

G-2: An Option for China?

G-2 : 大陸的選擇？

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I. Introduction

While scholars and practitioners begin to address the increasing importance of a rising China lately, questions remained when it comes to China's relations with the status quo power, the United States. A group of practitioners such as Zbigniew Brzezinski proposes the conception of "Group of Two" (G-2) to emphasize the importance for the United States and China to work closely to address global as well as regional issues.

However, another group of experts such as Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal contends that G-2 is only a mirage because of the mismatched national interests of both sides. And, even Niall Ferguson, who coined the term "Chimerica" in 2008 to address the close ties between China and America, now called "'Chimerica' is headed for divorce" given the financial tsunami only few month ago. At a click in time, team "Chimerica" in an emerging bipolar world seems to become an unrealistic "chimera."

How does China perceive this recent debate over its relations with the United States? Why China, as a developing country, hesitates to joining the prestigious "G-2" to exerting its influence internationally, as revealed in Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's exchanges with President

Obama last month? Putting it into a big picture, this paper employs China's view on the evolving international environment since the end of the Cold War to answer these questions. While China has gradually admitted unipolarity best describes the current international structure, it also has found the futility of calling for a multipolar world. In addition, for the Chinese leadership, "veto" and "free-riding" on a case-by-case basis seem to be the most rational policy choice. Under these circumstances, this paper concludes that the "Group of China and the U.S." will begin to exert influence on international affairs in the years to come.

II. International Structure and China's World View

In China, the term "international situation/pattern (*guoji xingshi* or *guoji geju*)" refers to the distribution of capabilities and interactions among primary actors over a certain period of time. Compared to Kenneth Waltz's concentration on how units are "arranged or positioned" in the international system at the expense of how they interact, Chinese academia pays attention to how units relate and interact with one another. In other words, when Waltz only focuses on the distribution of material power in his analysis of the international system and relegates interactions among states to the study of state-level foreign policy rather than international politics, Chinese analysts tend to incorporate the interactions between states as part of the international structure in world politics.

If this holds true, we can expect that the Chinese leadership is more open to the possibility that state interactions could influence the restraints put forth by the international distribution of capabilities.

III. Evolution of China's View on Polarity

In the early 1990s, as Michel Oksenberg once noted, the unprecedented end of bipolarity as a result of the demise of the Soviet Union “left China’s leaders without a definition of their place in the world.” In addition, in the shadow of the Tiananmen incident that caused such insecurity within the Chinese leadership, the U.S. was perceived as a political threat that could endanger the CCP’s rule. This anxiety further diminished Chinese admiration of America in the pre-1989 period. Therefore, the Chinese leadership not only perceived multipolarization of world politics as a trend based on their assessment of U.S. decline, but also advocated this concept as a goal, as Deng Xiaoping once commented “China too will be a pole.”

In the 1990s, the U.S. was first depicted as “dangerous but in decline,” but this image of the U.S. has changed with world events, especially in the mid- to late-1990s. Generally, China is still worried about the U.S. ability to delay China’s development and further integration with the world economy, but the perception of the U.S. as a threatening actor possessing the intentions and capabilities to topple the CCP regime and pursue world domination has decreased over time.

Many Chinese official reports and analyses also reflect how the perceptions of the leadership have changed overtime. China gradually downplayed “anti-hegemonism” from the early 1990s to 2008 (save for some episodic crises), and acknowledged the protracted nature of the process of “multipolarization” with increasing mentions of “one superpower, many great powers (*yichao duoqiang*).”

China has also promoted “globalization” since the mid-1990s, and

with it more open discussions on and acknowledgement of “unipolarity.” It should be noted that to date the Chinese government is still reluctant to officially employ the term “unipolarity” to describe the international system, while in academic discussions “unipolarity” is more often seen.

The other significant change in China’s perception about polarity in world affairs rests upon its view on multipolarization since the early 2000s. Several reasons contributed to this change. First, one of the means to oppose the U.S. dominance is to form an anti-hegemonist alliance, but China has realized that such an alliance would not be available in a click of time. Interactions between the U.S. and other major powers have changed China’s perception, particularly the U.S.-led Kosovo War in 1999, in which the U.S. and the Western European countries demonstrated their close relationship based upon shared values and common interests.

Second, in addition to the collective action problems, China realizes the difficulties to militarily challenge U.S. primacy by itself. In the aftermath of the Kosovo War, many argued that the gap of military hardware between China and the U.S. was too huge for the Chinese to catch-up, which rendered an arms race with the U.S. unrealistic.

Third, China finds that a multipolar world is not inheritably good for China as deemed before. In the early to mid-1990s, analysts all followed Deng’s view that multipolarity was a necessity to safeguard world peace and thus helpful to Chinese development. However, as early as in 1998, several Chinese scholars started to ponder the fundamental question of whether multipolarity is inherently favorable to China and balancing was the only strategy able to preserve world peace. To them, strategies as “hiding from the threat,” “free-riding or bandwagoning to benefit,” and

“tying the threat with international arrangements,” seem to be more often seen than balancing throughout history.

Fourth, from a practical perspective, China realizes that it should not habitually oppose every initiative from U.S. solely in order to pursue a seemingly beneficial multipolar world. Multipolarization is in essence meant to prevent U.S. domination or infringement on the rights of other states. But given U.S. military and economic primacy, U.S. involvement has become a precondition to the achievement of China’s economic development and the multipolarization of world affairs.

Fifth, China finds it morally difficult to co-opt developing countries to balance against the U.S. with the term “multipolarization” or “anti-hegemonism.” More often than not, when China refers to “multipolarization,” the majority of developing countries are apparently not included as a “pole”—this makes China look no better than other powers in the eyes of Third World. To Third World countries, China’s call for “multipolarization” is akin to an extension of the concept of “sphere of influence” from the 19th century.

Finally, some Chinese analysts further suggest that a multipolar world will even be harmful to China if it means including India and boosting Japan’s political influence. And, to better serve China’s interest in economic development, it is imperative for China to cooperate with the U.S. and others for its own good.

In short, China’s re-discovery of the U.S. contributing role in economic development, lack of reliable partners, and fear of the political rise of Japan and India, have been leading to China’s accommodative views on the U.S.-led international order since the late 1990s and early 2000s.

IV. Bipolarity in the Making?

Analysts have been treating the term “responsible stakeholder” to redefine U.S. bilateral relations with China in 2005 as the inception of the so-called G-2. As part of a response to China’s advocacy of “peaceful rise” in 2002, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick commented in September 2005 that China should take concrete steps to cooperate with the U.S. on common interests and to become a “responsible stakeholder” in world affairs. The then suggested issues that China should address included its military buildup, energy security, counterfeiting and intellectual property rights protection, political reform, and other regional issues.

In the first place, the term “stakeholder” confused Chinese analysts as well as practitioners, and received no formal response from the top leadership. It was on or shortly after Bush’s visit in November 2005 that China’s several leading U.S. experts began to publish articulate reactions to Zoellick’s statement. Some leading Chinese scholars contended that the U.S. hopes China to be working with it to shape the future international system and to share risks and responsibilities. To this group of Chinese analysts, the key of this expression of “responsible stakeholder” rests upon whether the U.S. can treat China as an equal footing stakeholder. What is more salient is that although the U.S. had adopted a more pragmatic policy toward China, pragmatism has not rendered ideological differences obsolete, and the U.S. had never been ambiguous in hoping that China would move in the direction of political change.

In the same vein, another cautious view contends that it will still

benefit the U.S. and China if the two nations agreed to strengthen positive interactions on common interests; however, China would need to strike a balance between the costs and benefits that result from such cooperation. To this group of scholars, closer cooperation with the U.S. sometimes would backfire if China conceded too much on issues like currency control or energy security. It is of great importance for China and the U.S. to diminish possible misunderstanding in advance in order to achieve long-term stability. Furthermore, China should be aware of its special ties with the Third World countries, with the acknowledgement that Third World is concerned about the U.S. ill-perceived intention of world domination.

The Chinese leadership formally responded to the conception of “responsible stakeholder” in April 2006, when Hu Jintao visited the U.S. When receiving Hu in the White House, President Bush said, “[as] stakeholders in the international system, our two nations share many strategic interests.” Hu, with the wish for equality, replied that the two nations “are not only stakeholders, but ... should also be constructive partners.” Hu’s statement indicated the Chinese leadership was still preoccupied with “equality” with the United States. In other words, China preferred to describe its relationship with the U.S. as a “constructive partner” rather than “stakeholder,” or at least to juxtapose the two terms. China continues to express its view of “constructive partnership” to the Obama administration.

Though China has been concerned about the “equal footing” with the United States, the Chinese leadership has shown the concern of the so-called “G-2.” When President Obama visited China in November 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao conveyed the view that China “disagrees the

suggestion of G-2” because there are more for China to do to further modernize. Wen’s statement seemed to contrast with China’s wanting to be an equal partner with the U.S.

The implications of Wen’s statement on G-2 shall not be ignored by the students of Chinese foreign policy. As shown above, China’s conception of multipolarization has undergone a significant change since the late 1990s, and it continues to give way to other priorities in Chinese foreign policy. In addition, Wen stated that global issues should be decided by all nations in the world, and yet dialectically communicated that “Sino-U.S. cooperation can play a unique role” to promote peace, stability, and prosperity on the same occasion. This seems to suggest that China intends to forgo the responsibilities while enjoying the seemingly equal status with the United States. When China takes part in the climate change issues, for example, it worries many countries that China would only accept “common, but differentiated responsibilities.” Under these circumstances, if G-2 means to jointly share the burden in international affairs, China tends to prefer a special “Group of China and the U.S.” to the “Group of Two.”

V. Conclusion

When many analysts perceive Wen Jiabao’s statement on G-2 last month as a continuation of China’s promotion of multipolarization, this paper suggests that China in deed has been holding an instrumental view on this conception. As the COP 15 in Copenhagen this month indicated, it becomes more and more obvious that China’s consent or at least “no objection” is necessary for the international community to conclude those pressing issues. We will continue to witness a rising China under the

framework of the “Group of China and the U.S.” more often than not in the foreseeable future.