a colossus over this process as the author of the enduring vision on where China should go and of the core guidelines that it should adhere to in order to get there. China's spectacular success is due overwhelmingly to Deng's far-sighted determination to immerse the country in the international system largely designed by and still presided over by the United States, a system that Mao Zedong's China had resolved to resist and, if possible, unravel. A question that has lurked in the back of some minds is whether China will continue to see strong advantage in helping to preserve and develop this system or begin to see itself as having outgrown the system and to lean toward more China-centric arrangements. East Asia's strategic trajectory will depend strongly on whether this distills into a bilateral contest to shape the regional order or whether both principals can be persuaded to prefer a more diffuse and collective shaping mechanism that also includes the likes of Japan and India.

China has worked hard and skilfully, and enjoyed considerable success, in recent decades to portray itself as a benign force, utterly absorbed in the task of lifting its mammoth population out of extreme poverty, and, as an integrated and increasingly interdependent member of the international community, doing so in a manner that produces major economic spinoffs for many if not most other members of the system. Chinese leaders have stressed that China needs and seeks maximum tranquility in its external relationships to avoid being distracted from this huge and long-term endeavour.

To this end, China has become one of the world's leading trading nations from within the World Trade Organization (WTO); it has stepped from well outside

the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)/long-range missile non-proliferation regime to membership of, and compliance with, the key instruments of this regime; it has become an enthusiastic proponent of addressing security challenges in multilateral forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); it has for a decade relentlessly promoted the principles of common and comprehensive security as its national security policy; the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has become the largest single contributor to UN peacekeeping operations; it has begun, cautiously, to recognise (in respect of Zimbabwe, Sudan and Myanmar) that its national interests are not served by resisting absolutely the emerging norm that the sovereignty of states is qualified by a 'responsibility to protect' the welfare of its citizens, and that the international community has rights and responsibilities in upholding this norm.

China's actions over the past three decades have accomplished a crucial qualitative change: broad impressions of China as a mysterious, somewhat exotic but also vaguely alien place have substantially given way to assessments in which 'normalcy' and 'similarity' dominate over 'difference'. In addition, we have noted above that China's leadership seems to attach a high priority to building the country's rise on broad and deep foundations, to ensure real substance and to minimise any vulnerabilities. To the extent practicable, short-cuts are avoided or at least abandoned if the longer-term penalties are recognised and assessed as damaging either to China's image or to the certainty of China's trajectory toward a nation of power and influence. It is reasonable to suppose, and to some extent inevitable in the Chinese context, that the leadership aspiration is to make this fourth resurgence in China's fortunes as substantive and durable as those in the past.

Finally, there is the fact that China's re-emergence is part of the evolution of an unfamiliar geopolitical environment—an environment in which several geographically dispersed and culturally distinctive countries will stand apart from the majority as disproportionately powerful but still subject themselves to the significant countervailing capacities of their peers. The more certain members of this 'group of giants' will be the United States, the European Union, China, Japan, Russia and India.

Taking these considerations together suggests that there is much to be said for the proposition that it is both valid and wise to take this 'new look' China at face value and to be confident that an ever more powerful and influential China will remain an agent of reassurance and stability and indeed become a 'responsible stakeholder' within the evolving international system.

There are, however, considerations that incline this observer toward a more cautious and circumspect assessment. First, there is China's size. Even for

the most imaginative people, it is difficult to envisage the sort of entity that China will be in 25 or 50 years if it sustains anything like its present trajectory. While many see formidable challenges ahead for China on such fronts as the environment, pollution, and socially stressful income inequalities, few believe that its economic trajectory is unsustainable because of deep flaws in its economic fundamentals. In other words, China will, by any measure, become the largest economy in Asia quite soon, and eventually the largest in the world. Furthermore, China's economic strength will become progressively stronger and deeper in terms of attributes like its education system, its capacity to develop new technologies, and the magnitude and mobility of its capital resources.

Even if considerable doubt surrounds China's future standing in global terms at these future dates, there can be little doubt that China will be a dominant presence in East Asia and that the manner in which the United States, Japan and China fit together will be very different from the arrangements in place today. East Asia, of course, is the region of the world of greatest interest to Australia in economic, political and security terms. It follows that the manner in which the accommodation of China is approached and accomplished—whether the process leans toward the deliberate, collegiate and stabilising or is characterised more by suspicion, resistance and military competition—is a matter of fundamental concern to Australia.

These observations feed into a further set of considerations. Despite the enormity of China's economic and social transformation over the past three decades, its system of governance has proven to be highly resistant to change. China remains an authoritarian one-party state. Internal checks and balances on the authority of the government remain weak and uncertain. This, in turn, has consequences that will make it harder for the Chinese leadership to steer its preferred course. The comparative absence of internal checks and balances on the authority of the government will intensify instincts elsewhere to at least hedge against the emergence of a powerful China, whether through seeking to build the foundations for countervailing coalitions or accelerating the development of selected military capabilities (or both). Needless to say, while both responses are predictable and even sensible, they tend to make the prospects for a deliberate, collegiate and stabilising strategic transformation rather remote.

In a similar vein, the reassurance provided by China's current foreign and security policy settings is qualified by the fact that they are so clearly careful choices made by the leadership and the policy elite. The fact that China is an authoritarian one-party state leads inescapably to the sensation that the policy choices are a means to an end, and to perceptions of being manipulated to the benefit of China's longer-term aspirations. Apart from the glimpses (despite China's tightly controlled political and bureaucratic environment) that emerge on the scale of these aspirations, there is a strong propensity among some in

other policy elites to 'fill in the blanks' and to press for more robust hedging, if not outright competition to deny China's presumed aspirations. For those that are sceptical, the question becomes how far has China entered into external arrangements or allowed internal changes that are genuinely 'costly' in the sense of limiting the state's freedom to pursue its aspirations?

The US experience provides a benchmark against which to illuminate these observations. For pretty much all of the twentieth century, the United States loomed ever more decisively as the pre-eminent power in every dimension of that elusive concept. Yet there is widespread agreement that the United States, uniquely, somehow combined disproportionate power with reassurance. Most of the world never feared that the United States would use its power to conquer or to subjugate, a quality that added immeasurably to America's status and influence. The United States managed to pull off this feat not because it consistently exhibited statesmanship and policy skills of the highest order, but because not using its power in this 'traditional' way was a vague national preference that US democratic processes could essentially impose on the leadership. It was not something that was left up to the policy elites to decide. Somehow, it would appear, this intangible quality was transmitted to and imbedded itself around the world.¹

It can be accepted that the introduction of such factors as market economics, the advent of economic opportunity, labour mobility, international travel and widespread exploitation of the Internet have transformed China's internal atmosphere dramatically in the last 30 years. It is a much freer society than it used to be. Many analysts go on to express confidence that the Chinese Communist Party has unleashed forces that will prove impossible to guide, let alone slow or stop, and that political pluralism is inescapable. I would submit, however, that China's accumulation of economic power, and almost certainly of matching military power, is a great deal more certain than is the evolution of its political system in the direction of reliable internal checks and balances. The authority of the state to attempt to stop or curtail any aspect of its new openness to external influences remains absolute. And as long as other powers, particularly those proximate to China, have reservations about the reliability of the internal checks and balances on the freedom of China's leadership, they will incline toward stronger national means of resisting Chinese power; that is, they will feel compelled to 'hedge' against the image projected by China's leadership.

1 The administration of George W. Bush presided over a disturbingly severe erosion of US status in the world, and, for the first time, raised doubts about the capacity of America's internal checks and balances to reliably keep US power pointed in the 'right' direction. In response, a new cottage industry has sprung up in Washington policy circles devoted to 'doing by design' what the United States had for a century largely managed to do unconsciously. See, for example, Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye (co-Chairs), CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America, Center for Strategic & International Studies, Washington, DC, 2007, available at <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/071106_csissmartpowerreport.pdf>, accessed 24 June 2009.

China's system of governance also generates important tactical advantages in the 'game of nations' that Beijing exploits to the full. This has become particularly conspicuous in China's quest for resource and energy security. China has established itself most deeply with an array of states whose internal practices make them hazardous partners for the business community in the democratic world and which provide China with stronger opportunities to 'own' or 'control' their raw materials—states such as Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Sudan. On a positive note, however, it must be pointed out that the Chinese leadership also attaches genuine importance to perceptions of legitimacy regarding China's rise and, in respect of its dealings with Zimbabwe, Sudan, Myanmar (and, to a lesser extent, Iran), has demonstrated some sensitivity to its vulnerability in this regard.

A related observation is that China has no tradition of genuine partnership with another state. Moreover, it seems in no particular hurry to start such a tradition. For nearly all of its uniquely long history, China has been sufficiently large and powerful to essentially, in itself, define the 'system' for all the communities within its steadily expanding reach. It has, very occasionally, accepted other states as allies of convenience (the tribes of Inner Mongolia in the distant past, and both superpowers in the last century), but it has never formed a partnership with another significant state that it valued sufficiently to be prepared to be sensitive to and protective of the interests of the partner. Whether China can, or wants, to build such partnerships remains an open question.

Today's China, in my view, conveys the unmistakable impression of a state that is proceeding with great seriousness and determination to become a first-rank state with a balanced portfolio of power and no major vulnerabilities. China's leadership may not have a clear vision of what it would like to do when it achieves this status, nor of what international circumstances at that time will present in the way of opportunities and constraints. China's leadership does, however, seem to prefer postponing any discussions with its prospective peers on the modalities of their interaction until China is strong enough to have a decisive say on those modalities.

China takes itself very seriously and seems to be engaged in a quite stunning demonstration of Sun Tzu's dictum that 'to subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence', inviting the world to overlook the evidence about the formidable hard power assets it is determined to acquire in favour of simply enjoying the fruits of its market and trusting in the sincerity of its rhetoric on being determined to become a benign and peaceful new-age major power without a realist bone in its body.

One does not have to believe that China's rise is an ominous development to see prudence in questioning its endeavour to 'keep a low profile and hide its

strengths' until some date in the still distant future. Playing along with this strategy, but also, inevitably, being driven to hedge against less optimistic scenarios, is a recipe for a steady erosion of trust and confidence, and the emergence of a serious adversarial relationship in circumstances of already heightened military preparedness. China is well past the point where any reasonable doubt can be attached either to its aspirations to become one of the world's dominant states or to its capacity to achieve these aspirations. It could be the case that the Chinese Government's rhetoric about the sort of international actor it intends to be is wholly sincere. It is the case, however, that China's system of governance inescapably erodes the credibility of that rhetoric. The policy prescription that emerges from this assessment is to become more persistent and resolute in requiring China to measure up to contemporary standards of openness and transparency, and to create opportunities for China to display its willingness to enter into obligations and commitments that genuinely constrain its policy options.